



# Things in Culture, Culture in Things

APPROACHES TO CULTURE THEORY 3

**Things in Culture,  
Culture in Things**

Approaches to Culture Theory Series  
Volume 3

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The *Approaches to Culture Theory* book series focuses on various aspects of analysis, modelling, and theoretical understanding of culture. Culture theory as a set of complementary theories is seen to include and combine the approaches of different sciences, among them semiotics of culture, archaeology, environmental history, ethnology, cultural ecology, cultural and social anthropology, human geography, sociology and the psychology of culture, folklore, media and communication studies.

# Things in Culture, Culture in Things

Edited by

Anu Kannike & Patrick Laviolette



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This volume and the initial conference have been financed by the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT, European Regional Development Fund).



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Photographs used in cover design and in the beginnings of sections: the photo collection of Estonian National Museum, ERM Fk 184:71, ERM Fk 127:3, ERM Fk 114:134, ERM Fk 139:43, ERM Fk 2644:3724.

ISSN 2228-060X (print)  
ISBN 978-9949-32-394-4 (print)

ISSN 2228-4117 (online)  
ISBN 978-9949-32-395-1 (online)

University of Tartu Press  
[www.tyk.ee/act](http://www.tyk.ee/act)

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## Acknowledgements

This volume was set in motion at the fourth annual autumn conference of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT). The conference was held at the University of Tartu, Estonia, from the 20th to the 22nd of October 2011.

We would like to thank all the participants of the conference for sharing their cross-disciplinary interest towards the questions of materiality over time. Even though it was not possible to include all the conference contributions in the present collection, we were pleased so many of the presenters submitted their papers to us for consideration.

The conference committee put together the original manuscript and helped to find reviewers – our thanks goes to Valter Lang, Mari Tõrv, Helen Sooväli-Sepping, Kirsti Jõesalu, Maarja Kaaristo, Ester Bardone, Ene Kõresaar and Katre Pärn. We are grateful to the reviewers for their cooperation and patience, and for providing valuable remarks for both the authors and editors.

Thanks are also due to the language editor Daniel E. Allen, the managing editor Monika Tasa and the series editors Kalevi Kull, Valter Lang and Tiina Peil.

## Introduction.

### Storing and storying the serendipity of objects

Patrick Laviolette

[...] you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale called *the three Princes of Serendip*: as their Highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right – now do you understand *Serendipity*? [...] this *accidental sagacity* (for you must observe that *no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for comes under this description) [...]

Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 28 January 1754  
(Walpole 1960, 407–411; emphasis in original)

Objects, artefacts and matter, even sometimes the immaterial, have been comprehensively theorised and contextualised through a number of intriguing volumes. Since the ground-breaking publication of *The Social Life of Things* in 1986 to the launch of the *Journal of Material Culture* ten years later, the material world in its cross-cultural, multi-temporal and interdisciplinary study could never quite be the same again. Indeed, the very concern for the effects and affects of how materiality evolves over time is what this volume seeks to address.

A well-known adage in this field of enquiry is that things make people as much as people make things. Serendipitously, things often tell more about people than people themselves can actually tell us about those things.<sup>1</sup> The relationships we develop and share with a tangible arena of artworks, buildings, infrastructures, monuments, relics and everyday trinkets varies from the remote to the intimate, from the fleeting to the durable, from immediate to mediated, from the passive to the passionate, from the philosophised to the commonsensical. Such objects gain meaning and status within an array of creative processes. Whether it is through the usage or non-usage of the physical world, things nonetheless harbour a potentiality for becoming endowed with auras, symbolism and power. Hence our journeys through the material world generate a multitude of emotions

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 13–33. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

and sensations: pleasure, attachment, belonging, angst, envy, exclusion, loathing and fear are amongst some. They also feed into the propagation of on-going discourses, myths, narrations and stories which oscillate between the robust or durable and the ever shifting.

A certain Socratic (or perhaps 'Serendip') maxim applies here: that the better one understands things or knows material culture, the more difficulty there often seems to be in defining and delimiting what this thing – this field of research – is all about. So you might ask, what does the area of material culture studies actually consist of? Well, where in Hades do we start. As acknowledged by the many scholars who have contributed in recent decades, material culture studies has a multi-faceted history with different regional/national perspectives.

Now the more a nascent field develops, the more all-encompassing it can often become. And so what might be interesting about the future of material culture studies is the recent fascination with the importance of the immaterial and the virtual as well as the abandoned, the decommissioned or the no longer inhabited. For example, the study of stars and luminous auras, or the invisible and the otherworldly. Even the scientific and pseudo-scientific processes of interpreting simulacrum data call for attention. There is indeed a lot of research currently done under the rubric of material culture studies which focuses on the not so obviously tangible things in existence (e.g. colour and darkness, memory and the senses for instance). Or on phenomena of the world which do not immediately appeal to our classification categories as cultural objects since they are either too big, too small, too mundane or too natural – animals, food, landscapes, painkillers, zebra crossings and so forth.

Moreover, by bringing the significance of the mnemonic aspects of story telling to the table, material culture theorists, amongst others, have helped indicate that one place where we can start is at the beginning. Not, of course, at the beginning of all things (i.e. physics) or with the source of human evolution (i.e. physiology). Nor even at the beginning of society or culture (although archaeology, history, philosophy and so on obviously feature prominently). Certainly though, at the beginning of our individual and collective human lives, as well as our first socialised or collective memories of encounters with people, environments and all that stuff in between. It then seems interesting to ask whether the material culture project becomes one that is highly focused on the narrativised memories that objects carry.

Stories and how they are stored in things is an angle which the chapters herein pivot around. Inquiring into mnemonic experiences with things might be especially pertinent for opening up a new ethnographic moment of first contact – not with 'Others' but with objects. Such a significant inertia for the material

(re)turn, as we are witnessing it, can therefore allow us to infer that what we are hearing from such stories (reminiscent to some of 'origins' and first contact theories), is the implication that maybe it is objects themselves which are (again) becoming the 'new Other'. This might help explain why the new brand of contemporary material culture studies has become so popular and influential in such a relatively short period of time, especially in the subsequent stages to that historical instant when post-colonialism and post-socialism, as well as the reflexive deconstruction of the 'Other', had become so paramount.

During these zigzag moments of the material roundabout then, now over a quarter of a century ago, material culture studies has increasingly turned to the visual, the digital and other forms of information and communication technologies. And at the risk of repetition, to pretty much everything else. Indeed, material culture can be about a lot of things and non-things, particularly within the framework of the global economic system of high, late or post-modern capitalism. But from the influence of Marxist scholars, we have learnt that the objects of most value or relevance are not always those that are most obviously life-shifting. Service purchases, ritual, kinship, exchange as well as the mundane experiences of everyday life, once the bread and butter of anthropologists, are still pivotal categories for any diligent material culture enthusiast. From certain Marxist axioms about making history or the repetition of time, we have also learnt that in addition to mattering significantly, the past is somehow inescapable.

Hence, before presenting the diverse contributions in this volume, this introduction briefly surveys the contemporary field of material culture studies. It does so by paying homage to a particularly narrow legacy of 'ancestral' things – the endeavours of a selective cohort of academics who paved the way for the current generation's research on human-object relationships.

## **Material sagacity**

The epistemological roots for addressing the comprehensive study of human artefacts are muddled. Many archaeologists are adamant that this is predominantly the realm of their discipline. They are correct in some ways. Nevertheless, the study of material culture has continuously existed across a range of other disciplines, art and design history for instance. The inaugural editorial of the *Journal of Material Culture* put forward the undisciplined, politically proactive and creative possibilities as defining features of the field, advancing many perks and advantageous features of not being subject to particular academic dogma (Miller & Tilley 1996).



Despite this, anthropology is on pretty firm ground when laying a certain claim to the intellectual development of this field. From the offset, the early theories of Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) and James George Frazer (1854–1941), compiled from ‘missionary’ data, allowed British anthropology to begin establishing itself as a collections discipline in terms of gathering cultural objects, linguistic data and life-history information. Dependant upon second-hand colonial narratives and other travel writing accounts, Frazer’s armchair theorising dealt less with artefacts than that of his teacher E. B. Tylor. So, to an extent, one could argue that his was an anthropological vision for collecting stories, not things.

One of the first overtly notable ancestors in allowing the study of material culture to become clearly identifiable was Alfred Cort Haddon (1855–1940). With eclectic interests and a background in the natural sciences, he effectively masterminded the most comprehensive ethnological team research in the English-speaking world. The famous Cambridge expedition to Torres Straits and New Guinea at the turn of the 20th century established the textbook model for ‘rescue anthropology’. It would professionalise the discipline by setting as precedence the global export of ethnological field researchers. The objective was one of the orders of the day: to salvage cultural information that was changing (disappearing) due to the increasing pace and scale of global cultural contact; amongst other factors, the result of colonialism and imperialism.

Given the disciplinary signatures of the era, the tyranny of distance as well as the theoretical pedigree of the armchair theorising necessary for making cross-cultural comparison, these field expeditions were undoubtedly questionable as proper ethnography. Such initiating phases of rapid-fire fieldwork techniques, developing towards longer term and repeated field visits, did indeed verge on ‘collection binges’. In his many treatises on art, Haddon brought to the table the evolutionary importance of creative adaptability in many capacities (Haddon 1895).<sup>2</sup>

It is worth mentioning a few later anthropologists whose global popularity, backgrounds and novel approaches made them unwitting accomplices in creating the intellectual space from which material culture studies could develop. Notably: Ruth Benedict, Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, Mary Douglas and Colin Turnbull. All became internationally recognised. In most of their cases, connections with the vibrant art and culture milieu of New York City allowed them to have significant involvements with diverse forms of public outreach. This permitted experimentations with film and photography as well as museum curation projects and research collaborations.

In terms of the significant impact on the development of material culture studies as we know it today, the distinct European versus New World trajectories

for academic anthropology did find its initial institutional synthesis in the UK through the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI). Certainly one of the oldest independent anthropological institutions in the world, the RAI has had a long history of gathering, collating and storing field material, as well as providing researchers with access to collections and archives. Two noteworthy individuals to have significant influence within the RAI particularly stand out: John Henry Hutton and Cyril Daryll Forde.

Hutton argued vehemently for more interest in examining material culture as a means of conceptually rallying against many things such as extreme functionalism, linguistic determinism, diffusionism, and (more 'controversially') applied anthropology. He concluded by nearly opposing the utilitarian value of applied anthropology as against the knowledge value for knowledge's own sake ethos, which for him the study of material culture encapsulated. In the context of British anthropology, the impacts were significant in the future obfuscation of where the material culture field would most naturally belong.

Contemporary material culture studies, through the influence of Marxist archaeology and Daryll Forde's desires to open up anthropology even further, could seem to come as a reaction against Hutton's position. Unsurprisingly then, if this was seen as the established anthropological position since the 1940s, that in the 1990s the on-going debate about where material culture studies fit epistemologically would still be fraught with ambiguity and disputed principles. But let us not obliterate the obvious with such a premature conclusion since Hutton was a key proponent for the inherent significance of the past, particularly as expressed through archaeology, museum collections and the anthropology of art. As stated in his RAI address:

[...] thinkers whose primary interest lay in the forms and functions of society, tended perhaps to minimize the amount of attention given to arts, crafts and the material environment of the society studied [...] (Hutton 1944, 1).

What are also crucial are the absences and subtexts in this address. He referenced the German influence but not the French. And in so doing, used Radcliffe-Brown as a straw man to remind the audience of the day when in certain camps of anthropology, some people still saw the functionalist school as a disputable myth. In dispelling Radcliffe-Brown, one could bypass the developments in ethnology of a post-Durkheimian school of structural-functionalism. Yet ironically, through his attention to the impacts of French social theory, Radcliffe-Brown was a significant facilitator in introducing some of the long-term intellectual building blocks for a British social anthropology that could easily house comprehensive

studies of material culture. Instead though, Hutton was drawn back to the British past of anthropology, insinuating through citation to Charles Seligman's work, that psychology was the bridge between a dualistic anthropology with cultural anthropology (including material culture) on one side and human biology/physiology on the other.

The second individual in question, Daryll Forde, was the founder of the Department of Anthropology at University College London. For obvious institutional reasons, given this university's founding role in the history of material culture studies, Forde has received considerable attention already (Buchli 2002; 2004). As such, we can move on to consider a few international facets to this field of scholarship.

In terms of emphasising the different impacts of colonial ethno-history, we should perhaps remind ourselves that Hutton's dismissal of French theory has long since been redressed. In response to reflexive interpretations of the global repercussions of early European Imperialism, many writers have chronicled how the triad of Britain-Germany-France has significantly shaped the field under investigation. For its part, early French sociology developed in accordance with the close influence of 'revolutionary' thinking. That is, those intellectual ideas formative of an ideology which has been more intransigently iconoclastic. In helping to lay some of the reactionary and irreverent groundwork necessary for the fundamental shaking-up of Western paradigms (through such conceptual movements as subaltern studies or Orientalism for instance) certain early French sociologists interested in contemporary objects, as well as the technologies of past human civilisations, would go on to form several influential *laboratoire* centres with a key interest in material culture.<sup>3</sup> The *ethnologie* of Durkheim, Mauss and eventually a slurry of other continental anthropologists has been powerful in its self-criticisms of Western research practices and epistemologies. Many of the major material culture debates of the early days arise from (and indeed return to) the pioneering perspectives of French sociology from the 1920s onwards. One of prominence is the East-West tension as it relates to gift exchange societies versus capitalistic ones. Such initial divisions have been identified as structurally deterministic and much on-going research has geared itself towards refining or decoding the ancestral binary gift-logic.

The foundational collection of essays to flag the onset of contemporary material culture studies is presumably *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986). It is paramount in terms of exchange theory because it does not shy away from the symbolic. Indeed, many of the contributors reflect upon the practicalities by which the notion of sacrifice and ritual become embedded into reciprocal action, so that exchange can both transform and continue with vigour; maintaining,

reinforcing and forming the possibilities for new social relations along the way. With this we get a significant historical unpacking of the German/British ideological liaisons over Marxist theorising, which had historically advocated more evolutionary and materialist views than the revolutionary French one. The result has been the creation of a powerful intellectual space within which the discussion about the alienability and inalienability of objects has become a vital conceptual pillar for the field of material culture studies. Dozens of issues can be subsumed within this frame, encompassing such areas as bride-wealth, contestable land and resource claims, cultural copyright, heritage and human remains repatriation, slavery and so forth.

A final point to bring out here is the global influence of ethnographic reflexivity in social theory (Fabian 1983). In terms of the period for the field under investigation, the questions of territoriality and the academic politics of authenticity are open game. In the early 1980s, in America, especially through some significant cultural-theorists and social historians in Pennsylvania, there began a process of embracing and engaging with anthropology. Arjun Appadurai and his colleagues were at the forefront of this. Certain British scholars were involved (Renfrew, Gell, Bayly) but not in terms of representing any particular school of thought. Moreover, probably inadvertently, a series of academic presuppositions remained largely unchallenged at the time (the all-male gender selection of the contributors for example).

Some institutional consequences from this pivotal publication seem to have themselves been materialised in the form of a self-perpetuating intellectual distinction/divide for the field.<sup>4</sup> To an extent then, an internal structural schemata has been recreated whereby, since anthropology in the USA has largely maintained the four field approach, many American material culture anthropologists have stood together with social historians. In the UK, the pairing has been between anthropology and archaeology/museology. And as we have seen, the historical side of things has usually been subsumed by a range of other disciplines. Strictly speaking though, historians and art historians of material culture studies in Britain have only been marginally accepted into the inner circle. The exceptions were themselves initially at the margins of UK anthropology since they were effectively historians of the discipline itself.

The landscape of material culture studies in Estonia (where the present volume was put together) as well as in much of Eastern Europe (Korkiakangas et al 2008), has followed an altogether different pattern. The priority of early archaeology, ethnology and folkloristics was to collect and preserve the objects that were seen to constitute national heritage in museums and archives. In the pre-World War II period, developments in Germany and Scandinavia were followed here,

resulting in the interdisciplinary historical-geographical method that continued to dominate in the study of material culture until the 1990s. However, due to the administrative separation of research institutions in the Soviet period (for example, the Estonian National Museum was divided into the Ethnography Museum and the Literary Museum) artefacts were often collected and studied separately from the stories stored in them.

From the early 1990s onwards, the humanities in Estonia have opened up to new theoretical and methodological inspirations from the Western world and new multidisciplinary approaches. The material world thus began to be interpreted in the contexts of cultural communication, consumption, memory and life-stories, home, heritage production and so on (e.g. Kõresaar 1998; 2002; Jaago 2011; Jõesalu 2009; Jõesalu & Kõresaar 2011; Ruusmann 2007; Keller 2004; Võsu & Kannike 2011; Võsu & Sooväli-Sepping 2012).

At present the collaboration of Estonian archaeology, ethnology/anthropology, semiotics, folkloristics, communication studies, religious studies, landscape studies and contemporary cultural studies is carried out under the auspices of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) established in 2008. This pan-institutional research hub has enabled, among other things, a closer interdisciplinary approach to material culture studies within Estonia and across the Baltic states.<sup>5</sup>

### **Simplifying things**

Contrary to Appadurai's hallmark text from the mid-1980s, the selection of research in this volume represents the work of scholars based in eight countries which encompass ten different academic institutions. Historically, the topics of the essays range from the Late Bronze Age to topical contemporary debates. Geographically, the scope is quite international since the case studies included herein cover Eastern and Western Europe, Scandinavia, the far eastern edges of Canada and India as well as West Africa.

Despite some overlap, the sections represent the categories for four major areas of interest within the study of material culture: everyday domesticity and vernacular settings; projects dealing with archaeological records and/or deep historical issues; approaches influenced by theories of consumption and museum collection ethnology; and finally, socio-textual analyses considering cultures of waste and new technologies. By no means do these provide an exhaustive compilation. They do, however, cover a wide gamut of current research and interest on the cultural histories of the material world.

The collection begins with **Soft objects** – a section whose chapters advocate a flexible, non-dogmatic approach, at least in Hal Foster’s (2002) sense of the benefits inherent in soft theory.<sup>6</sup> We are thus confronted with ambiguous objects. Or put differently, we revel in the stuff of reverie. We also face projects concerned with the tangibility of an ethnographic present, the placed matter of a contemporary moment drawn towards methodological experimentation (Labrum & Laviolette 2009). Prominent themes include domesticity, entropy and subversion (Riggins), the sensuous chronicling of mobile objects (Cubero), fantasy, political ideology and reality (Mackay). These are poetic and personal stories, in which the senses are important conceptually and an anti-establishment attitude towards accepting conventions at face value is significant epistemologically. We start with a chapter by someone who has an exceptionally well established track-record when it comes to writing about things. Earlier in his career, Stephen H. Riggins edited the compilation *The Socialness of Things* (1994) when he published “Fieldwork in the living room: an auto-ethnographic essay”. This visionary exercise in the thick-description of vernacular possessions, provided a systematic methodology for gathering information about the relationship between the self and objects displayed in homes. His chapter here is a condensed methodological effort to update his exemplary, socio-semiotic approach.

Informed by recent advances in material culture studies, Riggins complements his earlier contribution with a sociologically reinvigorated perspective. He peppers his revised methodology with a detailed domestic ethnography of a young artist and writer influenced by the punk scene. It is wide reaching in its collaborative and visually informed style (cf Drazin & Frohlich 2007). Further, it is not only timely in dealing with the entropic dimensions of ‘homework’ and the longevity of materiality but also because of its subversive play (Crang 2012). It is equally significant in that it discusses an array of material culture scholarship, providing extensive terminological definitions and an engaging overview on the history of material culture fieldwork.

Next follows another ethnographic piece, this time one that traces the material meanderings of diasporic sounds. Carlo A. Cubero addresses the different meanings and uses the kora (an African harp) assumes when it goes through transnational networks. Since 2009 he has been carrying out sporadic periods of participant observation research in Western Europe amongst West African musicians. Cubero’s chapter considers the complex identities of this community, arguing for a perspective where the multivalency of objects mirrors the subjective multivalency of transnational migrants. Methodologically, he contextualises the piece within ethnographic cinema and presents the different ways in which documentary film-making informs his research project. Enticing to a synaesthetic

range of our senses, this narrative layering brings out the 'glocal' life history of the kora. Moreover, the chapter emphasises the instrument's qualities as an adaptive, creative, mobile and socialising fabrication.

Also sensitive to the materiality of soundscapes, Rowan Mackay's essay discusses the relationship between tangible and intangible things within culture. By focussing on a particularly impalpable thing, 'the American Dream', she produces some interesting reflections on the value of the intangible. Her findings resonate with those of Eugene Halton some 20 years previously when he commented cynically on how mega-technical media representations of democracy "transformed the American vision of autonomy into the dream of automatic culture and kitsch" (Halton 1994, 309). In its consumerist dimension, the myth that is the American Dream itself critically involves the acquisition and procurement of things.

Mackay relies on Theo Van Leeuwen's ideas on the socio-semiotics of contemporary visual communication. Especially pertinent are his thoughts on integrating together the study of semiotic modes and normative discourses as well as moving from uni-modal accounts towards multi-modal approaches which blend language, image and music. Mackay thus heeds that we seek to comprehend such modes in more sensual veins, celebrating – instead of fearing – the difficulties of translation.

The three chapters in the section **Stoic stories** share a concern for a narrative subject matter which is arduous and touchy. Tough to take in, they border on the stoical, even though this is for quite different reasons. In the first two pieces we have a stoicism of the everyday. Whether through the encapsulated trauma in the memories of migration for Nylund Skog, or the heritage value of stones in an age of droll tales in Muhonen, these essays weigh heavily on our understanding of mnemonic things with an aptitude for transgressing the past. The implications behind Salo-Mattila's grand history of a partitioning screen are similar, even if this object's prestigiousness conceals some of the attributes and properties of its vernacular significance. When doing research on experiences of living as a Jew in Sweden, Susanne Nylund Skog found that diasporic belonging is often mirrored in the artefacts that are regarded as meaningful and worthy of memorialising by the narrators. Her chapter explores this topic by investigating how a female migrant, in her narrative and use of things (material and imaginative), positions herself in a Jewish diaspora while simultaneously creating and maintaining her own identity. Overall, Nylund Skog's essay uncovers how memories of migration and experiences of living in diaspora materialise into vernacular epics, revealing some of the ways in which identities and relocated communities are maintained

as well as reproduced in the dialectical process of narrating the materialisation of migration.

One of the intriguingly serendipitous sides to folk belief is how it often renders mundane things into objects with remarkably surprising qualities and vice-versa (Orange & Lavolette 2010). Objects or matter of the most commonplace sort become intertwined into ritual praxis as well as incorporated into narrativised mythologies. Timo Muhonen's chapter addresses one of the simplest objects within the sphere of Finnish-Karelian folk belief – an unworked stone. Even this, when viewed in its own cultural context, transpires to be laden with both intrinsic and transposed power. This power was harnessed to serve objectives related to such diverse walks of life as, for example, cattle herding, love affairs and healing. His examples attest to an anachronistic and oversimplifying way in which archaeology often perceives many stone remains. Frequently viewed in their totality, as unchanging cairn structures with a single function, Muhonen follows a different line in suggesting how it might be more accurate to acknowledge a more complex interpretation based on the biographical meaning of the units which make up these types of larger structures. Flipping the convention, he implies that the significance of a single stone in a cairn might have been equal to, or even exceeded, the significance assigned to the aggregate.

Sticking with the Finnish-Nordic theme but returning to a more contemporary style of historical analysis, we conclude this section with a chapter by Kirsti Salo-Mattila who traces the biography of the Empress Screen (1885). She starts by outlining the screen's origins and symbolic roles through its process of design and embroidery. The screen is shown to breathe European culture. It pictures the history and vitality of a nation loyal to the Emperor. Set in contrast with other gifts given to the Emperor and Empress during their visit to Helsinki, which overtly reflected Finnish nationalism, Salo-Mattila demonstrates that the circles behind the screen were more closely aligned with politically liberal European ideologies.

She concludes by discussing the division of labour in the realisation of the screen. The ideal of William Morris to combine design and implementation in one creative person was in conflict with reality even in the Arts and Crafts movement. In the late 19th century, crafts did not try to approach art as much in the person of the maker as within the traditional division of labour. Especially in embroidery, the difference between a male 'head' and female 'hands' was clear, and it was generally understood that the creativity of handicraft was in the implementation of the artist's intention. Via the Empress Screen's life-history, Salo-Mattila thus reveals it as an embodiment of such thinking, offering a compelling account of how changing ideologies were being objectified and gifted to the elite.



**Consuming and the collectable** is a second-hand knowledge section. In the sense that it examines such issues as when amateur bricoleurs become connoisseurs, or when consuming and collecting are inverted, it presents work that is both archetypal to material culture studies yet peripheral enough to stretch some boundaries. Featuring four essays, it is the longest section in the book. With the first (Cristache), buying and vending are conflated in an East European context where capitalism sits uncomfortably. The subsequent chapter (Kurvits) equally places consumption (this time of knowledge) outside its zone of familiarity. There is also an intended symmetry here in that after these two chapters dealing with post-Soviet states, the next two are similar in confronting hot-capitalism rather than cold-war issues, even though they raise very different tensions – psychology and design (Immonen) and post-colonial appropriation (Ngully).

Engaging with the growing literature on the consumption of worn clothing worldwide, Maria Cristache's contribution is especially pertinent in that it has taken place within a neglected area (i.e. Eastern Europe). She interprets ethnographically the nascent community of 'vintage lovers' in Bucharest. Making bold claims for the importance of nostalgia without memory, as well as for the quest of authenticity in consumption patterns amongst buyers and specialist sellers, she focuses on an emerging community of vendors/buyers whose rules and practices are still in the process of consolidation. She explores how this community delineates vintage from both mainstream fashion and second-hand style; how consumers of vintage deal with issues raised by accessibility and scarcity (Norris 2012). In identifying how original items of clothing are combined with accessories and new garments, Cristache thus points towards a hybrid type of consumption which merges a pronounced experiential character with minimal mnemonic traces.

Roosmarii Kurvits' chapter interprets the evolution of the visual form of newspapers in the context of information consumption. Her analysis is based on the core Estonian-language newspapers from their introduction at the beginning of the 19th century. She reminds us that this media, intended for news transmission, is more than a source of information but also, à la McLuhan, its material container. Readers deduce how to consume the contents of newspapers from their very appearance and physical format. Hence, the visual presentation of information (e.g. page size, topical sequence, habits of segmentation and illustration) crucially provides cues, expected reading paths and triggers for keeping our attention. In short, the visual form of the newspaper directs us on how to use it, acting as an implicit guide for information consumption. Kurvits' contribution demonstrates how during the last two centuries the visual form of Estonian newspapers has become increasingly intensive in assisting readers and guiding their informational choices. She concludes that the visual form or the package

of information becomes dominant, whereby the content is produced to fit into pre-made news templates which have become ends in themselves.

The relationship between individuality and consumer products has been a long-debated issue. The Lacanian concept of interpassivity, especially in the form as it appears in the works of Slavoj Žižek, potentially provides a new take on the discussion. Through this framework, Visa Immonen approaches the Jordan Individual range of toothbrushes, some of them marked with signs of gender. From an archaeology of contemporary design point of view, he distinguishes three narratives in toothbrush histories: the first, an evolutionary tale of technological progress; the second addresses the practices in which toothbrushes function to bring forth modern notions of individuality; and the third discovers desire present in the practices and implements of oral hygiene.

Individuality and its relation to desire, not to mention consumer behaviour, opens up connections between the senses, the material culture of design and psychoanalysis (Marcoux & Howse 2006). In fact, analysed through interpassivity, the claim of individuality in mass products gains discordant currency, although the materiality of toothbrushes also resists too simplified applications of the concept. Immonen combines the design of the Jordan Individual series with traditional gender signs, providing a key point of reference: that of a securely sedimented place for the consumer to make the product part of an inter-passive arrangement, materialising routine.

Meripeni Ngully's chapter discusses a concrete and layered case study dealing with colonial collecting. It begins with the historical complexity of India's Naga Hill people whose territory is south of the state of Assam, in-between Bangladesh and Burma. Ngully's story brings us to these outermost north-eastern reaches via the biographical profiling of John Henry Hutton and Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum. Such a topic provides an apt resume for this section since it aligns itself closely with a body of research that has widened considerably since Talad Asad's critical reflections (Asad 1973; Gosden et al 2007). Themes such as cultural ownership, museum repatriation and an attention to the workings of the heritage industry as well as over Empire building processes are certainly near the core of the material culture ethos.

What is especially astute in Ngully's contribution is to point out how Hutton's career as a collector should not be segregated from the politics of academic anthropology. Nor can it be understood without considering the needs of both the Pitt Rivers Museum and inter-state tensions more generally. Hutton's collections of Naga artefacts thus provide an archive in tangible form – a material documentation – of his own experience, entangled as it was in intricate hierarchical networks of compromise, status and power.

The final section, **Waste and technologies**, is about dystopia and the material fashioning of new social discourses. Collectively, the legacy of projects that play with the idea of transforming waste has pushed the limits of the life-cycle analysis of materiality; such research has brought forth evidence which reconstructs the deconstructivist framework of iconoclastic destruction and despair. So for example, abandoned buildings become sites for installation work and discarded objects the source material for 'recyclia' artists (Baird & Laviolette 2011). As such, waste itself takes on positive elements of theoretical value. These conceptual ways of reminding ourselves of our 'puritanically' influenced Western world-view about waste largely arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, through such ideas as Michael Thompson's valuations of rubbish in the UK and William Rathje's garbology in the USA. The two first papers here are textually reflexive conceptualisations which follow in this vein, a literary archaeology (Glaser) and a semiotic reflection (Gramigna). Appropriately enough, we then finish with a case study dealing with Estonian cultural perceptions (Raudsepp & Rämmer). As an examination into futuristic discourses of social reproduction and material realities of power, it is also a fitting chapter to bring the anthology to a close since it is the only fully co-authored piece, mirroring Riggins' semi-collaborative début essay.

Drawing together theoretical approaches from a triumvirate of literary, ethical and material culture studies, Brigitte Glaser's chapter provides a new reading of the work of Margaret Atwood and Ronald Wright. By examining two of their novels (*Oryx and Crake* and *A Scientific Romance* respectively) she argues that most scholarly explorations of these two stories have emphasised topics connected with their 'science fiction' layer. Her own reading places the focus on two interconnected and hitherto neglected themes: i) the representation of what is left behind, that is, objects once denoting civilisation but which have turned into rubbish; and ii) the projection by these authors of a new form of alterity, the recognition of which is required of the protagonists in the process of their adjustment to the dystopian surroundings.

Combining the approaches of Appadurai and Thompson with more recent work by Emmanuel Lévinas (on ethics of deconstruction), Glaser connects the themes of waste and radical otherness. With regard to the new functions assigned to them in the post-materialist and post-consumerist worlds, which characterise the dystopian settings of the two novels, she examines objects representing the dailiness of human life rather than great achievements of human kind. Furthermore, she raises the question of humankind's fate in a post-apocalyptic setting as depicted in these novels and as related to the status of things.

Moving on to less literary but more literal conceptions of waste, we have Remo Gramigna's chapter on the lavatory. The contemporary toilet represents a

conspicuous part of the daily cleanliness liturgy in occidental societies, featuring a great deal in our everyday 'taskscape'. He contends that the WC is a meaningful microcosm insofar as it provides clues for understanding the structural relationship between many categories: nature and culture, the perception of the human body and its bodily wastes, as well as the collective representations of dirt and cleanliness embedded in things. His chapter builds a semiotic approach to toilets which combines three theoretical concepts: Mary Douglas' notion of dirt; Juri Lotman's conception of boundary; and Tim Ingold's dwelling perspective. From these, Gramigna suggests that toilets function as mechanisms of translation between nature and culture for the 'dweller' who lives and perceives the landscape, inasmuch as it renders culturally acceptable that which is considered disgusting. The lavatory makes dirt clean, purifies the body via concealment, occlusion, ablution, daily tasks, processes and routines which translate what is meant to be 'natural' or 'organic' into a cultural phenomenon.

Exiting the loo, the volume draws to a close by taking us to a 21st century kitchen table. Maaris Raudsepp and Andu Rämmer's contribution stays with familiar themes in this section such as dystopia, disgust and the anticipation for techno-fix solutions to environmental issues. In examining the bio-mechanical world, they focus on some sensitive processes of social representation in terms of the design applications and public perceptions of such things as food production through genetically modified organisms (GMOs). For them, the drama of the personal biography of things lies in the uncertainties of valuation and of identity. In the case of some new technologies, uncertainty is culturally constructed as the blurred boundary between the 'natural' and the 'unnatural'. Relying on Serge Moscovici's description of the trajectory of an ideological innovation in society, from a scientific idea into widely known social representation, Raudsepp and Rämmer show how technological innovations entering into public use evoke similar representational activity and symbolic processes of collective coping. Hence their study reveals some of the ways in which modern biotechnologies produce near-fictional objects with hidden and partly unknown properties. These are socially constructed in terms of both possibility and risk. GMO crops are thus good exemplars of that new breed of objects to evoke strong and heated responses – appearing unmistakably on the scene of public controversy.

### **Stories and how they are stored in things**

Having skimmed over the intellectual landscape of material culture studies, let us briefly consider the research directions which best apply to the present volume's chapters. Picking up from pages 17-18, the impact of continental social theory is

relevant to four overlapping areas: i) the heightened attention to everyday life; ii) the marked interest in the body as a social technology; iii) concerns for dystopia and iconoclastic aesthetics; and iv) an on-going fascination with biographical narratives and textual storytelling. A fundamental tension here has been the identification of a certain epistemological paradox within the material culture arena itself: that language is necessary for interpretation yet impedes true understanding of the material realm. Semiotics, hermeneutics and other language-like conceptual frameworks have made contemporary material culture studies possible, establishing some analytical tools to help comprehend, decipher and make sense of the tangible world.

The systematic application of structural and post-structural methods to the object world was certainly part of identifying the material culture niche (Tilley 1990; Gottdiener 1995). Notable in defining and drawing these strands together was Roland Barthes who analysed the role that certain everyday items of popular culture play in the creation of French identity. For instance, by examining a series of globally influential holiday guides, he could argue against the notion that these items were products for enhancing one's appreciation of travel (Barthes 1957). Nor, he claimed, did they act as educational devices in the service of increasing one's cultural capital, perceptive abilities or geographical awareness. Through a series of such object analyses, including fashion and photography, Barthes helped inspire a movement that would reveal the extent to which many materialised grand narratives were blinding agents, directing civil liberties and free thought away from the everyday.

Once there was an uncovering of the subtle ways in which what was 'real' in the mundane history of human experience was actually masked or camouflaged, the micro-politics of the everyday suddenly became a site for manifesting democratic power. In tandem, the domestic became a bountiful terrain for research (Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Csikszentmihályi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Undoubtedly numerous other factors were at play. Noteworthy, the influential thoughts about public and private space by Walter Benjamin as well as the mid-20th century Mass Observation Project in Britain. Together these also contributed to better understanding, and thus being better equipped to critique, the material regimes of authority.

From the perspective of the everyday, semiotics or hermeneutic approaches therefore proved to be powerful. They offered accessible and direct means for scrutinising technologies of control – they provided a system for challenging normative uses of oppressive material systems. But there has been a diversity of anthropological questions over whether object-focused interests would necessarily exclude the natural/biological world, humans included. In the mid-20th

century, this was still the established position put forth by those such as John Hutton (1944) who largely discarded human beings as 'items' of material culture. But with the ontological realisations that, as a seat for observation, the human body is one of the most direct and immediate features of everyday experience, several factions in the community of cultural theory have compellingly argued to the contrary (Jackson 1996).

Already in *Entangled Objects* (1991), Nicholas Thomas had anticipated the area of scholarship which has significantly begun to focus on the senses, the body, motion and emotion. That is, to question how our visceral reactions co-exist alongside, respond to and impact upon elements of the material world. "As socially and culturally salient entities, objects change in defiance of their material stability. The category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgment it prompts, and the narrative it recalls, are all historically reconfigured" (Thomas 1991, 125). There is indeed a burgeoning of research done under the rubric of material culture studies that currently focuses not only on the senses and emotion but on our kinetic experiences of the world. The theoretical frameworks and methodologies for such studies are at the earlier stages of instituting themselves however. But in terms of the movement of things, a more established set of research guidelines has had time to refine itself over the past dozen years, ever since the conceptual tools (developed more abstractly in the 1980s and 1990s) for studying human-thing relationships were put into ethnographic practice and refined as a result.

Given the indivisibility of the subject-object node, which includes the notion that all objects have biographies, then when people move, the biographies of their possessions (and other objects they have with them) change. The investment of accumulated experience onto these moving things will in turn not only change a person's or group's identity but has considerable impact on the world. Heritage, migration and tourism studies have been areas where such concepts have been especially well disseminated (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). In material terms, movement implies boundaries, pathways, people and power. Thomas' (1991) metaphor that all these issues are inevitably entangled thus has its own legacy of being played with by numerous authors interested in how (C/)culture unavoidably gets entrapped into discussions regarding aesthetics, agency, creativity and civilisation (Gell 1998; Hallam & Ingold 2007).

Discussions about art and aesthetics have been so vast that whole areas of ethnographic film/photography and visual culture studies, which equally fall under the rubric of material culture studies, have themselves formed various sub-fields (Banks & Morphy 1997; Forty & Küchler 1999). New media technologies, from the radio or the Internet through to specific social networking forums, have also been the subject of fascinating ethnographic case studies. These fit into a

recently growing hybrid category of media/digital anthropology (Horst & Miller 2012). Conceptually, these topical issues and debates about creativity are a move forward from what had eventually become an excessively pessimistic iconoclasm of earlier takes on aesthetics and technological developments.

## Coda

Trying to evoke the aegis of a Horace Walpole to provide some concluding wisdom for this introduction proves difficult. Struggling over names of people who certainly know a thing or two about things reveals a vast list of characters who are all so directly involved in shaping the field. Indeed, there is always a lot missing in any compendium. For instance, the lack in explicitly considering gifts, reciprocity or the more purist forms of economic exchange and macro-processes of commoditisation. Yet hopefully the reader will agree that a certain unconventionality allows the chapters which follow to claim a place in the realm of experimentation and methodological innovation. And as a serendipitous forum, the volume points in the direction of topical/futurist possibilities.

So the tautological circularity arising out of the observation that things exist as much in culture as cultures exist in things is at least semi-deliberate. Regardless, the point is that the adage concerning the potential for people to make things as much as for things to make people, itself risks misappropriation. Or at least to be taken for granted in its universalising appeal, becoming a vacuous epistemological mantra. Hence, every now and then it becomes necessary to re-highlight the ethno-specificities – the socio-culturalness of objects as it were. Consequently, despite the diversity and complex layers of the following case studies, they provide a contemporary glimpse into the textual fascination with the storying of things.

The intention for this book is therefore to present a set of chapters inspired by, and which often return to, the creative elements inherent to ethno-semiotics, hermeneutics and literary theory. In being sensitive to recent developments within narratology studies, whilst still returning to those classic semiotic and biography of things texts,<sup>7</sup> the idea is to continue restoring the balance between the solidity of things and the ephemerality of stories.

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## Notes

1 Serendipitously in the literary sense of Horace Walpole's own 'agency'. But also in the way Billy Ehn & Orvar Löfgren have recently considered its methodological implications. In their words: "[...] for some years now there have been pleas for celebrating such unsystematic dimensions of research as aimless rambling and random reading. This trend is encapsulated in the buzzword *serendipity*, the art of not knowing what you are looking for, and the celebration of creative wild thinking. Yet such labels conceal the cumulative and systematic dimensions of even seemingly anarchistic analytical work" (2010, 218; emphasis in original).

2 See also Quiggin's preface to Haddon 1945.

3 Amongst them the *Matière à Penser* lab led by Pierre Lemmonier and Jean-Pierre Warnier as well as the field of Science & Technology Studies (STS) epitomised in the figure of Bruno Latour and his subsequent Actor Network Theory.

4 This distinction was amplified by other studies and developments in the USA (e.g. Bill Brown, Jules Prown, W. J. T. Mitchell, etc.). For instance, in the 1980s a group of prominent public historians set up the *Winterthur Portfolio*, a journal dedicated mostly to the description of American material culture.

5 Thank you to Anu Kannike for writing up these paragraphs on the history of material culture studies in Estonia.

6 "For many this is a good thing: it permits artistic diversity; 'weak' theory is better than strong; and so on. But [...] [a]ll of us (artists, critics, curators, historians, viewers) need some narratives to focus our present practices – situated stories, not *grands récits*" (Foster 2002, 128–129).

7 See for instance Kopytoff 1986; Riggins 1994; Hoskins 1998; Dorleijn et al 2010.





**Soft objects**

## **The natural order is decay: the home as an ephemeral art project**

Stephen Harold Riggins

### **Touchy objects: the ethics of research**

Although the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences has been influential in North American sociology, the ‘object turn’ has had little impact other than in fields such as science and technology studies, and research on consumption. In general, sociology has always emphasized human interaction rather than human-object interaction. This has occurred even though the very term ‘symbolic interactionism’, which dates back to the late 1930s, should have sensitized sociologists to human-object interaction. People are almost always perceived among objects and in various degrees of association with them. In that sense we are never alone. Domestic artifacts are doubly important for the relationship between self and society, which was the focus of symbolic interactionists and dramaturgical sociologists. It is typical that no sociologist or anthropologist, to my knowledge, has written about the visual subtleties of objects as perceptively as the novelist James Agee (1941). Novelists were aware of objects as agents long before actant-network theory. Examples can be found, for instance, in Nathalie Sarraute’s book *Tropisms*:

Objects were very wary of him and had been for a long time, ever since, as a little child, he had begged their favor, had tried to attach himself to them, to cling to them, to warm himself, they had refused to ‘play’, to become what he had wanted to make of them, ‘poetic memories’ of childhood. They had been brought to heel, these objects had, being well trained, they had the unobtrusive, anonymous look of well-schooled servants; they knew their place and they refused to answer him [...].

Clinging to the wall, sidewise, through fear of being indiscreet, he would look through the clear panes into downstairs rooms in which green plants on china saucers had been set in the window, and from where, warm, full, heavy with a mysterious denseness, objects tossed him a small part – to him too, although he was unknown and a stranger – of their radiance; where the

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 36–57. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

corners of a table, the door of a sideboard, the straw seat of a chair emerged from the half-light and consented to become for him, mercifully for him, too, since he was standing there waiting, a little bit of his childhood (Sarraute 1963 [1939], 66–67).

“Fieldwork in the living room: an auto-ethnographic essay” (Riggins 1994, see also Riggins 1990) was an early attempt to provide a systematic methodology for gathering information about the relationship between the self and objects displayed in homes. The research was quite intrusive in the personal lives of participants, which was less problematic twenty years ago. Procedures which could be followed today in order to obtain ethics approval for such a project will be outlined in this paper. My early terminology will be updated in view of recent advances in material culture studies. In conclusion, the revised methodology will be illustrated with a case study of the apartment of a Canadian visual artist, poet and experimental musician influenced by the 1970s punk subculture.

My original advice was that researchers begin interviews by finding something in a living room which would seem to attract a visitor’s attention and then systematically proceed throughout the rest of the room. I thought that skipping from wall to wall or object to object which were widely dispersed would complicate the interview. For readers to imaginatively reconstruct a room, decoration has to be described in the same systematic manner. Photography was considered an essential tool, although the photographs need not be of professional quality. No outside observer can produce a verbal account of a domestic interior which is both objective and subjective without the aid of photographs. It is not possible to immediately notice or to remember all the nuances which will eventually interest an investigator. David Halle’s book (1993) about the display of popular and fine art in homes was abundantly illustrated. More recently, Annemarie Money (2007) and Rachel Hurley (2006) have made similar claims about the necessity of working with photographs. It is my insistence on sharing unaltered photographs with readers and my eliciting intimate personal stories from interviewees that can lead to hurdles in obtaining ethics approval.<sup>1</sup> Friends, family, and acquaintances can easily identify living rooms through photographs. (But let us also recognize that since decoration evolves – more rapidly for some people than others – not all living rooms are identifiable for a long period of time.)

Few people have agonized over the ethical issues of writing about private homes as much as James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This did not stop him, some eighty years ago, from secretly itemizing the objects in drawers when poor Alabama farmers were out in the fields. That contemporary researchers investigating objects have reflected about ethical issues is clear in the way

they have carefully chosen interviewees and topics. The most common solutions are to write about oneself (Fiske 1990; Lively 2002; Wood & Beck 1994), to write about family members (Bourdieu 1984; Davidson 2009), to concentrate on the deceased (Saisselin 1985; Schlereth 1982; Ulrich 2001), or the poor and powerless (Agee 1941). Daniel Miller (2008) changes informants' names and characteristics. Annemarie Money (2007) blurs the faces in displays of photographs of family members and friends. Marianne Gullestad (1984) illustrates the chapter on living rooms in her book *Kitchen-Table Society* with photographs of homes belonging to people who did not participate in her study. Sarah Pink (2004) does not share her video 'tours' of homes with the public. Ian Woodward (2001) picks interviewees who are culturally sophisticated and thus more sympathetic to the ideals of objectivity and detachment in the social sciences. It is safer to write the 'biography' of a type of object than to document rooms because the former gives informants anonymity.

I will dwell on only a few details of the ethics policy which concern Canadian researchers because these guidelines resemble policies in other countries. The Canadian guidelines are referred to as the Tri-Council Policy because they were established by three agencies: the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2010). Respect for human dignity is the founding value of the Tri-Council Policy.

Research based on "personal reflections and self-study" do not require ethics approval. "Auto-ethnography" is specifically cited as an example. Other exceptions include studies of individual politicians, artists, and celebrities; and "consultation to frame or develop the research". This latter exception is quite important because it is often not clear when a research project begins. Researchers are given the right to see if projects are feasible before applying for ethics approval. The following features of my early research on domestic artifacts are problematic in view of the Tri-Council Policy.

**Privacy and confidentiality.** What does informed consent mean, when a researcher looks for the hidden dimensions of the self-object relationship? If privacy is impossible, what are my obligations to protect the self of interviewees? Should I give interviewees ultimate control over my account of their home? What happens when we disagree about my interpretations or my 'clinical detachment' is perceived as criticism or ridicule? What if my account makes social inequality seem even more painful? If I let my interviewees control my text, am I guilty of contributing to their impression management by allowing false claims or misperceptions to reach a larger public?

**Benefits to participants.** My research was motivated by theoretical issues in sociology, more specifically symbolic interactionist theory. There was never a concern about its benefits for participants, although some of my observations may have had practical value to interior decorators or manufacturers. I did not even try to imagine what these benefits might have been. Perhaps interviewees experienced my visits as empowering or following the interview they had a better understanding of themselves. People are flattered when social scientists think their opinions matter.

**Risks to participants.** The risks to interviewees are more obvious than the benefits. Tensions within families can be exposed. The same is true for 'deviant' activities and non-standard family forms. Could I formulate my project so that I secretly interview people about their homes? Covert research is possible if the ethics board is convinced the research topic is socially significant and that no alternative to covert research is available. But who in their right mind would actually think that the study of living rooms holds such significance for the public that it should be undertaken through covert means? Carrying on informal conversations in order to secretly interview people about their home is also time-consuming. It would not be possible to publish photographs. Crucial artifactual or biographical details would have to be altered. This is obviously not a solution.

Are there other options? The pessimistic conclusion would be no, nothing is left except for the discourse analysis of passages in realistic novels which depict character through material artifacts. I could now think of the public good of my research in terms of what I have to offer novelists. I can help them write more sociologically nuanced descriptions of domestic interiors. I would not be the first sociologist who has worked as a spy on behalf of novelists. I find this an appealing topic, sociology as a source of esoteric underground knowledge for novelists. Unfortunately, it is not the kind of symbolic interactionist study of lived reality that I had envisioned.

The practice I advocate is to allow participants to be co-researchers or collaborators. This is motivated by both ethical and practical considerations. The unfortunate aspect of this practice is that I will have to restrict the study of living rooms to people who are culturally sophisticated, although this is contrary to the socially inclusive research explicitly advocated by the Tri-Council Policy. Again it must also be recognized that outsiders cannot master the factual and interpretive detail which is the goal of my analyses. Collaborative researchers should have fewer reasons to worry about the imagined reactions of their informants.



## Analytical categories for describing domestic objects

My original terminology was based on general concepts in semiotics, Goffman (1951; 1959; 1963; 1974), Baudrillard (1988), Bourdieu (1984), Csíkszentmihályi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Schlereth (1982), etc. The methodology was also a reaction against the informality of James Agee whose literary skills I admired, but who was, at best, an amateur sociologist even in the context of the 1930s. I will not argue that my terminology and procedures are a model for everyone. When so many academics compete for attention, diverse theories and methods should be encouraged. In this section I will define my terminology as succinctly as possible and then suggest additional terms derived from recent research.

**Categories of domestic objects.** *Agency* and *mode* distinguishes between the active and passive use of objects, that is, between objects which are handled and objects which are contemplated.

*Intrinsically active objects* are created by designers/manufacturers so that they will be physically manipulated. For example, a corkscrew.

*Intrinsically passive objects* are created to be contemplated. For example, a painting.

*Active mode:* Objects which are touched, caressed, or moved within a household regardless of the intended use by designers and manufacturers.

*Passive mode:* Objects which are contemplated irrespective of intended use.

A small sculpture used as a paper weight would illustrate the *active mode of an intrinsically passive object*.

*Normal use:* An artifact's intended use when manufactured.

*Alien use:* Any non-standard or unanticipated use of objects. The concept includes 'found art'.

*Status objects* are semiotically interpreted or manipulated as indices of social status. 'Apparent cost' may be a more useful term than actual cost since the latter will often not be known with certainty.

*Esteem objects* symbolize the personal self-esteem an individual has achieved in the intimate spheres of life such as parenthood or marriage. Displays of greeting cards, for example.

*Collective objects* represent ties with groups outside the family. National symbols, memorabilia from social movements, etc.

*Stigma objects* are associated with 'spoiled' identities. The most common stigma objects in living rooms are likely to be associated with aging. Tidying up a room often means removing stigma objects.

*Disidentifying objects* make false claims such as exaggerating status. Fake antiques, for example. Disidentifying objects can be contrasted with what Baudrillard called “witnessing objects” which accurately reflect status.

*Social facilitators* are used by groups of people to turn each other into temporary partners and opponents or to facilitate public demonstrations of skill and knowledge. Chess pieces, Rubic’s Cube, etc.

*Occupational objects*: Displays of tools or some material reference to an occupation. In living rooms they tend to be somewhat atypical, antique, handmade or constructed in unusual dimensions.

*Indigenous objects*: Objects made locally in contrast to *exotic objects*.

*Time indicators*: Any sign of time in the decoration such as stylistic features of objects which date them.

*Temporal homogeneity* refers to a room in which most of the objects have been made at approximately the same time.

*Temporal heterogeneity* refers to combinations of artifacts from different historical eras. The category reveals information about the self’s position in time; attitudes toward history, tradition, change and continuity; and the active presence of several generations in the house.

*Size and proportions*: The potential interpretation of objects is influenced by their size. Objects of non-standard size or proportion carry a different meaning than do those of customary size. *Miniaturization* and *monumentality* represent the extremes of the category.

*Way of production* distinguishes between handmade and machine-made objects.

**Display syntax.** *Co-location*: The meanings of artifacts are influenced by the qualities of the surrounding or co-located objects. The same artifact may elicit radically different readings depending upon the setting in which it is displayed.

*Highlighting*: Displays of objects in any manner which attracts attention. Hanging objects at eye level, framing pictures or artifacts, putting plants on plant stands, setting something at the center of a mantelpiece, putting one antique in a contemporary setting, etc.

*Understating* refers to any technique of display which deflects attention away from an artifact.

*Clustering*: Artifacts are clustered if they are grouped together. This style of display may highlight a group of objects.

*Dispersing* refers to objects scattered in space. This display technique may highlight individual objects.

*Status consistency*: Objects in a living room which convey the same level of status. All are apparently costly or inexpensive.

*Status inconsistency:* Living rooms which combine the apparently costly and inexpensive.

*Degree of conformity:* The extent to which a living room conforms to the current tacit rules of interior decoration.

*Referencing:* An interviewee's comments which are about the history, aesthetics or customary use of objects.

*Mapping:* An interviewee's comments in which displayed objects are used as a way of talking about his or her social network.

*Flavor:* All of the preceding categories should be seen as subcategories of flavor, which is similar to 'atmosphere' or 'character'. Flavor refers to taste, a sense which for most people is less well developed than sight. Flavor also refers to a range of identifiable but elusive qualities whose reality is undeniable. Examples: cozy, conservative, impersonal, chaotic, formal, casual, deprived, bohemian, nostalgic, extravagant, etc.

Some of these concepts have appeared in research about living room decoration, artifacts in the bedrooms of infants and teenagers, the display of domestic artifacts in claiming an ethnic identity, objects highlighted on mantelpieces, and the spectacle of empty beer bottles in student residences (Hurley 2006; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh 2002; Pike 2004). Emmison and Smith (2000) ask their readers to look for examples of these terms in realist literature. However, to my knowledge, no one has methodically used these terms in their research. In his outstanding article about "epiphany objects" which symbolize an interviewee's personal taste or experience, Ian Woodward comments on my methodology:

While (Riggins') categories of domestic objects are useful and original, by their exhaustive nature they end up being restrictive and practically inflexible. Additionally, to reach the theoretical standards set by Riggins would seem to require granting the researcher near unregulated access to the domestic setting – this may be the reason why Riggins' model is apparently based substantially on his family home (Woodward 2001, 131).

Indeed, my aim was to be exhaustive. The flaw in the original terminology is that it does not fully exhaust the dimensions of domestic artifacts. In my opinion, Woodward has to some extent misunderstood my methodology. These terms are flexible. The classification of an object depends on how it is used and on the narrative given by the interviewee. Thus one object can easily illustrate more than one category. My interviews do not require "unregulated access" to the home. They are admittedly more intrusive than asking about a few epiphany objects.<sup>2</sup>

Woodward (2006; 2007) gathers collaborating evidence from the narratives interviewees tell about their domestic artifacts. Narrative inconsistencies might tell us something about the anxiety of shopping, but my procedure concentrates on domestic objects themselves and I do not consider interviewees to be 'the expert' on their personal lives or possessions.

### **Proof of fate and love**

My original terminology was developed while writing about the last residences of two elderly couples. Not surprisingly, then, I underestimated the degree to which living rooms evolve. At the time I interviewed my mother, she had lived in the same home for fifty years. The size of the living room as well as the location of windows and doorways severely limited decorating options. The furniture was too heavy to be easily moved except for things like light-weight metal TV trays (or snack tables). Pauline Garvey (2001) has published an excellent study showing that rearranging furniture is an inexpensive way of redecorating for some people. Although my original categories included time indicators (temporal homogeneity), few things pointed to the future or to a distant past. A yellow armchair in the living room was actually a reupholstered wedding present to my parents. Since all of the furniture was old, care and repair of domestic objects is a topic which should have been pursued. If I were to repeat the interview today, I would also raise questions about the way the home allowed an elderly person to be independent but at the cost of social isolation.

To my knowledge, there was no negotiation in planning the decoration when the last major change occurred circa 1968. Mother made all the major decisions. Negotiation is more common in young families today. Conflict over planning a home is one of the most difficult topics to explore in interviews. Insight requires interviewing family members separately, but again ethical problems arise about how much of this conflict needs to be aired in public. Questions about gifts displayed out of a sense of obligation were never raised in my interview. The discussion would have been about my gifts. A couple of things were gifts to one's self. Mother bought for herself a German cuckoo clock, and a hand-painted teapot from Bavaria at a next-door neighbor's estate sale. I did not think of explicitly asking about the topic until much later when I read Annemarie Money (2007, 361). I should also have asked about objects as signifiers of occasions (Money 2007, 372). I was primarily concerned with objects as signifiers of relationships. The cut glass and china in a display case might have elicited stories about occasions. As I am not a cook, no questions were raised about family dinners. Another mistake. Sarah Pink (2004) is correct that we need to pay more attention to the

sounds, smells, and tactile experiences of homes. But I am reluctant to add these dimensions except in rare instances for fear of overwhelming readers with too much detail.

Daniel Miller (2001) and Tanya Davidson (2009) use the concept 'haunting' to capture the way buildings are more permanent than their inhabitants. But the sentimental value of my parents' home did not come from other residents. There were no markings from previous residents except for a nearly invisible child's name scratched on a window pane. The absence of signs of haunting in this house could be interpreted as indicating the relative social insignificance of previous residents. Haunting can also refer to standard stylistic features which date a building. The living room was more closed to the outside environment than is typical today, and in my eyes the overhead ceiling light resembled the lighting in old movie theaters. These are features which made the home less attractive. Haunting is certainly a topic that merits sustained attention in other research.

Death reshuffles the labels which give domestic objects so much of their meaning. Following death, some things disappear; new things arrive. The haiku poet and friend Richard Hendrickson (1999) writes: "family heirlooms/are passed down the line like genes/proof of fate and love". This particular home, however, was resistant to change. In retirement my father's hobby was making small wooden toys, model cars, and birdhouses, some of which could easily have been displayed in the living room. My father's presence in the living room is muted. I should have raised the question: Who or what was responsible for his invisibility? Is the answer his modesty, the power of social conventions – not many people have houses for wrens atop their coffee table (Attfield 1997) – or mother's domination? Why was I the person responsible for the two pictures of him which were displayed in the living and dining room?

The dispersal of domestic artifacts is another process meriting attention. As Jean-Sébastien Marcoux (2001) shows so eloquently in his study of the Quebec ritual *casser maison*, the dispersal of domestic artifacts by the elderly can be seen as a conscious attempt to live in the memory of family and friends, and is thus related to the idea of a 'good death'. Not being able to give things away to the appropriate person can be distressing. Negotiation may have to take place because the appropriate person may not want the gift. Although mother was the kin-keeper of her family and 88 years old when interviewed, she showed little interest in 'placing things'. That was left to me and to nostalgic shoppers at my backyard estate sale.

### **The random nonsense of existence by Adam Bradley and Stephen Harold Riggins**

Riggins' partner enjoys speaking with strangers.<sup>3</sup> At a concert of contemporary music in Toronto, the volunteer selling refreshments struck up a conversation with him. The volunteer was Adam Bradley. Although he completed a sociology degree at the university where Riggins teaches, they had met only once when Riggins signed an administrative form for Adam. Riggins had no recollection of this brief encounter. But Newfoundlanders in foreign places like Toronto, Ontario, have a tendency to associate with each other. Adam was later invited to participate in a twelve-hour poetry reading which Riggins' partner organized at a bar on Queen Street West. Adam stole the show because of the quality of his poetry and his acting ability. At some point Riggins learned that Adam lived in an eccentric apartment. Since this kind of dwelling is difficult to find, Adam let Riggins photograph his home. The basement apartment – at a location different from the one described in this article – was indeed very eccentric. The decor, the remnants of a friend's bankrupt antique store, included a dozen bicycles and old equipment related to making films and styling hair. Adam is presently an administrator at the concert society where he volunteered. Riggins systematically photographed the artifacts in the living room which will now be described and interviewed Adam on two occasions. Each interview was about two hours long. Adam also read drafts of the following account and, as will be apparent, corrected some of Riggins' misperceptions. Adam requested that one remark in the draft be removed. His request was honored.

Adam articulates a philosophy which is difficult for some people to hear. For Riggins, part of the appeal of research on material artifacts is that objects evoke the past. Of course, everything is eventually destroyed, forgotten, and recreated in different forms, but in the meantime passively accepting transitoriness seems inhuman. Adam, in contrast, embraces transitoriness while at the same time creating an environment that celebrates the self. Neglect and clutter give his version of transitoriness a shabby appearance. Riggins does not struggle with his personal biases in writing this description because he appreciates Adam as a visual artist, poet, and experimental musician. Adam is in his mid-20s but identifies with the 1970s punk subculture, although he is too young to have experienced the decade, and finds significance in the street address of his apartment which was a prominent year in the Toronto punk scene. The apartment, which is located in Toronto, Canada, has been named 'Sally Rough' by one of Adam's friends. ('Sally Ann' is a colloquial term for the Salvation Army.) But nothing actually comes

from the Salvation Army. To some extent the apartment is still haunted by its previous tenants.

I cured this place. When I moved in, it had a horrible smell from the previous tenants' cats. I think they were drug addicts and did not take proper care of the cats. I turned this place around. Most potential tenants immediately rejected it. It was probably never meant to be a place to live in. It's weird and solitary. I fell in love with this place.

The apartment is located in the basement of a two-story brick building, apparently built circa 1920, in a working-class neighbourhood which is slowly being gentrified. At this point in time, the class contrasts along the street are very noticeable. Adam has lived for the past fifteen months in a basement apartment which was probably intended to serve as a furnace room. On the ground floor of the building is a variety store that sits just above the apartment.

The door to Adam's apartment is at the back of the building. Entrance requires walking into a vest-pocket park accessible to the public at all hours. The park's attractions are a children's playground and a wading pool. The entrance to the apartment is down a few concrete steps which on a hot July day are slightly dusty and covered with a few dry leaves. The screen door has no handle. A hole has been cut in the screen which serves as a handle for opening and closing the door. Upon entering, visitors find themselves in a space Riggins calls a kitchen/bedroom. Since the tenant is from Newfoundland, it might be noted that the traditional way of entering Newfoundland homes was through the kitchen, which typically had a daybed. However, this kitchen has a queen-size bed near the stove, immediately giving the impression of someone living in an inadequate space. Modern kitchens have become multifunctional open spaces but they are not combined with bedrooms. Adam's art works are better displayed on the walls of the kitchen/bedroom than the casual treatment they receive in the living room. The art is coloured drawings, made with felt pens ('sharpies') and Crayola brand crayons, on sheets of cardboard and used pizza boxes.

In July 2011 when Riggins first visited, the shouts of children wading in the pool penetrated through the open door into the kitchen/bedroom and into the room we shall call the living room/closet. Little in the room conforms to middle-class conventions of interior decoration except for one characteristic. Living rooms tend to be a repository for handmade objects. Adam takes artifacts normally seen as stigmatizing because they are associated with poverty and uses them in alien ways that ironically convey high status. Here – with a bit of extravagance and egotism – they are also turned into disidentifying objects, collective

objects, and occupational objects. In the interview Adam references the objects by associating them with the philosophy of a youthful counterculture. The main display technique, clustering, makes it difficult to highlight objects and encourages understating. When he maps the objects in terms of the social relationships they represent, the talk is about marginal subcultures in new music and art.

Neglect runs through everything in this apartment. There is a rat bite on a cardboard pizza box in the kitchen. There are organic, damaged elements on a lot of the art I do. Blackberries smeared on one of my art pieces. Bugs buried in some of them. Things are mortal. I like the idea of impermanence. I don't like to glorify art, put it behind glass. I wouldn't do that. Whatever happens to my art is real and honest. Things in your life get degraded. I try to do that in art rather than falsely preserve things.

The living room is rather dark. It is windowless. The main light is a red Chinese lantern. The ceiling is uneven and low. At its maximum, it is only 6 feet and 2 inches (about 183 cm; ed) high. There are so many objects crowded together in this room that it is not obvious which one might at first glance attract a visitor's attention. Maybe it would be the electrical service panel for fuses and electricity meters. It is on the wall to the left of the door, at eyelevel, and large with respect to the size of the room. The panel holds the meters for the entire building. Electrical service panels, always painted institutional grey, are normally considered utilitarian necessities and hidden in a closet. Here it is in full view. There is perhaps a certain irony in its prominence. The decoration of the living room is consistent with the 'modernist project', as some sociologists call it, in that it is comparatively individualistic. But if the modern home is understood as a technical terminal (Putnam 1999), then it is not modern because the television is not the focal point of the living room and the apartment is not connected to the Internet. The room seems to be organized in a traditional manner with a central focus which facilitates conversation. The service panel is decorated with a few promotional cards for artists. Since they cannot be seen properly from the doorway, the art will be discussed later.

We do not discuss shopping because Adam does not buy many things. The furniture is second-hand, 'snatched up things' discarded and left on the street for anyone who might want them or for the garbage collectors. He once carried a chair home on his back. His friends also sometimes help him carry things home. The red and orange shag rug comes from a middle-aged friend, an audiophile fond of taking discarded things from the street, who was convinced to reduce his possessions. To the left of the doorway separating the kitchen/bedroom and



the living room/closet are two grey cushions lying flat on the floor. Instead of a backrest there are three mismatched pillows, beige and brown. Adam brought a used couch from his previous apartment. But when he realized after two hours of struggling that it would not fit through the door, the frame was discarded. These are seats for the young because they are so low. Lodged high in the corner and barely visible above the Chinese lantern is a tiny staircase from a doll house. It was found in the parking lot of a nearby thrift store called Value Village. In the corner is a guitar modified by a local noise artist:

We don't really know each other. I was at a party and he brought tubs and filing cabinets full of junk and just threw himself on them and broke them. The acoustic guitar was functional. He played it. A mic cord was attached to it. But he smashed the back of it. Whatever he has done to it, it makes really crazy abrasive sounds. It was a violent noise show. There is a positivity which comes from expending energy. Listeners can vicariously live through the violence. Everything is so politically correct these days. We are not allowed to express rage in Canada. I am very fond of the idea of creation in destruction.

Underneath the guitar is a black robe of fake fur, part of an ape-like "mogwar costume". (The costume also consists of a mask and a Newfoundland ugly stick which are not on display. An ugly stick is a traditional Newfoundland musical instrument made out of a mop or broom handle, bottle caps, tin cans, small bells, cymbals, and other noise makers.) Crypto-zoological circles are familiar with the mogwar, a mythical primate (perhaps a hoax) supposedly discovered by the Swiss oil geologist François de Loys in Venezuela in 1920.<sup>4</sup> The Shadow Ring rock band has a song about de Loys and this South American version of Bigfoot. The face is a Halloween devil's mask from Walmart turned inside out. It is hidden because he assumed it would frighten some visitors and Adam did not want to try to explain it. This is one of the rare examples of interpersonal negotiation in decorating the apartment. He talks about dancing around in this costume at happenings like Extermination Music Night, a clandestine mobile concert series, held in illegal locations such as industrial ruins and secluded beaches. The music may be free jazz or conceptual noise, but it is generally 'garage rock', that is pop-tinged, high energy music. Adam calls garage music "very do-it-yourself music, usually sloppy but fun".<sup>5</sup>

Beside the guitar is a bale of hay coming from a neighborhood bar. It functions as a chair. A cushion makes it more comfortable. The back support is an old tire, with the rim intact, recuperated from the sidewalk. Next is a very old and by contemporary standards very thick Diamond brand television set. A friend

gave him the television. It rests on a small table that has the traditional turned legs of antiques rather than clean modernist lines. Underneath is a DVD player. In the corner is a red padded armchair. Anyone sitting in the chair must occasionally shift positions because some of the springs are worn out. On the floor is a discarded cardboard pizza box. A painted sheet of cardboard leaning against the wall is one of Adam's paintings. It is casually displayed in a shockingly understated and self-destructive manner. The remnants of a couch touch the painting; two cushions on the floor, two cushions as a backrest. Guests sitting here cannot comfortably avoid damaging his painting. Older guests who know little about contemporary pop art might see resemblances with the cartoons of Robert Crumb, but Adam's art is less erotic. Any resemblance is accidental because Adam is not familiar with Crumb's art.

The natural order is decay. The cardboard art I do is not going to last. The material is acidic. That's the joke. It's not going to last. That's how I view everything. Everything is very temporary. It is not a malicious trick. Wealthy people who buy art should understand that. Preservation is a big thing for many people. But we buy things which break in a year or two. Accepting that is part of my desire for novelty. If they break, something new will come in. I feel in a lot of ways, to quote Kurt Vonnegut, "so it goes".<sup>6</sup> Life is chaotic and a constant loss. Life is aleatoric, just random nonsense. I accept that. I'm not trying to be a prophet. It's just what is in my head.

Riggins notes that Adam has a BA degree in sociology. The random nonsense of existence is not what sociologists typically see. We see the unjust social order.

The room is basically L-shaped. The extension to the side serves as a storage area stuffed helter-skelter with electronic equipment, amplifiers, turntables and speakers; some rest on blue plastic milk crates. Within handy reach of the audio equipment is a modest pile of records or "vinyls" as Adam calls them. No curtain or door hides this disorder which is of such modest dimensions that Adam does not appear to be a hoarder, although he does call himself a "packrat". He keeps odd things which might have a use later. The effect is a room Riggins calls the living room/closet. Adam points out that there is a glow-in-the-dark rubber snake on the back wall but it is barely visible. Another large drawing on cardboard is obscured among the clutter. It would have to be moved, if visitors got a good look at it.

I like the aesthetics of piled up electronics. They all did work once. I like rooms to be full. I like cluttered spaces. I feel I am a maximalist in many

ways. I designed this place to be entertaining to me. Efficiency and utility is something I am not fond of. I feel like my home is an on-going art project. I have made all of my apartments into an art project out of whims that come to me, impulses, things given to me.

Among the electronic equipment is a drum kit which Adam cannot use. "I asked the landlord when moving in if I could play music underneath the corner store. He said 'yes,' but it turned out that the space was far from sound proof. I can hear the neighbours' voices when they chatter, but I cannot understand what is being said."

I sometimes like to destroy my possessions to remind me that things decay. I don't do this in a fit of rage. Writing on the walls is part of that. I once sprayed a fire extinguisher around the apartment. I don't like to be restricted by norms. You never get to use fire extinguishers although they are displayed everywhere, sometimes behind glass. Spraying the fire extinguisher was an impulse. I wanted to see the result and deal with the consequence afterwards. If you take risks, you get burnt a lot. But it makes life more interesting. If you actively engage trouble, you learn damage control, how to deal with problems.

There is an abstract crayon drawing ("just junk") on a wall of the closet. Otherwise, scribbled messages and line drawings are confined to the door of the washroom. The drawings look like spontaneous doodles: caricatures of faces, messages, and a human head with octopus-like tentacles. Some are even partially erased. Tacked to the door separating the living room from the kitchen is a humorous drawing by a friend. It might be an esteem object. The caption is descriptive: Toast Owl in a Sunset.

The living room is characterized by little temporal depth, as one would assume from Adam's remarks, and by status consistency. There are a few exceptions, however, pieces which convey a more orthodox notion of status. One is a bentwood rocking chair. It reminds him of a chair at his parents' home in Newfoundland. If exotic objects are understood as referring to geographically distance places, this is the only potential exotic object. However, it is a manufactured chair of unknown origin, certainly not from Newfoundland. Only in Adam's referencing does it appear to have exotic connotations for a Torontonionian. The two levels of seating in the apartment, cushions on the floor and chairs of standard height, have the effect of introducing some visual diversity into a small space depending on where one is seated. The other high status object is the colourful hand-painted table top which Adam made. This is certainly the most marketable art in the

room. In another setting it might be referred to as a coffee table. Although it is a standard table top, the legs have been discarded. The support is an apple basket.

The painted tabletop took me ten to fifteen minutes to make. No thought went into it. I don't see any value higher than aesthetics. All of this stuff is junk. I value it because I put it together. I feel that it really keeps me from getting too attached to material goods. I have some things I treasure.

I don't like artists who make something and then make a grandiose statement about it. I have fun with bizarre things, odd juxtapositions, playing with geometry. Not grand statements. The motto "Offend thy self" does not apply to the table. The table is only for aesthetics.

My work is very selfish. At an exhibition my artist statement was written backwards on a pizza box beginning from the bottom. If you find value in my art, I won't disagree with you. Some things have tons of values. Other things are just squares and nonsense. Sometimes I realize in retrospect that a piece is more valuable than I had anticipated. Some friends suggest that I take just one image and make art. I like images with too much information.

Despite Adam's claim of being self-centered, he does not sign his art works. Instead the identifying symbol worked into the image is a stoplight of non-standard colors. Until this statement Riggins had interpreted Adam's message as: I do not treasure anything. But Riggins misunderstood. Memories and stories are what Adam values. However, he has a suitcase full of "tidbits", which are the objects he truly values. Some are from his childhood. He keeps adding things to the suitcase. It seemed inappropriate to inquire about the contents of the suitcase in the kitchen/bedroom but there was no indication from Adam that the contents were actually private. As a musician he also treasures his "vinyls, although I abuse them". He does not revere objects. It is the ideas associated with them which he treasures.

Adam talks about young artists in Toronto, some of whom are collaborators. "Friends, people in my atmosphere," he calls them. He says they do art based on somewhat disturbing and violent material. The content may be humorous, abrasive, and offensive; but the people are "really nice". He refers to the Toronto-based video/art collective called Exploding Motor Car, the White House art collective in Toronto and the music-community message board called Stillepost.

Above the electrical service panel is the exposed heating system and insulation. The electrical service panel displays a stylized drawing by Patrick Kyle of a man defecating evil spirits. There is also a small promotional card for an art exhibition on the "theme of death, psychedelic and self-indulgent fantasies" (to quote

part of the text on the back of the card). There is a three-dimensional miniature tombstone decorated with something like runes. Nothing but the date 12 BC is legible. It is described as “simply a weird gift” from a friend. The other things are a sticker showing the face of a musician from the band called The Bicycles, a sticker with the message “Fuzzy Logic Recordings”, and a real drum stick. But Adam was more interested in talking about another gift, a band button that reads “Gimme Teenage Head”. This is the slightly naughty name of a popular Toronto band from the 1970s. Adam talks enthusiastically about its authenticity – scratched in a mosh pit. Actually, the scratches from the frenetic dance scene are hard to see.

Adam suggests that Riggins needs to learn about pataphysics in order to understand his home. This is a sort of intellectual Dadaism which was the invention of the French artist Alfred Jarry. “I don’t know tons about pataphysics,” Adam confesses. “I haven’t figured out how to fit it in my life yet.” Riggins’ impression is that pataphysics might help understand a future apartment rather than the present one.

### **Addendum**

In conclusion, this apartment supports some of Daniel Miller’s ideas about the social determinants of decorating strategies. It is certainly consistent with a masculine aesthetic. But in the absence of comparable apartments inhabited by members of different ethnic groups, it is not clear how Adam’s aesthetic reflects ethnicity. Adam’s aesthetic does seem to be a variation on the “biographical cover-up” strategy. Miller (1988, 364) claimed that domestic artifacts in government-subsidized housing in Great Britain sometimes function to attract attention away from the low social status of the dwelling. Adam’s aesthetic is both consistent and inconsistent with this practice. Physically, his cheap things reflect the status of his apartment house; the intellectuality behind the objects might be understood as a cover-up.

Dick Hebdige’s (1988) ideas about style in the British punk subculture might also help to understand Adam’s apartment. Some similarities are unmistakable. Riggins employs the term ‘alien use’ rather than ‘bricolage’, which Hebdige borrowed from Lévi-Strauss; however, the terms have similar meanings. Alien use is a basic characteristic of Adam’s living room as well as punk style. In Riggins’ opinion, Adam’s examples of alien use are less shocking, less provocative, than punk practices with respect to clothing in the 1970s. Adam has rejected the conventional expectation that the home is a site for conveying signs of affluence and conspicuous consumption (Chapman 1999, 56). His philosophy, however, turns poverty into a sign of success. The apartment is characterized by subversive

practices, sometimes humorous, with respect to the dominant ideology of capitalism and consumerism. The differences with British punk are due to the compromises everyone makes in furnishing and decorating a home because they have to acknowledge gifts from friends; differences are also due to accidental acquisitions, and concerns about comfort and practicality which literally 'domesticate the Other'. The result is to undermine the consistency of the political messages conveyed by the living room. Forty years ago punks may have been seen in conventional British society as 'folk devils', but this is certainly not the apartment of a folk devil. The anti-consumerism of the decoration is not a 'spectacular' subculture that escapes analysis. Anti-consumerism is relatively common today. Ian Woodward (2001, 117) utilizes the continuum 'beauty to comfort' to represent the underlying philosophy of decorating schemes. If the concept is adapted to be more accurate in this case, the continuum would be 'self-identity to comfort'. Adam's apartment is near the self-identity point. There was no talk of beauty or comfort in the interviews. Riggins suspects that to some extent the living room/closet functions as a parlour. When a few guests are present, they are more likely to sit around the dinner table in the kitchen/bedroom, on the bed or in a plush kitchen chair.

Adam might have made a more convincing claim that he identified with the punk subculture. But as Riggins is a classically trained pianist, he would not have understood any of Adam's references other than the most obvious ones. In general, punks revealed their identity with the subculture through music and clothing rather than interior decoration. It is typical of the differences between interviewer and interviewee that when Adam referred to his "vinyls", Riggins never inquired about his collection. Adam could have displayed more band paraphernalia and logos. However, if he had purchased too many for display purposes, some visitors might ironically interpret this as a sign of inauthentic over-identification with the subculture (Force 2009). Punk style is supposed to be spontaneous and always oppositional. Adam has carried this idea even to the extent of resisting the tendency of turning the living room into a gallery. His subversion of the conventional middle-class styles of decorating has a long history among artists that Christopher Reed (2002) dates back to French Impressionism. For nearly a century and a half avant-garde male artists have scorned conventional symbols of domesticity. This is another reason why Riggins did not think it was necessary to further pursue the topic of punk subculture when interviewing Adam. Riggins describes the flavor of Adam's apartment as virile, slightly chaotic, playful, and symbolic of anti-consumerism. It is definitely not homey.

Adam agreed only in part with Riggins' analysis. He agreed that he strongly identifies with material poverty, and with Riggins' impression that he is not very

provocative. As Riggins suspected, Adam does not think of himself as a militant or an activist. He attributes the status diversity in the living room to his appreciation of randomness and contrast and to his “fear of commitment”. He wants to feel free rather than hounded by people. However, he states that Riggins was wrong in thinking he radically rejects consumerism. On those rare occasions when friends give him something that is expensive, he makes use of it. He thinks the pursuit of money to buy consumer goods interferes with his priority, the “creation of stories”. Redecorating, rearranging the furniture, acquiring new stuff is always tempting. Moving is one of Adam’s favourite experiences. In his words, “there is something neurotic about my apartment but it makes me happy”.

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## Notes

1 I agree with the following statement by Daniel Miller (2001, 15): “An anthropology that thinks that sensitivity about being too intrusive is demonstrated by remaining outside and respecting the distance of conventional social proxemics is a dead anthropology, that loses its humanity in the very moment that it asserts it in this claim to sensitivity.” Although talk about one’s home is always a sensitive topic, not all studies of vernacular interior decoration are as intrusive as the model I propose for my own research. I think that Ian Woodward somewhat misrepresents my methodology, but I emphasize that Woodward specifically rejected my procedures because he thought they required “near unregulated access to the domestic setting” (Woodward 2001, 131).

2 For me, there were several epiphany objects in my parents’ home in hilly and forested southern Indiana, but few were in the living room or dining room except for my paternal grandfather’s mustache cup. On top of the cedar chest in my parents’ bedroom were two albums of Kodak photographs. One records the early years of their marriage. The second holds my baby pictures. Both albums are incomplete. My parents’ album ends when I was born. As a child, I thought I learned some profound knowledge from these photographs: marriage changes fundamentally, and for the worse, when children arrive. It is best to be voluntarily childless. I thought it was such dangerous insight that I did not share it with anyone. The idea strikes me now as hopelessly naive. That aging plays a role in people’s desire to be photographed never occurred to me. Viewed this way, the album says little about marriage as an institution. I also never gave a thought to why my album ends when I was about the age of 14. I still do not have an answer for that question.

Aesthetics was never the photographer's concern. The photographer always thought that the best angle was to capture a person's image from head to toe. This resulted in mid-distant shots which convey little intimacy. There was no effort to document local life. Most photographs depict visits to nearby towns and tourist sites, like French Lick. Thus the album poorly records the socializing which tended to be restricted to the extended family. I now interpret these features as evidence that, like many in the working class, the Riggins and Ledgerwood families were not well integrated into mainstream American culture.

3 Note to readers: for ethical and practical reasons, I made it a point to cast my informant as a research collaborator. Therefore, I will refer to myself in this section in the third person.

4 The mogwar is known by a variety of names depending on the South American country: *shiru*, *sisimite*, *vasitri*, *didi*, *xipe*, and *tarma*.

5 See *eyeweekly.com*, 20 August 2008, <http://www.eyeweekly.com/features/article/36773> [accessed 15 August 2011] and *Toronto Star*, 11 July 2009, <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/664502> [accessed 15 August 2011].

6 "So it goes" is a refrain in Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). It could be understood as meaning that is the way things are.

## **Placing objects first: filming transnationalism**

Carlo A. Cubero

### **Introduction: placing objects first**

For the past year and a half I have been carrying out fieldwork amongst West African musicians in Luxembourg and surrounding areas, with the goal of making an ethnographic film that would portray aspects of their transnational daily life. The guiding theme of this ethnographic documentary project is to use audiovisual media as a research method to understand the complexities of a life constituted in movement or what I like to describe as modern practises of nomadism where people are engaged in continuous practises of travel and, in doing so, put pressure on social categories that are based on sedentarism – of being in place (Cubero 2011).

My ongoing reflections on the project have been to consider the audiovisual dimensions of transnationalism (Cubero 2011). However, ‘transnationalism’ lacks an immediate visual substance and addressing this topic through an audiovisual medium requires a different set of questions and approaches than using a text-based medium. For example, a filmmaker asks how does transnationalism look, how does it sound, and how can I capture its sights and sounds? This exercise re-contextualises transnationalism from a discursive, historical, and abstract term into something physical that can be seen or heard. The challenge, in this context, is to use audiovisual media to go beyond the illustrative and produce an audiovisual piece that would engage with the experiential dimension of ‘a life in movement’ through the audiovisual. In the case of my project, this approach benefits from the fact that the transmigrants that I am studying are musicians, a practise well served for the cinematic medium because it emphasises the performative dimensions of embodied identities.

In this paper I want to focus on some of the effects that filming methodologies have had on my approach towards my research material. I would like to propose that making a film about transnational practises prioritises the material features of migration practises over the contours of power and class that characterise a

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 58–73. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

transnational social field (Basch et al 1994, 34). As such, this approach comes closer to a phenomenology of transnationalism, where the project seeks to offer an insight into the transnational experience by presenting an experience-rich account of migration practise by using exclusively descriptive materials collected through participant observation. This paper will particularly concern itself with the objects that produce and reproduce the social contexts I am filming. I will argue that the practise of making an ethnographic documentary places the filmmaker in a position to consider material objects as constitutive of social relations, rather than engage with objects as metaphoric, illustrative, or as a means to engage with historical causalities.

Collecting footage, in my case, is more akin to crafting an ethnography of the 'now', rather than collecting data that can be mined later for producing ethnographic insight. In my experience, filming as part of fieldwork heightens the ethnographer's sensibility to the visual and aural dimensions of the fieldsite (Cubero 2008). This kind of heightened state of awareness is necessary in order to produce footage that can lead to a participatory narrative, a narrative where the viewer and filmmaker are intellectually and sensually engaged with the piece, rather than an informative documentary that 'tells' or reports a story. The result of this approach is that the anthropologist engages with the fieldsite for its cinematic potential – for its forms and rhythms, its sights and sounds. In this mode, objects become narrative motifs, an event a scene, an informant a character, sounds that are taken for granted become the soundscape of the film, and positionality is mediated through the camera.

In the (on-going) process of collecting the footage for this documentary I have been compelled to consider two types of objects that function as narrative motifs that drive the material. In the first instance, I will address the meanings connected to the musical instrument that my main informant, Marcel, plays, the kora – an African harp, which is discursively linked to the African griot and is represented as one of its main tools. As a transnational object, the kora is subjected to inconsistent identity politics and significances that are, at times, antagonistic. For example, in Burkina Faso, where Marcel is originally from, the kora is associated with the griot caste, word-smiths who occupy a specific place in the region's social hierarchy. Marcel does not consider himself a griot, nor does he have pretensions of reproducing griot social hierarchies or values. According to him, for someone of his social position to work with the kora in Burkina Faso represents a taboo and he would never consider playing the kora whilst in Burkina Faso. By working with the kora in Europe Marcel consciously deploys a series of social significances and images that go against normative social hierarchical values associated to his place of birth. This results in a conceptually

fluid kora, a semiotically malleable object that carries within it a wide array of significations, reminiscent of a mosaic or a palimpsest.

I suggest that the methodology of filmmaking offers the opportunity to address these complexities consistently, by prioritising the objects in motion, and their use in practise, rather than begin with their normative and hierarchical discursive definitions. As such, the story of the kora that emerges when it is filmed is not exclusively the story of, say, tradition versus modernity, post-colonial politics, or the complexities of world music politics. Filmmaking promises to show the kora as it is practised in daily life – to re-present it as it presents itself rather than presuming that it symbolises or stands for something else. It gets closer to an anthropology of material life, which appreciates that social relations are constructed by relations with objects through practise and consumption (Miller 1998).

In the second instance, I wish to address the materialities associated to the sounds of the kora. Rather than engaging with the kora for its discursive potential, filmmaking methodologies can address the sonic-effect of the instrument and invite the viewer to consider how the textures and nuances of the kora's sound serve to constitute social relations in a similar way to material objects. This approach is reminiscent of Stoller's approach to sensual ethnography, in which, in the case of griots, the relationship to sound is physical, material, and constitutive of social contexts (Stoller 1997). It is also reminiscent of the concept of 'sound object' as articulated by Schaeffer (1966) and Chion (1990). For Schaeffer and Chion, the technological recording and playback (or reconstruction) of sonic events entails separating from their original source, which allows appreciation of sounds on their own terms, reduced to their physical core. This approach is not concerned with the causality of sounds, but with the perceptual reality of 'the sonic'. As such, it distances itself from political, semiotic, and discursive dimensions of music and highlights the inherent property of sound itself. While Schaeffer developed his approach in the context of *musique concrète* and Chion in the context of understanding the role that sound plays in cinema, I am interested in the possibility of thinking with 'sound objects' as a means to articulate the contributions that ethnographic filming methodologies can provide to coming to terms with the complexities embedded in transnational practises and the globalisation of musical practises. Thinking with 'sound objects', for example, contrasts with Steven Feld's 'shizophonic mimesis' approach, which stresses the discourses of power, particularly unequal power relations, that characterise contemporary circulation of music and sonic appropriations (Feld 1996). This approach, I contend, reiterates the Marxist ontology that focuses on the power relations embedded in the production politics of sound. With its emphasis on 'the sonic-now', filmmaking methodology, on the other hand, allows for the researcher to examine the

politics of listening and consider how sociality is constituted sonically. In doing so, it side-steps isomorphism associated with place, identity, and authenticity and goes back to looking at (sonic) things in themselves.

This reflection on the materiality of sound and the kora is the product of participating and observing the daily life of my informants with video making equipment and, most surely, would not have been possible had I not been filming. The heightened awareness of a site's sights and sounds, which goes hand in hand with being technically competent with the equipment, results in a sensation as if the anthropologist is already 'in the film'. As such, the anthropologist is not filming just 'things' but narrative motifs. The anthropologist is not just recording sound, but producing a soundscape that affects the viewer and completes the picture. The actual filming of processes and relationships between people and things – music playing, in this case – is a way of capturing the moments in time when the material, immaterial, and the human come together to constitute 'the social'. Filmmaking methodology reconfigures material cultures and artefacts by placing their use and aesthetics as constitutive of their semantic meaning, rather than approaching its aesthetics and use as an illustrator or indicative of discourse. Filming methodology offers the prospect to re-present objects as part of a broader flow of meanings and relationships that constitute mobile social lives. As such, it presents a picture of transnationalism that emphasises its practises and the relationships between people and things.

### **Filmmaking methodology**

This volume invites us to consider how we live 'through' things, which I connect to Marx's observation that commodities acquire value in relation to their social use rather than exclusively their use-value and to Simmel's suggestion that human values are objectified in cultural forms. In both cases, commodities acquire value when they are transacted – when set in motion. But I would suggest that the process of making an ethnographic film inverts the relationship between social value and things and considers what happens when it is things and people's engagement with things that give places and contexts their value.

Conventional discourse on visual anthropology reproduces the claim that the use of audiovisual materials, on their own terms, is not as effective as text in communicating discourse, history, and the broader social context. This is mainly because ethnographic documentaries are made up exclusively of materials collected during fieldwork in opposition to texts, which are written up after the fact, in isolation from the field, and are articulated with social theory, which is conceptual and not necessarily part of the local idioms. I would argue, following

MacDougall, that the promise of ethnographic film methodologies does not lie in film's capacity to contribute to anthropology's discursive and text-based knowledge (MacDougall 2006). Rather, anthropologists should acknowledge that cinema is a different medium than text and its contributions to anthropology should reflect cinema's peculiar potential and limitation. In the context of my project, filmmaking methodologies place things rather than concepts first – they prioritise lived experiences, objects in use, bodies in space, and the moment of encounter between the anthropologist and the fieldsite.

I am referring to the practise and discourse associated with observational cinema. While a lot of ink has been dedicated to the uses and abuses of observational cinema (and I do not intend to review its characteristics here), an angle of observational cinema practise that I do wish to revisit and highlight is its ethical suggestion. The term 'observational cinema' implies more than a method of inquiry. It denotes a special kind of relationship between filmmaker, subject and audience – a relationship that is based on mutual trust and on an intimate, sympathetic encounter between different worlds (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009). It is not based on a notion of observing as a passive exercise, as it would be associated to voyeurism or spectatorship – 'to look at'. Rather, 'observation' suggests 'to respect', 'to comply with', 'to take notice of', 'to celebrate or solemnize (as a ceremony or festival) in a customary or accepted way' (Merriam-Webster's Online). When applied to cinema, I take 'observation' as a practise that conforms and complies with the rules that are offered by the ethnographic reality of my informants, in opposition to subjecting my informant's discourse and practise to a non-diegetic logic.

This approach recalls William James' 'radical empiricism', an approach that centres its enquiry on direct lived experience on its own terms. For James,

[...] the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous transempirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure (Perry 2009, 3).

Empiricism [...] lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. My description of things, accordingly, starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order (James 2009, 14).

The radical empirical documentary, then, seeks to generate an understanding of the world by collecting snippets of daily life – to assemble a skilful description

of relationships, which, when narrativised as a whole, offers an experience-rich account of social life. A corollary of this approach is the promise of avoiding the separation between 'idea' and 'object'. To develop an ontology, which sees objects as a realm to produce theory (which sees 'things as meanings'), in opposition to the methodology that looks for prescribed meanings in objects (Henare et al 2006). In doing so, empirical methodologies indulge in life's negative capability, in accepting experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge – without an explicit demand to subject it to an extraneous logic.

Roland Barthes attempted to articulate the simultaneous excess and deficiency of meaning in the image, or rather the object-image, by writing about the obtuse revelations in what he called photography's "third meaning". For Barthes, photography's third meaning or obtuse meaning is bound to artifice, to disguise, and to emotion. In the end, it is not articulable in language or rather it can be agreed on 'over the shoulder' or 'on the back' of articulated language. Third meaning, in this sense, "outplays meaning", it takes the side exit on "literacy's depletion" (Barthes 1980, 63).

If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the obvious meaning, it does not copy anything – how do you describe something that doesn't represent anything? The pictorial 'rendering' of words is here impossible, with the consequence that if, in front of these images, we remain, you and I, at the level of articulated language – at the level, that is, of my own text – the obtuse meaning will not succeed in existing, in entering the critic's metalanguage. Which means that the obtuse meaning is outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution (Barthes 1980, 61).

Obtuse meaning, in the empirical and observational sense, does not arise from a passive or narcissistic reflection of the subjective self. The practical reality of observational filmmaking is that the filmmaker is part of the context being filmed. The filmmaker cannot hide his bulky equipment and the subjects are aware when they are being filmed. As such, this kind of filmmaking is inherently participatory, where the scenes and processes being filmed are always done with some kind of implicit or explicit acknowledgement of an inter-subjective relationship between the filmmaker and the film subjects. This positionality is made evident in the film by the framing of the scene, where implicit in the camera style there is a theory of knowledge (MacDougall 1998). The presence of the filmmaker is evident in the film by the quality of the relationships between the subjects and the camera, the treatment of the material, and by the fact that the filmmaker's body is holding the camera.



The kind of observation that I am referring to cannot and must not be passive. It *cannot* be considered passive because of the fact that what functions as my ‘data’, the footage, is already being narrativised by my camera and sound recording equipment. I *must* not be passive because to record in a disengaged manner (i.e. to leave the camera on a tripod, to have the camera separated from the body, or to be immobile with the camera) is not conducive to constructing a participatory narrative, a narrative where the viewer and filmmaker are intellectually and sensually engaged with the piece.

This approach has allowed for two tentative provocations that have helped me to assess my material in a way that may not have been possible otherwise. (1) Filming objects places them in relation to bodies and space – it emphasises their usage rather than their political or semantic meaning. What follows then is an approach that sees how objects give value to practise and in doing so, constitute and mediate social contexts. In other words, that objects make space happen in opposition to the notion that space and context are prescribed and objects are subject to them – as it is suggested in the approach that fixes commodities to practises of exchange. (2) If objects can be seen as constitutive of a scene, the question that arises for me as a filmmaker is the issue of the agency of objects – what is the process through which objects actually make place happen? In the following sections, I will expand on these provocations and attempt to articulate some of the results of trying to film transnationalism, with an eye on material culture.

### **Sound: the tool of the griot**

The ethnography on griots describes this social group as word-smiths, bards, and story-tellers with a complex social role. Traditionally, griots are associated with making a living by begging and survive on the charity of people who listen to their stories. However, griots are much more than mere story-tellers or historians. Their stories have a real social and political power in their society. African scholars consider griots the ‘archivists’ of their cultures, they are “great depositories, who, it can be said, are the living memory of Africa” (Hampaté Ba 1981, 66 in Stoller 1997, 26–27). I want to highlight this characterisation of the “living memory of Africa”. It suggests that their stories are not illustrations, re-tellings, representations of history or of folklore. Rather, the griot tradition of the West Sahel emphasises that listening to a griot story is to re-live, re-constitute, and re-experience history and produces new knowledge about social life.

This approach dislodges the passive-ness of words that is suggested in the classic linguistic binary that generates meaning according to signifier and signified.

From a griot approach, words and sounds are their own signifiers. They have a power that functions to create social relations rather than represent them. In the griot context, the telling of a myth or a legend does not make a distinction between fact and fiction (Hale 2007). In Western traditions, for example, the truth-value of epics, legends, and myths is relegated to a narrative; they ultimately function as allegories and are suspensions from our own social 'reality'. When a griot recounts the story of a hero, however, he traces their genealogy to the present, weaves it with praise, presents it in rhythm and rhyme, uses allegory and poetry, uses music, deploys incantations, proverbs and oaths – he is re-living the past, re-living history and the listeners are corporeally affected and emotionally drawn into the story. The experience of listening to a griot engages the listener's full attention and they are all drawn into a common space and time.

A griot, then is kind of a craftsman who uses 'old words' to reconstruct history and culture, to negotiate conflicts, and to reflect on continuity and change. Their craft suggests that sounds and words pre-exist the author. Sound in the Sahel context is not created by the griot (the poet/musician), but rather the griot learns how to harness the power of sound into different contours. An important concept in this process is *nyama* – a Mande word that roughly translates as 'energy of action'. The words infused with *nyama* have a guttural and sensual effect on their listener, causing them to re-sense the emotions and sensations told (Hale 2007; Stoller 1997). In some cases words are held accountable for bodily reactions such as fainting, irrational behaviour, or to successfully mediate a delicate social situation. Energy of action indicates the potential of words to cause an affect, to excite, and cause direct physical reactions on listeners. It is the energy that words carry and it is the energy that griots learn to master, internalise, and deploy in their performances.

The skill to re-animate the past, to affect listeners, and to disrupt the sense of space and time through words and sound is developed throughout a 30-year apprenticeship. One aspect of this apprenticeship entails the mastery of rudimentary and technical knowledge of praise singing and knowledge of history. But more importantly, the skill of the griot entails a decentering or dispossession of their 'selves' from the 'old words' they have hitherto learned. It is a decentering that acknowledges that:

The words that constitute history are much too powerful to be 'owned' by any one person or group of people; rather these words 'own' those who speak them. Accomplished griots do not 'own' history; rather they are possessed by the forces of the past (Stoller 1997, 25).

Being 'mastered by words' suggests that the question of the authority of the author/historian is not posited along the same binary terms as Western traditions of the Enlightenment. In the Sahel context, an 'author' does not exist outside of his or her social context. They are deeply implicated in the tale they are telling (Stoller 1997). This kind of deep implication recalls the deep reflexivity of ethnographers who cannot distance themselves from the social contexts they are writing about. In other words, the griot craft necessarily entails a subtle balance between living-in-the-world and representing it.

For griots, learning to hear and to sing is more than turning the sound of an incantation into speech. It is more than mastering the literal, allegorical, and metaphorical meanings of words and narratives – as a classic Western poet would. To learn to hear, the griot must learn to apprehend the sound of words much like a musician learns to apprehend the sound of music. From this perspective, the griot must subject himself to the world of sound. If we then consider that experiencing sound is a corporeal experience that has an effect on us at a pre-conscious level, we can say that a griot learns to strike a balance where his sonic effect acts through the body, rather than upon bodies. In this sense, a tone or a magical incantation does not convey action; rather, it *is* action.

### **Understanding the transnational kora**

The process of globalisation has led to the increasing recognition of the kora as an object of 'world music', an exotic musical object of the Third World. Griots have a new audience in the form of tourists and world music enthusiasts, which leads to the commodification of the instrument and bypasses the taboo that associates it to the griot caste (Hale 2007). My own acquaintance with the kora has become more prolonged since I began collecting footage for my documentary about West African musicians in Luxembourg, 18 months ago. I met Marcel Sawuri, a Burkinabe who has since become the main subject of the film project, in the context that he was giving music workshops in schools – paid for by an NGO in Luxembourg that addresses Third World and development issues. A particular workshop that he is often called to do, is a kora building workshop. He would go to secondary schools, vocational schools, youth prisons, and youth organisations with his associate with suitable materials to build a kora – wood, paint, pieces of leather, tacks, strings, etc. – and all students have the opportunity to build their own kora. Marcel would also teach the basics of playing the instrument. Some of these workshops result in public performances.

Marcel also plays the kora in various music groups in the Benelux area. While many of these groups are short lived or are formed on an ad hoc basis, they are

mostly organised by Marcel. Marcel is often called, by NGOs, private interests, event organisers, and promoters, to offer music workshops or to perform. Depending on the requirements of each performance or event, he will rely upon his network of associates – e.g. other West African musicians and performers of the area – to put together a team of musicians and performers tailored for the event. Marcel would usually play the guitar, percussion, or the kora. His most successful and most consistent musical venture is as the front-man of a Paris based reggae band called Sawuri. They have been together for over a decade, produced various CDs, but do not tour regularly any more. The band's make-up can be seen as illustrative of the kind of cosmopolitanism that characterises Marcel and his scene. The Paris based pianist is originally from Ivory Coast, the bass player is based in Amsterdam, the drummer is Parisian, and the back-up singer-percussionist from Martinique. The band's music is clearly influenced by West African and West Indian reggae groups: Marcel sings in French and in various African languages and their lyrics are connected to the philosophy of Rastafarianism.

Marcel's relationship to the kora began in his twenties when he left Burkina Faso for Abidjan to enrol in music courses, primarily jazz guitar. While in Abidjan he also picked up the kora. This was a controversial move for him because the social expectations required him to reproduce the social hierarchy into which he was born. Marcel's father is connected to a king caste, which positions him in a hierarchical position that eschews music playing. To be more specific, to Marcel playing a musical instrument would represent a taboo in his social context. This taboo is augmented in relation to the kora, an instrument associated with the relatively lowly griot caste. While in Ivory Coast, Marcel moved in the music scene and worked with numerous music groups. In the mid-1980s Marcel joined reggae star Alpha Blondy on a tour of Europe, but left the tour and stayed in France. Marcel travelled continuously between Western Europe and West Africa and, in the late 1980s, married a French woman who is active in the development NGO industry.

Marcel has consistently worked as a freelance musician in Europe and maintains strong links with his region in Burkina Faso through development work. A lot of his work with NGOs in France and Benelux countries is done to generate consciousness of West African development issues. When back in his native Burkina Faso he meets with politicians and development workers to secure agreements and projects on behalf of funding agencies in France and Luxembourg, to carry out infrastructure projects in his region. Marcel and his wife also visit artisans and purchase large amounts of crafts, dry goods, and some consumable commodities at a preferential price, for sale in Luxembourg. The proceeds from

these transactions, which are often in the red, are used to finance further trips and events to promote Burkina Faso's craft industry.

During the first months of fieldwork, I struggled with coming to terms with the contradictions that characterise Marcel's life. How could it be, I wondered, that he allows himself to perform such antagonistic identities? How must it be to live between worlds, where one is continuously dislocated: where he reproduces Africa in Europe and represents Europe in Africa? What kind of politics and ethics allow him to negotiate continuous difference? Is the kora just an illustration of the fluid and inconsistent identity politics of Marcel's transnationalism? If so, what are the ethical and political implications that are evoked when the kora is re-contextualised within the midst of post-colonial relationships and transnational networks of power and capital?

Steven Feld's research into the political implications of Western appropriations of African music emphasises the means of production, the politics of distribution, and intellectual property issues that characterise the unequal power relations of the musical-political-industrial habitus between Africa and the West. Essentially, Feld is interested in raising an awareness of, what he calls, the "turbulent morality of today's increasingly blurred and contested lines between forms of musical invasion and forms of cultural exchange" (Feld 1996, 1), which result in the continuity of an exploitative relationship that alienates African musicians from their cultural and intellectual property. Feld takes issue when elite musicians working alongside powerful technocrats in the music industry, appropriate musical motifs and sonic themes for their own profit without crediting the source. He characterises this circulation and consequent commodification of sonic goods as 'shizophonic mimesis'.

By 'schizophonic mimesis' I want to question how sonic copies, echoes, resonances, traces, memories, resemblances, imitations, duplications all proliferate histories and possibilities. This is to ask how sound recordings, split from their source through the chain of audio production, circulation, and consumption (Schafer 1977, 90–91; Feld 1994, 258–260) stimulate and license renegotiations of identity (Feld 1996, 13).

The development of technology that can record and reproduce sounds outside of its context – i.e. starting with the phonograph – presents the opportunity to look at the complex representations and commodity flows as ideologically loaded and operating within the context of the accumulation of capital. While the process of copying, in the context of globalisation, has led to observations of

homogenisation, unification, centralization, and ‘imperial universality’ (Attali 1985, 113 in Feld 1996, 15) of the sonic environment, Feld emphasises that

[i]t is important to come to terms with the fact that despite the now widespread debates on music and cultural imperialism (e.g. Garofalo 1993), most schizophrenic practices are often referred to and sanctioned as transcultural inspiration by artists and critics alike [...] what is typically excluded is how the practices are asymmetrical, specifically assuming that ‘taking without asking’ is a musical right of the owners of technology, copyrights, and distribution networks (Feld 1996, 5).

Feld may not see the same turbulent morality at play when Marcel plays the kora and reifies an imagined African performance for a European public. He does not extend the same kind of responsibility to, for example, African American musicians or to jazz musicians because, for Feld, these musical traditions do not represent a discontinuity – creatively or politically – from the source material. What is at stake, in the schizophrenic approach, are the politics of copying and the context of production, distribution, and consumption that reproduce colonial relationships of power. A result of this approach is the acknowledgement of the power discourses of ‘world music’ and its collusion in reproducing imagery of indigeneity and tradition. In terms of my project, schizophrenic mimesis operates at a conceptual and discursive level, making it problematic to film empirically. While schizophrenic mimesis may be a useful tool to think through the politics at play in Marcel’s transnationalism, its moral grounds and emphasis on the politics of authorship would direct my project’s narrative into a political direction that would subject Marcel’s work to a discourse that does not necessarily connect or relate with his intentions.

An alternative approach can see the kora as an agent or a motif that characterises this social field. Instead of examining the political economical context of this issue, the process of making a film has led me to consider the material possibilities of sound when it is disconnected from its source. Pierre Schaeffer’s work with *musique concrète* represents a body of work that concerned itself with the dissociation of a sound from its source, which he termed an ‘acousmatic’ experience (Chion 1990). Schaeffer’s work informed itself from the enthusiasm built up around the possibilities of new recording technologies being developed in the mid-20th century that allowed for the re-contextualisation of sounds. A sound, de-contextualised and separated from its original source, allowed for the possibility of building new associations for sounds and a new form of composition, where the composer engineers sounds and invites the listener to engage

with the forms and shapes of sound (op cit). Isolating the sound from its original audiovisual complex produced what Michel Chion, following Shaeffer, called a 'sound object' whose perception is worthy of being listened to in and of itself (op cit). The 'sound object' values the free-standing quality of sounds, completely divorced from their source and semantic meaning. As such, it invites the listener to engage with the sonic piece as a phenomenal experience analogous to musical sound, implying therefore that the experience of listening includes visceral, corporeal, and pre-semantic engagements.

Acousmatic listening refers to a methodology that enables 'reduced listening' or to appreciate sounds on their own terms, divorced from the process of production – as a kind of a return to a phenomenology of sound. This kind of listening is closer to the kind of listening required in filmmaking, where the sound is collected 'live' as it happens. Listening as a filmmaker requires an awareness of the properties of sound, the physical features of the environment in which the sound is emitted, and the types of microphones used. While Chion's approach has been mostly picked up by sound artists, sound designers, and other sonic researchers, I am interested in the possibilities it may offer to a transnational narrative. The 'sound object' approach allows Marcel and the kora to be honed in on their own terms, to re-focus attention on practise, from a standpoint of sameness rather than a perspective based on the cultural comparative model of structural difference.

Marcel's case is not unique. Many of the West Africans who are part of Marcel's network rely on reproducing traditional markers of African identity as they traverse through Europe. This contradicts a lot of the sociology and policy research on migrants in Europe that suggests that migrants assimilate 'European' norms and values in the process of integrating into European society (Bauer et al 2000; Phalet & Swyngedow 2003; Ertzinger & Biezeveld 2003; Joppke 2007). I have found that highlighting African traditional practices – whether they are genuine or not – has proven to be an effective way for my informants to negotiate the different social fields they traverse through. Confronting and coming to terms with this issue made me lose confidence in drawing consistent conceptual lines over the practises of my informants. Rather, filming methodology creates the conditions for me to address this issue on the terms of my informants. This may be standard anthropological practise, in theory. Yet, I would pose that filmmaking methodology highlights the need to centre one's inquiry on more empirical, or radically empirical, terms.

## **Conclusion: the effects of filming**

My filmmaking process is on-going and the success of this approach is still to be seen. In this chapter, my intention has been to point to a discrepancy that I have been experiencing in the process of collecting footage. The central tension that I wanted to address in this chapter is the intention of using a methodology and medium that does not adjust to the textual conventions of anthropology (ethnographic documentary) to address conceptual terms of mainstream social theory. On the one hand, I am dealing with a hierarchical social structure that fixes specific objects and practises to strict norms, which are being subverted before my very eyes. Yet, I cannot film 'subversion', only practise. These norms are invisible – I cannot film 'griot' nor can I film transnationalism, much less can I film 'immigrant integration'. I can film practises and objects as they are used in daily life. Acknowledging this places me in a position to consider other ways of articulating the ethnographic experience. My intention has been to attempt to connect theory (the acousmatic dimension of sound objects) out of objects themselves and bring that theory into conversation with social concepts; to think with ideas associated with acousmatics and 'sound objects' as a way of articulating the narrative possibilities of filmmaking methodologies.

One result of ethnographic filmmaking methodology, so far, has been to confront and assess the regimented and static view of the kora. Traditional ethnographic texts and contemporary debates on 'world music' present the instrument as a consistent object that is harnessed to a specific region, practise, gender, and caste. Ethnographic filmmaking on the other hand places the anthropologist in a position to re-contextualise the instrument from an object that is the product of a network of relations brought about by colonial histories and articulations of capital, to a motif that generates the sights and sounds that constitute a social field and the relations within it.

When placed in a transnational and global context, objects lose their semiotic consistency. However, if, as practise-based researchers, we begin with objects and the relationships they facilitate, we can articulate how objects facilitate practise, generate social relationships, and constitute space. Ethnographic filmmaking methods begin with the relationship between objects and practise rather than objects and discourse. The first result is to move away from the approach that insularises, exoticises, locates, racialises, and fusses over authenticity politics. The second result, I suggest, is to put forth the notion that social relations are constituted in practise and these practises are mediated through things first and discourse second.



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## **Beware of dreams come true: valuing the intangible in the American Dream<sup>1</sup>**

Rowan R. Mackay

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Langston Hughes (1994, 32)

### **Introduction**

One has only to look at the multiplicity of adages, sage maxims and commonplace sayings concerned with dreams to realise the fundamental importance they hold in human society. Must we follow our dreams, or hold on to them? Should we guard our dreams from those who might rob us of them or from our own careless loss? Or can our dreams never be taken away from us? We have sleeping dreams and waking dreams, both seen as manifestations of something essential to us. We also have public dreams, private dreams, and shared dreams that fall in-between the two, and which are often pivotal in helping to determine the evolution of our relationships. In fact, dreams, enigmatic as they and their meanings have proven to be, seem to be essential to our identity formation – and maintenance. This enigmatic nature, the intangibility of dreams, is precisely what allows them to have such affordances in terms of their interpreted significance and meanings. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the implications this feature of intangibility has on the American Dream specifically, and to other culturally held dreams more generally. To do this I trace parallel strains of meaning and material manifestations of the American Dream, from its inception to the present day from a social semiotic perspective.

### **Situating the dream**

Joseph Campbell said that “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (Campbell 2002). Clearly, there is a typological difference between those dreams

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 74–99. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

with which psychoanalysis is concerned and the American Dream which, by its very nature, has a public, shared element: which is, in fact, public before it is private. I say, it has a shared *element* (rather than saying it is shared entirely) because what can be invested in, understood by, and gained from such a public resource, can be incredibly private and personal. Clearly then, we must understand the American Dream in its multiple capacities (inexhaustively listed) as: a (multi-)national myth, a common dream, a national wish-list of consumerist items, a normative gauge, a utopian vision, a container into which personal hopes and aspirations can be placed, a place of negotiated, contested and reflected social and political values, a place represented not only through linguistic description but through music, architecture, landscape and visuals.

Popularised by J. T. Adams in 1931, the term 'the American Dream' denotes a vast array of meanings and from each of these ripple numerous and overlapping connotations. Adams' influential description contains within it many of the strains (in many senses of the word) which, together, make the notion so rich:

But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 1933, 415).

From this snippet it is possible to see the strain of consumerist materiality intertwined with notions of intangible, value-laden, potentialities; motor cars alongside (utopian?) dreams of a perfect 'social order'.

To look first at the entity which is the American Dream, Christopher Tilley's introduction to the special issue *Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage* (Tilley 2006) and Duncan S. A. Bell's (2003) notion of 'mythscape' are useful when looked at in tandem. Tilley's broad discussion of landscapes – partially defined as 'structures of feeling' (Tilley 2006, 7) – put together with notions of identity, materiality, embodiment, memory and myth help to frame the complexity of the American Dream. He writes: "Collective identities are always bound up with notions of collective traditions and shared material forms" (Tilley 2006, 12).

Here, then, we already have a defence of the materiality of the American Dream – although not of its commodification or political appropriation.

For Tilley, 'things in culture' are required for the (necessary) move from the intangibility of dreams to the intangibility of individual identities:

Material forms may act as key metaphors of embodied identities, tools with which to think through and create connections around which people actively create identities. Artefacts permit people to know who they are by virtue of the fact that they assume *specific forms or images in the minds of the viewer in a manner not possible to convey in words* (Tilley 2006, 23; my italics).

This brings into the foreground a tension between different understandings of '(in)tangible'. Is the intangible defined by being that which is unarticulated, unarticulatable, immaterial, abstract or impalpable? What is the place of specificity in the intangible? Tilley here seems to suggest that the translation from tangible 'thing' to 'the minds of the viewer' results in something 'specific', yet something, the process of whose becoming is 'not possible to convey in words'.

Bell, similarly exercised by how identity is formed in relation to 'things', introduces myth as the narrative form in which such translation and interpretation can take place. Arguing against a conflation of memory with myth, Bell discusses the agency involved in memory and notes that in the conflation (which he sees as a common misunderstanding) non-animate objects (e.g. landscapes) are seen as possessing memory, and people are represented as holding memories which they simply cannot have gained first-hand.

These conflated examples of this type of 'remembering' belong, Bell claims, to myth rather than to memory. It is in mythologizing that non-animate objects become invested with meaning – a meaning neither static nor stable, but continually contested. Furthermore, Bell argues that the temporal possibilities of myth are far greater than those of memory, allowing for an engagement with the past, present and future simultaneously (whereas, clearly, in his "more limited and cogent" (Bell 2003, 63) conception of memory this is not possible). He therefore introduces the 'mythscape' as

the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape is the page upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present (Bell 2003, 66).

The metaphorical use of the book/manuscript from which the mythscape is a 'page' indicates strongly the narrative dimension of Bell's concept. However, the story is not found on the page passively present: Bell emphasises the agency involved in the creating and editing of the narrative – Tilley uses the poetic metaphor of "palimpsests of past and present" (2006, 7). It is an agency which can be personal and political (simultaneously). I argue that the appropriation of the narrative of the American Dream by political (in the narrow sense of the word) actors inhibits its uptake by individuals.

### **The American Dream**

The American Dream, as a concept, is quite unusual. There is not, as far as I am aware, a 'Scottish Dream', a 'German Dream', or a 'French Dream'. In fact, those labels have connotations which are politically dubious and would, for any degree of successful uptake, have to be euphemised rather heavily. But the United States is an immigrant nation, and this, as J. T. Adams (1933) perceives it, is an important distinction so far as national dreaming goes. But then, we would expect to have a similarly developed 'Australian Dream', or an 'Israeli Dream'. And, again, in any sense that these do exist (or have existed) they are dogged with controversy. Actually, what we find is that the American Dream has become a conceptual export: as the English language has expanded into world Englishes, a (disputed) global *lingua franca*, the American Dream no longer belongs inside the United States alone, but can be found with regional features across the globe (as cultural imperialism goes, successfully exporting a national dream to which to aspire is quite astounding). This is not to say that the much maligned cultural imperialism of the USA has been responsible, wholesale (or perhaps even for the most part) for this coming to be. America as the 'land of opportunity' has been (and remains so for many) such a potent symbol worldwide that the uptake across cultures was desired and often bolstered by hazy tales of American Dreams being realised.

In the introduction were listed some of the most prevalent frames for understanding the American Dream and to this I think Benedict Anderson's imagined community is helpful as a backdrop. He talks of a 'sociological organism' moving steadily through time, analogous to 'the idea of the nation'. He writes:

An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity (Anderson 2006, 26).<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** Closing a summer cottage, Quogue, New York, 1957.

The American Dream must, therefore, compose a coherent narrative which masks – but allows for – multiple subjectivities.

Viewing the American Dream as a composite of narratives does not prevent further classification – such as the American Dream being, simultaneously, a composite of myths. Walter R. Fisher (1985), arguing for the narrative paradigm, notes that it is, in fact, a ‘metaparadigm’, which

does not deny the utility of drawing distinctions regarding macroforms of discourse – myths, metaphors, arguments, and so on. It insists, though, that any instance of discourse is always more than the individuated forms that may compose it (Fisher 1985, 347).

Thus, it is also helpful to view the American Dream in terms of it being a myth, and as R. C. Rowland and J. M. Jones suggest, a particular type of myth:

The dominant social narrative often labelled the ‘American Dream’ has been treated by a number of rhetorical critics and other political commentators as a myth. While we agree that the American Dream has been among the most powerful secular myths in this country for well over a century, we think that the functioning of the narrative is best illuminated by treating it as a particular sub-form of myth: political romance (Rowland & Jones 2007, 428).

They choose this sub-type because, as they put it, political romance holds its hero not as “superior in kind” to other men, but rather, “superior in *degree*” (op cit, 429). Therefore, every man can be hero of his own narrative in his own dream. Yet the tension this creates between dream world and reality is one played out in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

This play is a crucial (and devastating) commentary on the American Dream. In it every man is represented by Willy Loman, an unsuccessful travelling salesman consumed by the materialism of the American Dream at the cost of the truly valuable humanity at the centre of every man’s life. The American Dream, Miller believes, is guilty for the corruption of American society. Charley, Willy’s only friend, and a wiser man than he, says:

Nobody dast blame this man. Willy was a salesman. He’s a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory (Miller 2010, 120).

Yet it is the contents of the Dream, those internalised uncritically by Willy and thrust upon his sons, which are “all, all, wrong”. In fact, the Dream is summed up as “phony” and dangerous (although such a revelation never comes for Willy, who commits suicide in order to leave his family death-insurance money).

### **Freedom, want, and wealth**

We can see Miller’s opinion echoed in various ways. In an essay following the American Dream and its moral and material realisations from J. T. Adams’ day to 2009, David Kamp sees a shift from a wartime Rockwell-inspired ‘freedom *from* want’ to what is, as he stresses, a completely different ‘freedom *to* want’. In fact it was “a world away from the idea that the patriotic thing to do in tough times is go shopping” (Kamp 2009, 8). He traces the material manifestations of the American Dream through the Levittown 1950s<sup>3</sup> in which “buttressed by postwar optimism and prosperity”, the American Dream shifted, becoming less specifically concentrated on those identified earlier by Adams, and becoming more specific and materially focussed. The ownership of one’s own home was

the fundamental goal, but, depending on who was doing the dreaming, the package might also include car ownership, television ownership (which multiplied from 6 million to 60 million sets in the U.S. between 1950 and 1960), and the intent to send one’s kids to college (Kamp 2009, 10).





**Figure 2.** Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want*, 1943.

Of course, the explosion in television ownership also increased exponentially the public exposure both to the model families seen on soaps (modelling the achievement of the American Dream) and, when advertising began in earnest, to the pairing of the myth with any brands packaged well enough to make such a pairing credible.

Kamp highlights the introduction of the credit card alongside the changing moral standing of credit in general. Through the 1970s, however, as he enumerates, the uptake of long-term credit was still modest, and despite appearances, this trend continued through the 1980s. But, he writes,

it was in the 80s that the American Dream began to take on hyperbolic connotations, to be conflated with extreme success: wealth, basically. [...] “Who says you can’t have it all?” went the jingle in a ubiquitous beer commercial from the era, which only got more alarming as it went on to ask, “Who says you can’t have the world without losing your soul?” (Kamp 2009, 12).

Kamp describes this development in the 1980s as the “recalibration [which] saw the American Dream get decoupled from any concept of the common good” (Kamp 2009, 13). Wealth, or at least the outward signs of wealth – a simulacrum of it – then leads to gaudy architectural facades, and garish interiors. This inflation (coupled with its economic counterpart) contributed, in Kamp’s view, to the situation in which the American Dream was “almost by definition unattainable, a moving target that eluded people’s grasp” (op cit, 15). This was not, however, reflected in the pressure people felt under to attain these impossibly high goals, and as such, a feeling of failure was frequently engendered.

Of course, such consumerism and particularly its tie to the American Dream, did not go uncriticised – in political, artistic and popular fields. Many were critical of President Reagan and noted the irony of his Hollywood connection in upholding the veneer. Molly Haskell, a feminist film critic, spelt this out when she said: “The propaganda arm of the American Dream machine – Hollywood” (Haskell 1987, 2)<sup>4</sup>. And humorist George Carlin quipped: “They call it the ‘American Dream’ because you have to be asleep to believe it” (Carlin 2006). Kamp himself, talking of the American Dream and its connection with various frontiers (the Wild West or the Moon) makes the dry suggestion that “perhaps debt was the new frontier” (Kamp 2009, 13). However, as Fisher makes clear,

[i]n dichotomizing the American Dream into materialistic and moralistic myths, there is danger that one may assume that there is virtue in one and only vice in the other. But this is an inaccurate view (Fisher 1973, 163).

It would be disingenuous to attempt to remove from the American Dream all that was 'tainted' by materialism and consumerism. Fisher again (writing just after the re-election of President Nixon in 1972):

If one conceives of the American Dream as a monistic myth, it will seem odd to suggest that both Mr. Nixon and Mr. McGovern epitomize that dream. Actually, the American Dream is two dreams, or, more accurately, it is two myths, myths that we all share in some degree or other and which, when taken together, characterize America as a culture (Fisher 1973, 160).

Thus we see the need and demand for a pendulum swing back to an American Dream more recognisable as the one J. T. Adams envisages (or is it post-rationalisation, the silver lining of the cloud of economic depression?).

Barack Obama, once elected President, talked of the American Dream being "in reverse". One can assume that this was describing the economic crash and sub-prime housing market rather than the voicing of a pessimistic opinion about the worsening morals of the American public. He also said in his infomercial (before being elected):

Everybody here has got a story. Somewhere, you've got parents who said: "You know what, maybe I won't go to college, but I know if I work hard, my child will go to college." Everybody here has got a story of somebody who came from another country. They said: "Maybe my grandchild or my great grandchild, they'll have opportunity, they'll have freedom." Everybody here has got a story about a grandparent or a great-grandparent who worked in a coal mine, who worked in a tough factory, maybe got injured somewhere, but they said: "You know what, I may not have a home, but if I work hard enough, someday my child, my grandchild, they'll have a home they can call their own." That's the story of America (Obama-Media-Team 2008).

Yet he would also say, in more elevated tones (in the same infomercial): "It is that fundamental belief – I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper – that makes this country work" (Obama-Media-Team 2008).

And here we come to the moralistic myth Fisher feels is wound together with the materialistic one. He puts it thus:

Where the materialistic myth involves a concept of freedom that emphasizes the freedom *to do* as one pleases, the moralistic myth tends toward the idea of freedom *to be* as one conceives himself (Fisher 1973, 162).

Yet, astutely, he identifies the guilt inherent in the uptake of the moralistic myth and the guilt engendered by the recognition of someone else's uptake of such a myth. That is, in order to be sufficiently affected by moralistic appeals, one must recognise in oneself a moral shortcoming (or a laziness in putting one's beliefs into action). The advocates of such moral campaigns are, understandably, "accused of taking a 'holier than thou' attitude" (Fisher 1973, 162).

There is a normative element to the moralistic myth: it attaches *values* to the American Dream (think of "I have a dream that one day..."). And what are those values, specifically? It is not easy, not even possible, to give a definite answer here. The best one can do is to quote the United States Declaration of Independence and leave extrapolation open:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (Declaration of Independence 1776).

So what Fisher offers us is a way of conceiving of the American Dream in terms of two intertwined myths which, when taken together provide the material for a coherent narrative.

## **Myths, materiality, appropriation and branding**

### **Landscapes and authenticity**

The *idea* of the American Dream is intangible – ideas are. But in order for it to be public, it must be expressed through something – words, symbols, sounds, sensations, most often a combination of these. Tilley focuses a great deal on place and landscape; landscape being a place invested with meaning (whereas a place, arguably, has no inherent meaning). He also focuses on identity formation in relation to memory – including memory of place (he talks of 'ontological moorings'). As mentioned already, the American Dream is associated with frontiers. Specific frontiers have become prominent but the more figurative frontier is also fundamental: the material one often stands metaphorically for the figurative one. Yet, take the two material frontiers already mentioned – the Wild West and the Moon – and I think it would be safe to say that nobody reading this will have experienced these frontiers first hand. So, not only are these mythologised places out of our temporal or geographic reach, but they go through numerous re-interpretations. Therefore, although Tilley says this:

Ideas and feelings about identity are located in the specificities of places and landscapes in what they actually look like or perhaps more typically how they ought to appear [...] and how they feel, in the fullness and emotional richness of the synaesthetic relations of these places with our bodies which encounter them (Tilley 2006, 14).

He also says of 'traditions' (including those relating to place) that "notions of degrees of authenticity or inauthenticity remain entirely inappropriate to evaluate them" (2006, 12). Tilley seems to be at odds with himself here: on the one hand the sensory, sensual experience of *actual* place seems to be vital, yet, on the other, the authenticity of these places is a lesser concern (note the priority given to the subjective interpretation "more typically how they ought to appear").

How, then, are we to understand our romanticised notions of place as most often authentically experienced in the cinema? What sort of synaesthetic associations do we actually have with these frontiers if not the smell of popcorn, the movie soundtrack mingled with coughs and whispers, the darkened theatre in which the proximity of strangers contrasts with the characters on-screen? (Or, perhaps more common nowadays, the sitting-room sofa and the ambivalent attempt at escapism from 'the comfort of our own home?') These two *real* frontiers of the American Dream are experienced *only as* second hand translations, always mythologised, often pastiched to kitsch. I would take issue, therefore, with Tilley's apparent relegation of authenticity to the somewhat negligible and suggest, instead, that authenticity is frequently held up against accusations of being 'phony': the struggle to define 'authentic' becomes a very important and bitterly contested one.

Tilley does talk of the problems of a certain romanticisation: "A symbolic return to the past often acts as a retreat from the uncertainties of the present" (Tilley 2006, 14). He makes the point that the notion of 'place' as a stable and 'secure resource' with which to forge social identity has, in the "flux of spatial flows", become less and less reliable. The agency involved in the creation of landscape and place is, for Tilley, absolutely central for our understanding of how it comes to play a part, not only in our personal identity creation, but in political identities. Thus:

What kinds of landscape and place we produce, and want, are inextricably bound up with the politics of identity, for ideas about both relate to whom we want to live with and whom we want to exclude, who belongs and who does not, to issues of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality (Tilley 2006, 15).



**Figure 3.** Branding and appropriation of a symbol: John Stetson, John Wayne, Ronald Reagan-as-actor, Ronald Reagan-as-President, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.

And this is precisely why the Wild West, together with the Stetson-wearing hero, is extremely problematic when it comes to a multicultural – not to mention multi-gendered – American Dream.

### **John Wayne and the Wild West frontier**

We all know (from childhood) the role of the indigenous Native American and the Mexican in cowboy films. Way out West things just ain't that *complicated*. As John Wayne, in various incarnations as white frontier hero would have us know,

I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here a man settles his own problems. – Tom, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ray 1985, 217).

Out here, due process is a bullet. – Ethan, in *The Searchers* (Roberts & Olson 1997, 558).

Out of character, the man John Wayne said:

I don't feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them. There were great numbers of people who needed new land, and the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves (Golson 1981, 269).

It might seem like the political comments of a mere actor are out of place. But first, an actor by the name of Ronald Reagan made it to the White House (his acting-out the hero was – together with his political talents – endorsement enough for him to get 'all the way to the top', and he continued to use his acting experience to great effect). And, second, John Wayne's iconic status is such that he has come to symbolise, and is seen (by some) as embodying, many of the values associated with this frontier version of the American Dream. The role of the iconic in our times is immense, but here I just focus briefly on why Wayne is significant in understanding the frontier version of the American Dream and how this impacts upon its political appropriation.

Wayne's iconic status is hardly under dispute. Here are two short introductions:

Why was Wayne the Number One Movie Star, even as late as 1995? He embodies the American myth [...] Our basic myth is that of the frontier. Our hero is the frontiersman. To become urban is to break the spirit of man. Freedom is out on the plains, under the endless sky. A pent-in American ceases to be

American [...] The 'young American' Emerson imagined out on the horizon had the easy gait and long stride of John Wayne (Wills 1997, 302–303).

He epitomized rugged masculinity, and has become an enduring American icon. He is famous for his distinctive voice, walk and physical presence. He was also known for his conservative political views and his support in the 1950s for anti-communist positions (NationMaster-Encyclopedia).

There are, of course, many actors who are typecast, and many actors who seek to preserve their 'brand' (and their commercial sponsorships) by acting in their daily lives in a way not incongruent with their public image. Wayne was no different in this reinvention:

[C]onstructing a screen persona and a private personality that reinforced one another in a continual, symbiotic dance. In the process he became a permanent fixture of American popular culture, an icon. During much of the twentieth century, for millions of Americans, watching a John Wayne movie was like peering, over and over again, into a great cultural mirror (Roberts & Olson 1997, 647).

However, Wayne's influence has been deeper than most: "He became a magnet that drew the cultural ideals and popular attitudes of the nation into an agreeable figurehead" (Davis 2001, xiii). From a chapter entitled "Reactionary Patriarch", Ronald L. Davis writes not only about Wayne's ability to engender feelings of personal empathy, but also his political influence:

Wayne had become the unofficial spokesman for provincial America, giving sanction to traditional attitudes in a time of raging conflict (Davis 2001, 280–281).

An iconic image need not accurately reflect the complexities of the character on which that icon is based. The myth which supports the icon "hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" (Barthes 2000, 129). And simplicity is an important part of this inflexion according to Roland Barthes:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately



visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 2000, 143).

There are many accounts of Vietnam veterans citing Wayne as being representative of the America for which (they thought) they were fighting, not all of whom were celebrating the ‘simplicity’ of that easy connection upon return.<sup>5</sup> Davis quotes screenwriter Roy Huggins as saying:

People actually thought of Wayne as a great hero [...] And, of course, John Wayne was just an actor. He was never in any armed service, never saw a war, never even saw a gun fired that actually had lead in it. To me that is an incredible comment on American society. It says something about the confusion in the American people between reality and myth (Davis 2001, 8).

Yet that confusion, that uncritical embracing of the myth, has implications. For what Wayne-the-icon symbolises is a mixture of what he, his characters, and the pre-existing myth of the frontier hero bring together. And that relationship is not one way: Wayne *influences* the meaning of the frontier hero. His reputation for chauvinism (charitably not calling it misogyny) is, again, not under much debate. His social conservatism, too, is well documented:

Duke came forward as a vehement foe of gun control [...] He disdained hippies, long hair on men, and left-wing writers and eggheads who questioned the conservative principles on which the United States had taken root. “The disorders in the schools are caused by immature professors who have encouraged activists [...]” (Davis 2001, 280).

His racial views, however, are more controversial. His choice of spouses is used to counter the accusation of racism, but on ‘multiculturalism’ he was clear:

Despite his marriages to three Hispanic women, Duke would have no part of multiculturalism. “No, we’re not encouraging our children to adopt a dual culture,” he said, “They’re all-American” (Davis 2001, 280).

Of course, the argument can be made that he was ‘of his time’, and that would certainly be true. But, as Barthes points out, in myth “history evaporates” (Barthes 2000, 151) and all is pressed to present concerns. This provides ground for

the frontier hero being conservative, and, in rejecting multiculturalism (while begetting the results of a multicultural pairing), an accusation of 'backwardness' may be raised. Compounding this reputation, Wayne is also quoted as saying:

"I believe in white supremacy," said Wayne, "until the Blacks are educated to the point of responsibility. I don't believe in giving authority and positions of leadership and judgement to irresponsible people [...] I've directed two pictures and I have given Blacks their proper positions. I had a Black slave in *The Alamo* and I had the correct number of Blacks in *The Green Berets*. But I don't go so far as hunting for positions for them. I think the Hollywood Studios are carrying their tokenism too far" (Johnson 1971).

Again, it is important to remember that what I am discussing here is the influence of an icon upon the perception of the American Dream myth, and specifically the frontier incarnation of that myth. John Wayne's political views have been simplified to fit into his iconic status, and these simplified (and simplistic) political views have leached into what he is taken to represent and is allied to. Public figures can officially endorse ideas and other public figures; alternatively, public figures and movements can *appropriate* (or at least attempt to appropriate) the values associated with certain myths. This is why John Wayne's iconic importance within the frontier-hero myth is relevant and troubling.

### Political appropriation

The American Dream, therefore, has a problematic tie to place, and not only place but the connotations which are deeply associated with that place. Which political allegiance does such a frontier vision fit best? The Republicans, without question. In *Mythologies*, addressing what he sees as the political inclination of myth, Barthes writes:

Statistically, myth is on the right. There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly. It takes hold of everything, all aspects of the law, of morality, of aesthetics, of diplomacy, of household equipment, of Literature, of entertainment. [...] The oppressed *makes* the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing (Barthes 2000, 149).

Which is why there has been a great deal of discussion as to Barack Obama's success at the ballot box and his deployment of the rhetoric and narrative of the American Dream. There are, in theory, different strategies he could adopt. He could reject as Republican, backward and conservative, those features of the narrative which tie it to the values associated with his opponents. Or he could attempt to reclaim those features, and re-frame them in his own narrative. In practise, he did a bit of both, but notably, he concentrated on the latter strategy. Here, from his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote speech:

[T]he pundits like to slice-and-dice our country [...] Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. [...] We coach Little League in the Blue States and yes, we've got some gay friends in the Red States. [...] We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America (Obama 2004).

Not only did Obama attempt to muddy the divided ideological waters, but he has, since, gone out of his way to place himself in the locations and roles (real and metaphorical) normally only available within the Republican narrative (e.g. stressing his maternal Kansas connection and his donning of the Stetson). Tilley writes:

Identities must of necessity be improvised and changing, rather than fixed and rule-bound, intimately related to experience and context. They are both in the mind and of the world, embodied and objectified through action and material practice (Tilley 2006, 17).

And of the interplay of such identity formation with the negotiation of power he suggests that to the extent that identity is made up of – and displayed through – the use of symbols, their appropriation marks a site of symbolic power struggle. “Identity,” he writes, “may be regarded as a scarce resource requiring careful cultivation and manipulation of material symbols to maintain it” (Tilley 2006, 15).

Taking up this idea of place, identity, political appropriation and narrative, Michael Silverstein, in a discussion of political ‘message’ within Obama's campaign, says:

For an electoral candidate these particular semiotic flotsam, the design elements of ‘message’, become what we term *emblems of identity* that can be deployed to remind the folks of who – that is, of course, sociologically speaking,

what – the political figure is. What are his or her defining dimensionalities? (Silverstein 2011, 3).

‘Semiotic flotsam’ is a rather nice image and useful, as long as it is remembered that flotsam is contained upon a particular sea (although floating, the sea – the wider context – acts as a boundary) and that it comes to be after being jettisoned from a particular ship (each sign has a history which shapes its subsequent reception). Silverstein goes on:

Such emblems position people, allowing a public to identify them in a structural space of relative possible social identities, like protagonists and villains in the emplotments of most of the narratives to which we are otherwise exposed (soap opera of grotesques, we might term it) (Silverstein 2011, 3).

In an astonishingly blunt way, this ‘message’ of Obama’s (having received a severe buffeting in the currents of White House reality) has recently had something of what Silverstein terms a ‘semiotic self-redemption’ (Silverstein 2011, 3). Jonathan Jones (2011) writes: “With one cool shot, the US president brought down both Osama bin Laden and Republican claims to the mantle of western hero.” He then draws out the significance of Obama’s president-as-gunslinger-good-guy role. He notes that after Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both adopted, to varying degrees of success, the western hero persona (and symbolic props), the ‘heritage of the mythic west’ remained firmly in Republican control. As he sees it, however, this has been overturned by Obama:

This is why cool-talking, straight-shooting President Barack Obama has just changed history. He has overturned more than three decades in which the Democrats looked through the lens of the western like wimps from back east, and Republicans posed as tough sheriffs (Jones 2011).

And, supporting both Silverstein’s view of the ‘message’ as being of primary importance, and Fisher’s application of the narrative paradigm, Jones ends his piece by saying:

It may seem trite to reduce it all to a western. But in the political imagination, where elections are won and lost, this is a game-changer. [...] The myth of superior Republican patriotism is headed for Boot Hill – and *Destry Rides Again* (Jones 2011).

This political appropriation and subsequent struggle over claims to be fiduciaries (and thus executors) of the American Dream myth marries institutionality and mythologizing. The first is addressed by Bourdieu, the second by Bell.

### **Institution of identity**

Bourdieu makes the point that an identity, by the dint of being named as such is both a right and an imposition:

The institution of an identity, which can be a title of nobility or a stigma ('you're nothing but a ...'), is the imposition of a name, i.e. of a social essence. To institute, to assign an essence, a competence, is to impose a right to be that is an obligation of being so (or to be so). It is to *signify* to someone what he is and how he should conduct himself as a consequence (Bourdieu 1991, 120).

Therefore, to enter into the discourse about the American Dream and, like those actors and politicians above, to publically assume the mantle of living in, living up to, aspiring towards its attainment (or privately casting oneself as the hero?), is to appropriate the values, affordances and limitations which it entails. Entering into a public dream, employing such a myth, involves recognising its boundaries, and, moreover, it may demand something itself. W. B. Yeats (1914) used as an epigraph, "In dreams begins responsibility", and perhaps political actors and commercial interests could be held accountable here for their (ab)use of the American Dream myth. Furthermore, it could be suggested that only a dream free of political appropriation and branding (a reification of sorts) could inspire responsibility in individuals taking up the dream.

Perhaps, however, conceiving of the American Dream myth as something which *deserves* (which *can* deserve) is an unhelpful personification. Bourdieu's point holds, however, that an identity is an institutionalisation of sorts and with such an institutionalisation come external and political demands, requirements, and deserts. He elaborates:

In this and other cases, moving from the implicit to the explicit, from one's subjective impression to objective expression, to public manifestation in the form of a discourse or public act, constitutes in itself an act of *institution* and thereby represents a form of officialization and legitimation [...] (Bourdieu 1991, 173).

These paired dualities, implicit and explicit, subjective impression and objective expression, are connected to the tangibility, the articulation, the determinacy of an identity.

The ambiguities resonant in these terms, however, make distinction difficult. For example, if I am arguing that leaving dreams as intangible affords them greater (and more positive) use than if they are hijacked by political and commercial players, what definition of tangible am I using and what relation does such intangibility have to subjectivity or objectivity? The Oxford English Dictionary has four main meanings for 'tangible' as an adjective, and one for it as a noun:

**A. adj.**

1. a. Capable of being touched; affecting the sense of touch; touchable.  
b. Hence, material, externally real, objective.
2. That may be discerned or discriminated by the sense of touch; as a tangible property or form.
3. *fig.* That can be laid hold of or grasped by the mind, or dealt with as a fact; that can be realized or shown to have substance; palpable.
4. Capable of being touched or affected emotionally.

**B. n.**

A thing that may be touched; something material or objective. Also *fig.* (OED Online).

There is a clear overlap here between tangible and objective, and tangible and material. However, the figurative uses and the definition 4 concerned with emotional affect, remove the certainty and simplicity afforded by the first two definitions (and 'real' and 'objective' are not *that* certain or simple themselves when it comes down to it).

If we foreground three defining features of the American Dream: it is public, it is a myth, and it is a dream; its being 'dealt with as a fact' is clearly impossible. Furthermore, if it does possess dream-like qualities (and what are these exactly if not undefined, insubstantial, unreal or unobjective?) then in one way it will be absolutely graspable 'by the mind' (dreams which seem unreal at the time of dreaming are unusual), and it may feel palpable, but, in another way, it will resist definition and remain very (and necessarily) immaterial.

Bourdieu employs the trinity of 'credit, credence and fides' (Bourdieu 1991, 192) in connection with political capital and the constitutive features of symbolic power which highlights the giving-over of power, the divestment of it from some people to other 'powerful' people and 'significant' things. He writes:

Political capital is a form of symbolic capital, *credit* founded on *credence* or belief and *recognition* or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognise in him (or it). This is the ambiguity of the *fides*, analysed by Benveniste: an objective power which can be objectified in things (and in particular in everything that constitutes the symbolic nature of power – thrones, sceptres and crowns), it is the product of subjective acts of recognition and, in so far as it is credit and credibility, exists only in and through representation, in and through trust, belief and obedience (Bourdieu 1991, 192).

And here, again, Joseph Campbell's (2002) statement that "myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths" brings into focus the strange topography of the American Dream. This topography, the topography of myth, is a subject upon which Barthes ponders in his book *Mythologies*. He writes:

Thus every myth can have its history and its geography; each is in fact the sign of the other: a myth ripens because it spreads. I have not been able to carry out any real study of the social geography of myths. But it is perfectly possible to draw what linguists would call the isoglosses of a myth, the lines which limit the social region where it is spoken. As this region is shifting, it would be better to speak of the waves of implantation of the myth (Barthes 2000, 149–150).

This quote is interesting on multiple levels: firstly, in the clear parallels drawn between myth and nationalism. Secondly, in Barthes' attempts to portray myth, on the one hand as an organic, alive being which 'ripens' and 'spreads'; and on the other, as something to which the application of some systematic scientific study ('real study') is not only possible, but could produce a very tangible isogloss of myth (although he immediately moves from envisaging 'lines' which 'limit' to 'waves' which 'implant').

## Conclusions

The notion that myths can be likened to linguistic features in the sense that they travel and gain a geographical coverage (and I suppose these days this would also pertain for cyberspace) is an appealing one. It may help to explain a certain expansion and contraction in the popularity of myths (and particular versions of particular myths, if we are looking at the American Dream). It also has the advantage of explaining how a myth could be inflected with local features (as we

can see by local – and other national – variations of the American Dream). However, it does run the risk of being reductive (or rather, its necessary reductiveness runs the risk of being a barrier to a deeper understanding of myth's multi-layered nature). Bell writes:

[A] mythscape can be conceived of as the discursive realm, constituted by and through temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly (Bell 2003, 75).

Bell's point being that as an organising, analytical tool and framework, 'memory' – collective and individual – does not suffice. He rather scathingly writes:

'Memory', it appears, has today assumed the role of a meta-theoretical trope and also, perhaps, a sentimental yearning; as the idea of an Archimedean Truth has slowly and painfully withered under the assault of various anti-foundational epistemologies, memory seems to have claimed Truth's valorized position as a site of authenticity, as a point of anchorage – albeit an unsteady one – in a turbulent world stripped of much of its previous meaning. In memory we trust (Bell 2003, 65).

This touches upon several of the points raised thus far: the notion of a 'meta'-trope recalls Fisher's commitment to the narrative (meta)paradigm; the demand for *something* to protect truth and authenticity, as well as provide a 'point of anchorage', recalls the strength, use and appropriation of the American Dream myth; the reiteration of the need for a 'site' echoes Tilley's discussion of the importance of place and the role of the material and tangible in that; and finally, Bell highlights the yearning for stability in the face of the world's turbulence which myth, dreams, memory, narrative, place, institutionalisation, and objectification make manifest. Bell's critique of 'the mnemonic turn' (2003, 78) is based on what he presents as the danger of a conflation, a conflation that leads to 'conceptual confusion' and also, more worryingly perhaps, 'serves to obscure' the political aspect of collective remembrance, in which the 'governing mythology' is able to be challenged by alternative 'organic' narratives, which run counter (op cit, 66).

The relevance of such a dominant narrative to the American Dream myth is clear, particularly when the party political dimension comes in, but also more generally as a restricting frame both foisted upon, and adopted by, disparate people. Bell asks difficult and pertinent questions which throw light upon the manifold complexities of the American Dream:



[I]n what way does a national identity maintain temporal continuity, exerting its fierce gravitational pull from generation to generation?  
[W]hat are the key discursive elements that help to bind together the idea of a collective national identity? How is history, indeed time, represented?  
[H]ow do we 'cultivate' and moreover 'acquire' memories? [...] And how can institutions, practices, buildings or statues remember? (Bell 2003, 67, 69, 71).

The reason I think Bell's formulation of a mythscape is so useful when looking at the American Dream rests upon the way such a concept encapsulates the intangibility and dehistoricity of myth, while bringing into the foreground (through the use of the suffix '-scape') both an objectifying and a subjectivity: that is, an interplay of interpretation and translation. Bell notes myth's ability to hide complexity and contradiction:

Myth serves to flatten the complexity, the nuance, the performative contradictions of human history; it presents instead a simplistic and often uni-vocal story (Bell 2003, 75).

But this 'uni-vocal' story, although politically expedient, can be (and is) challenged by what Bell calls 'subaltern myths'. Applying this to the American Dream, we can see how it may be envisaged as 'ripening' (in Barthes' terms), as 'palimpsestic' (in Tilley's), and as 'controlled through narrative' (in Fisher's). Bell writes:

We can view the nationalist governing mythology in a similar way, as the attempt to impose a definite meaning on the past, on the nation and its history. However, as with ideologies this attempt will invariably fail, there will always be dissent and the story will never be accepted consistently and universally. [...] The governing myth thus coexists with and is constantly contested by subaltern myths, which are capable of generating their own traditions and stories, stories as likely to be concerned with past oppression and suffering at the hands of the dominant groups as by tales of national glory (Bell 2003, 74).

In this paper I have looked only at one dominant strand of the American Dream myth. There are others, equally, if not more, dominant. The imposition of these meanings, the vying for symbolic power, and the fear of allowing interpretation are all avenues deserving of further attention.

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- Figure 1 – Photograph: Norman Rockwell art-directed Colorama by Ralph Amdursky and Charles Baker, 1957 (Kamp 2009).
- Figure 2 – Photograph: *Saturday Evening Post*, 1943. [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/91/Freedom\\_from\\_want\\_1943-Norman\\_Rockwell.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/91/Freedom_from_want_1943-Norman_Rockwell.jpg) [accessed 2 April 2013].

Figure 3 – Photographs: John Stetson: [http://www.nmap2015.com/faces/John\\_B\\_Stetson.jpg](http://www.nmap2015.com/faces/John_B_Stetson.jpg) [accessed 20 May 2013]; John Wayne: <http://www.nndb.com/people/605/000023536/jw-sm.jpg> [accessed 20 May 2013]; Ronald Reagan-as-actor: <http://phile-bersole.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/ronald-reagan.jpg> [accessed 20 May 2013]; Ronald Reagan-as-President: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6a/Ronald\\_Reagan\\_with\\_cowboy\\_hat\\_12-0071M\\_edit.jpg/220px-Ronald\\_Reagan\\_with\\_cowboy\\_hat\\_12-0071M\\_edit.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/6a/Ronald_Reagan_with_cowboy_hat_12-0071M_edit.jpg/220px-Ronald_Reagan_with_cowboy_hat_12-0071M_edit.jpg) [accessed 20 May 2013]; George W. Bush: [http://i1212.photobucket.com/albums/cc452/SophiaPBpics/Texas/ELLENS\\_June25\\_President-BushCalgaryAirportWhiteStetson-1.jpg](http://i1212.photobucket.com/albums/cc452/SophiaPBpics/Texas/ELLENS_June25_President-BushCalgaryAirportWhiteStetson-1.jpg) [accessed 20 May 2013]; Barack Obama: [http://texansforobama.typepad.com/blog/images/obama\\_wearing\\_ray\\_skidmores\\_stetson.jpg](http://texansforobama.typepad.com/blog/images/obama_wearing_ray_skidmores_stetson.jpg) [accessed 20 May 2013].

## Notes

1 I would like to thank John E. Joseph for much editorial advice. I would also like to thank the reviewers for very useful suggestions as to how this chapter could be improved.

2 Agnew and Sharp bring together Tilley's notion of landscape with Anderson's 'imagined communities': "Spatial orientations are of particular importance to understanding America, whether this is with respect to foreign policy or to national identity. It could be argued that a geographical imagination is central to all national political cultures [...] However, if all nations are imagined communities, then America is the imagined community par excellence" (Agnew & Sharp 2002, 82).

3 Levitt houses started as homes for G.I.s (members of the US army) towards the end of World War II (as part of the New Deal) and were designed to be modest, affordable and suitable for family living.

4 More recently, there has been scrutiny paid to Hollywood's connection to the Pentagon and its apparent willingness to be 'on message' at the price of having access to great war-film props (think *Top Gun*).

5 In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic does not mince his words: "Gone. And it is gone for America. I have given it for democracy. [...] It is gone and numb, lost somewhere out there by the river where the artillery is screaming in. Oh God oh God I want it back! [...] Yes, I gave my dead dick for John Wayne" (Kovic 2005, 116).





## **Stoic stories**

## **The travelling furniture: materialised experiences of living in the Jewish diaspora**

Susanne Nylund Skog

When doing research on experiences of living as a Jew in Sweden I have found that diasporic belonging is often mirrored in the artefacts that are regarded by the narrators as meaningful and worthy of memorialising. This article aims to further explore this area and investigate how a Jewish woman, by the use of a set of bedroom furniture, positions herself in a Jewish diaspora while she simultaneously creates and maintains her Jewish identity. The article is based on interviews with, and a life story written by, a Jewish woman I call Rachel. The interviews and the written life story are a part of a larger body of oral and written narratives, collected from two different sources: interviews with Jewish women who have migrated to Sweden and *The Jewish Memories*, archived at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm (Nylund Skog 2009; 2010). The overall purpose of the project for which the material has been collected, is to investigate how memories of migration and experiences of living in a diaspora materialise in narratives (Nylund Skog 2008; 2011). Rachel is in her eighties; she is a widow with five children and eleven grandchildren and lives in the Swedish capital Stockholm. She was born in Austria in the 1920s, fled from the Nazis to England with her younger sister in the early 1940s, and later continued to Palestine. She lived for a while in the Middle East and came to Sweden in the 1950s.

I will start with a short resume of Rachel's life. Thereafter, I will explore the meaning (or the meanings) of a story about bedroom furniture that Rachel told me on our first meeting, and often mentioned afterwards. The story will serve as an illustrative example and starting point for an investigation into how material objects in narratives are used symbolically and imaginatively, as well as concretely. The main theoretical purpose of the article is to discuss how materiality and narrativity are related.

Rachel grew up in Vienna with her mother, father and a younger sister. Her father owned and managed a pharmaceutical factory; her mother was a violin player. German was the everyday language of the family, and the daily life was in many aspects that of a well-established Austrian bourgeois family. It was only

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on special occasions, such as the most important Jewish holidays, that the Jewish heritage of Rachel's family was visible and celebrated. Growing up Rachel therefore considered herself an Austrian. In accordance with many Holocaust survivors, she describes her childhood as a very happy one. She recalls moments with her bearded grandfather under a peach tree, her mother playing the violin behind glittering glass doors in a large Viennese apartment, her dedicated father by her sick-bed when she was suffering from a minor cold, as well as hours of ice skating to music.

When Rachel was in her teens, her life changed dramatically because of *Anschluss*, when Hitler annexed Austria and made the country part of the Nazi empire. Overnight Rachel was forbidden to enter certain places, sit on park benches, travel by bus, and go to the theatre and to school. After some time of growing misery and marginalisation in Vienna, Rachel and her sister were given the opportunity to escape from Austria with a children's train to England. Some years later they left England and continued to Palestine where the family was reunited. In her life story Rachel writes that her life began when she was twenty three. By that time she had met Aram, the man of her life and the father of her children. In the 1950s it was Aram's business that brought them to Sweden, where they came to settle in Stockholm.

Rachel does not have a homeland in the geographical sense. She has no wish to return to Austria, Israel or the Middle East. She feels at home in London, England, where several of her husband's relatives live, as well as in New York, USA, where two of her children have settled, but she does not want to live anywhere other than Stockholm. Despite this, she does not feel Swedish or at home in Sweden. Home for Rachel is not a geographical place, but a feeling of belonging connected to her family. In that sense, Rachel gives voice to experiences that she has in common with a growing number of people all over the world. In Sweden there are approximately one million people born in other countries (Olsson 1999, 14). This situation colours and gives meaning to the story about the bedroom furniture that Rachel told me at our first interview.

R: It is a rather funny story. You know, mum and dad had a bedroom in Vienna that my father ordered. I will show you. I have parts here. And my mum did not like it. She was much more, a little bit more modern and she was more like me, you know. Aram's taste. And then, when they were going to move. They were going to move and packed everything in Vienna, she thought the bedroom. *That* bedroom, that one will never be able to have in another country, because it is so baroque.



One had such very large containers, you know, such container cars that were filled and sent to Trieste. At that time one could at least still take such things, not so much, but furniture and such, one could bring. And from Trieste my parents were going to see where they ended up, and then it should not be that hard. So it was sent away, and the old furniture was left, it was left by mum at her parents.

Then after came, the war with Italy began. Then the Germans took everything there was, everything that mum had sent away. And then, when she came back to Vienna, the only thing that was left was this furniture that she didn't like. Hahaha and I *love* it!

S: Because it reminds you of your childhood?

R: That's right, yes, and it is beautiful as well. At the moment it is too messy in the room, so I can't show you everything. I can show you some.

S: Yes.

R: And then, she had a small apartment, you know, two rooms. She furnished *everything* with the furniture because there was a bed, a small sofa to lie on during the day, there was a breakfast table with chairs, there was a toilet table, and there was a very large wardrobe. It was two rooms.

S: Complete, then?

R: Complete, yes. That is how it was.

From the transcribed story it might seem as if I was given the opportunity to see the furniture that Rachel spoke about. That was not the case; Rachel only swept her hand in the direction of a room next to the one where the interview took place, and since I at the time did not fully understand the humour or the importance of the story, I did not insist on seeing the furniture. When I later started to think about the story and asked Rachel to see the furniture she did not want to show it to me. It was far too messy in the room where most of the furniture at the time was kept, she told me. I did not insist this time either. Finally, on yet another occasion five years after our first meeting, I was informed that I could see the furniture. The room had been cleaned, and at the moment housed one of Rachel's grandchildren.

The room where the furniture was kept is situated at the farthest end of a corridor that starts as a serving alley, and ends in a small hallway. We passed the dining room, the kitchen, where someone was busy cooking, a television room, where three grandchildren had gathered, walls dressed with bookshelves, several closed doors and finally we reached the small room (probably an old servant's chamber) where most of the bedroom furniture was kept. The furniture is painted in a light grey nuance, heavily decorated with ornamentation of flowers and

cherubs. The furniture consists of fifteen parts. At our visit a toilet table, some chairs, two bed ends, a cupboard for linen, a writing desk and a smaller cupboard were placed in the room.

Why did it take such a long time before I was invited to see the furniture? Why was it placed in such a remote part of the big apartment, despite the fact that Rachel said she loved it? Why did Rachel start the story by saying that her taste was similar to her mother's modern taste, and then end the story by saying that she loved the furniture that represented her father's baroque taste? And finally, why did Rachel tell me about the furniture in the genre of a humorous story? What is funny about the story?

In this paper I explore answers to these questions. But first I will briefly present the tradition of material culture that has influenced the analysis, as well as the theoretical basis of this paper.

### **Material culture and the materiality of narrativity**

In Swedish ethnology and folkloristics there has always been an interest in artefacts, an interest connected to the development of the discipline and to museum objects and folklore collections. Initially the objects were regarded as physical artefacts and as symbolic representations. Today there is a renewed interest in material culture, and to the traditional research new questions are introduced, questions of how objects, in both the physical and imaginative respect, are given agency and are parts of larger processes of meaning production, in which the borders between subject and object are explored and questioned. These perspectives are represented by many renowned researchers such as the folklorist Henry Glassie and his research on the relations between storytelling and material culture (1999), the anthropologist Daniel Miller's work on the material aspects of consumer culture (1994; 2008), and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's research on the materiality of globalisation (1986). These are important sources of inspiration for this article since they, albeit in different ways, explore the material aspects of living in diasporas.

One reason for the growing interest in materiality is that traditionally researchers have been too concerned with the written word, relying on a hierarchy of knowledge that excludes perspectives and knowledge produced in ways other than writing. However, as Henry Glassie argues, the material can give corrective and other information than the written word (Glassie 1999). Material objects are therefore no longer considered lifeless artefacts. What we eat, how we dress and the things that we are surrounded by say something about our place in society. They are symbolically charged and communicative.

The importance we place on an object is not fixed; it changes as the object is transported over time and place (O'Dell 2002, 26). Objects are given biographies when they are taken from one place to another, from one person to another. People also change by these processes; they change status and enter new or changed hierarchies of value (Appadurai 1986, 18). At the same time, as objects can alter meaning when they travel over time and place, they also have a capacity for storing and maintaining information (Frykman 2001, 91). Objects can keep the owners' feelings and transfer them to new owners. They can also adjust to their new owners' needs without losing their old meaning. In that way objects can serve as timeless containers for human emotions (Wettstein 2009, 29). Consequently, material objects do something with us and we with them (Silvén 2004, 23), an important argument for wanting to dissolve dichotomies such as object and subject, human and non-human, and instead place the relations between human and materiality at the centre of research (Latour 1999, 308; see also Latour 2007).

In this article I focus on the relationship between narrativity and materiality and consider them interrelated processes. Things create stories, stories give rise to objects. Objects are charged with meaning by stories (Gustafsson Reinius 2005), and stories are created with the help of things (Miller 2008). To let things talk, or talk through things, can be a way of avoiding painful memories, as well as keeping them (Wettstein 2009). Objects can also assist in expressing that which is hard, or perhaps impossible, to express orally or in writing (Jackson 2002). I argue that this is the case with the bedroom furniture in Rachel's stories. The furniture represents and symbolises that which for her is meaningful and important, but hard to express.

Since I first contacted Rachel and asked her for an interview, we have spent several hours recording her stories, hours when she has tried, in as nuanced a way as possible, to tell me how it was, and is, to live as a Jewish woman in a violent and changing world. For many years Rachel did not consider herself Jewish, but as she has become older her feeling for Jewishness, for her heritage and for where she belongs, has grown more and more important. I argue that this process, in which Rachel's Jewishness has gradually become more important, is mirrored in the rather funny story about the bedroom furniture. In the following I will pursue this argument and furthermore I will argue that the bedroom furniture symbolically represents and materialises Rachel's Jewish heritage.

## The Jewish furniture

The bedroom furniture was bought and brought home to the Vienna apartment by Rachel's father, who was born a Jew. According to Rachel, he had a different and more old-fashioned taste than her mother, who was not born a Jew. The bedroom of the bourgeois Vienna apartment hosted the complete set of fifteen pieces, and seemed at the time to carry the same importance in the family's life as their Jewish heritage prior to *Anschluss*. It resided in the background out of the immediate eye of the stranger, but was still of importance for the private and procreative life of the family.

When Rachel's parents fled Vienna, the furniture was left behind and placed in the care of Rachel's mother's parents, who were not Jewish. In the story Rachel's mother acts as if she is able to choose whether to be Jewish or not, as if Jewishness is something that one could adopt or dismiss according to one's wishes. When leaving Vienna Rachel's mother did not want to be known as Jewish and left the furniture behind. According to the story the furniture (and symbolically the Jewish heritage) would not fit in any other country. When Rachel's mother years later returned to Vienna she used all of the furniture to furnish her two-bedroom apartment. Symbolically, then, the Jewish heritage dominated the apartment and defined the life of Rachel's mother.

Following the roles of the furniture and the places where it has been kept, we can see that there is an obvious parallelism between the furniture and the Jewish heritage, and that the furniture in the story represents and/or replaces Jewishness, which might be harder to pinpoint and describe orally. We can also see that the growing importance of the furniture in the story is comparable to the growing importance of the Jewish heritage in Rachel's life. Further aspects that strengthen such an interpretation are that it is possible for Rachel to love and consider the furniture beautiful, despite the fact that it does not represent her taste. It is not the aesthetic dimensions that decide a Jewish heritage. The beauty of the furniture resides somewhere other than in its appearance.

Rachel also puts a lot of thought into choosing when, and under what circumstance, I am to see the furniture. It is as if she wants to control how I encounter and understand her Jewish heritage, symbolically and materially represented by the furniture. When I finally get to see it, it is placed at the farthest end of a corridor, in a small room, at the time used by one of Rachel's grandchildren. It is not spread all over the apartment; it is not in the bedroom or in a basement or a storage room. Where the furniture is placed and what is put in and on it, does tell a lot about the meaning given to it. And it is Rachel's family and relatives who are present on the furniture, in the form of photographs and other memorials,

and inside it, in the form of letters, documents and artefacts. All of these are things that through Rachel's stories come to gain meaning, and are placed in the Jewish family story, which is so important and defining for Rachel's life. One example of such an item is a small manicure case. Rachel showed me the case on the same occasion when I was shown the furniture. When I was about to leave the servant's chambers she ushered me into the dining room where she carefully and with slightly trembling hands opened the case. It is in leather and skilfully made with small compartments for nail polish, cuticle cream, cotton buds, a nail file and a pair of very small scissors. Marked in the leather a hotel logotype is barely visible. The case is from a hotel in Paris, which Rachel and her husband Aram visited in the early fifties. Rachel told me that she has kept the case because it reminds her of happy times, of the first time when she and Aram were together with his entire family.

As is shown by Rachel's story the furniture has changed its importance when it has moved around, at the same time as it has kept its meaning. It seems as if it has never fit easily in the life of its owner. When I asked Rachel's daughter why the furniture was placed at the far end of Rachel's apartment, she answered me with a laugh and said it is because it is obvious it does not fit anywhere. The furniture is just too much, she concluded. During the interviews Rachel said that she thought the furniture was too large and demanding, and that it had too many pieces. In that perspective the Jewish heritage symbolically appears overwhelming and as impossible to store and successfully hide. Sooner or later it will be exposed, if one is to trust Rachel's story in which her mother's life in the end was totally invaded by the furniture.

### **The diasporic furniture**

When I analyse Rachel's written life story elsewhere, I argue that it is to be understood as one of the stories that reproduces the Jewish diaspora (Nylund Skog 2011; 2012). Rachel's country of origin or homeland (if such exists) is in the diaspora – a mythical place of no return, a place that does not exist in any other way than in the mythical world (Brah 1997, 192; see also McLeod 2000, 210–211). I would like to argue that the furniture is a materialisation of the homeland, of a place of belonging. In Rachel's story the furniture carries all the conflicting feelings of belonging and marginalisation, of hiding and exposing as the Jewish homeland Zion in the diaspora. The circumstances under which the story was told strengthen such an interpretation.

Rachel told her story about the furniture when we, during the first interview, talked about how she and her husband Aram settled in Sweden. In the following

quote we see how she then placed herself, and consequently also the furniture, in the Jewish diaspora.

S: But a big part of Aram's family ended up in London. You were not considering going there to live?

R: There was a question about it, but I still wonder if Aram did not think that it was too many relatives there. He wanted to be a little free, (S: Yes.) free himself from the pressure of the family. On the other hand, I would have appreciated if *my* family had been close by. You know, we are spread all over the world, those who survived, in Australia, in Canada, in France, in Israel. I am here.

S: But your mother came, when she became older?

R: Yes, she came here. It was that daddy; you know nineteen hundred and forty seven, after the war, at first opportunity he wanted to go back to Vienna. And then it was a group of Austrian Jews that went back to Vienna and everybody got what they owned before, *almost*, everything that was in the British, French or American zone. My daddy's property was in the Russian zone. So we got nothing and when we finally got something, they had emptied the whole factory of all its valuable machines, so it was an EMPTY shell (S: Hmm.) that they got nothing for. For the land and an empty building.

S: Uhm.

R: So it was, I think he became very *disappointed*.

S: Yes.

R: In any case; he died at forty-nine, forty-nine years old (S: Oh.) from the consequences of the concentration camp. They had kicked him in the kidneys; he had constant bleedings and high blood pressure and everything that came with that. So he died because of what he had been through. Very much pain, you know. Forty-nine years. It is nothing.

S: No.

R: Nineteen forty eight, so he never got to meet Aram or the kids.

S: Tragic, but your mother stayed in Vienna?

R: Then she stayed in Vienna and then my sister was in the army in forty eight, but then she came. I think my mother went one more time to Israel. She stayed because she then, it was not finished yet with our property, so daddy died before (S: Uhum.) he knew that they had emptied the factory completely.

S: Maybe it was for the best.

R: Yes, that's so, and mummy lived then in Vienna. It is a rather funny story.

Here it becomes obvious that the rather funny story about the bedroom furniture is to be considered as part of Rachel's family story and as yet another of the narratives that keeps the diaspora alive and intact. Here Rachel describes her father's early death and that the family did not have any property left after the war. There was nothing material left to inherit. Only an empty shell, she says, with a loud voice. The only thing left to fill the empty shell with was the bedroom furniture. It seems the only stable thing in a changing world.

This passage offers a possible answer to the question of why Rachel considers the story a funny one. Exactly what it is that is funny about it is hard to understand. One suggestion is that perhaps humour stems from the impossible task for her mother to get rid of the furniture, although she tried to leave it behind. Another suggestion is that there were so many and large pieces that it was enough to fill a whole apartment. A third suggestion why the story is rather funny is connected to the moral of the story, which I argue is about Jewish heritage. The story says that it is not possible to escape, hide or ignore Jewish heritage. It is not something that you can shake off and leave behind, and if you do, it comes back and overwhelms you, as the furniture did with Rachel's mother in the story.

Diasporas are created by objects, but also by the objects' stories. When bodies and objects reappear they gain new shapes and meanings (Ahmed 2011, 163–164). When Rachel's mother returned to Austria, the bedroom furniture surely represented a different meaning from when she left the country. It was after the death of Rachel's father that her mother furnished an entire two-bedroom apartment with the bedroom furniture. Considering that objects have an ability to remind us of absent human experiences as embodied (Gustafsson Reinius 2008, 39), it is not unlikely that the furniture at that time came to fill out some of the empty (Jewish) space left behind by the father's death.

During an interview five years after the first one, Rachel again mentioned the bedroom furniture. Then I asked her how she has created a home for herself.

R: There was nothing when we moved, except that furniture, the bedroom furniture that my mother did not like. It was there. Really, it is true. Enormously large. You will see them one time. (S: Yes, some time.) Yes, and it did not fit in the modern society. That she had to leave behind in Austria, during those circumstances that I told you about before. Then, she thought it was just as well to leave them in Vienna, in the care of her parents and they should guard them. They succeeded. (S: Mm.) Then, when mother came back to Vienna, she had nothing. She rented an apartment and could actually furnish the whole apartment with the bedroom furniture. Hahaha, (S: Haha.) so that is that, also when I did not have the possibility.

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S: When did it come here? How did it come here? When did it come to Sweden, the furniture?

R: When mother moved here later.

S: So then it came?

R: And then there was room for it. Then it came. (S: Yes.) They were left in Vienna (S: Yes.) and mother furnished the apartment with them, but I think that she didn't have room for the large wardrobe. But anyway, my husband helped her bring all of it here. She furnished her small apartment, and the rest we kept in the basement, and now I have brought it all up.

If the furniture for Rachel's mother came to symbolise and embody her dead husband, the same seems to be the case with Rachel. After her husband Aram's death she brought all the pieces of the bedroom furniture together in her big apartment. The furniture offers and offered both women a safe place of belonging. By bringing the furniture together, they also symbolically gather dispersed Jewish relatives in one place, both emphasising and diminishing the conditions and experiences of living in a diaspora. That the bedroom furniture consists of fifteen pieces is not without importance. The many parts make a physical dispersion possible and accentuate the parallel between the bedroom furniture and the Jewish relatives spread in geographical space. In the Jewish diaspora that Rachel depicts, people are connected not by place, but by stories of a shared past and future. The same is the case with the bedroom furniture.

The furniture connects people to past places, histories and genealogies, as well as reminding them of the absence of other people, places and environments (Ahmed 2011, 164). In the same manner as the homeland does not exist in any way other than in the mythical, the furniture cannot bring to life lost worlds, only conjure new ones. It carries stories connected to many different times and places that are not accessible in the present in any other way. It is in this sense that the bedroom furniture is diasporic.

## Conclusion

Rachel's story about the bedroom furniture highlights many aspects of the inter-related processes of narrating and materialisation. It also illustrates the complexity of the process of materialisation itself. For example, I have shown here that the context defines objects, in this case the furniture, by the use of other objects, such as the photographs that are placed on the furniture or the letters and documents that are stored in them. Without these objects, and the stories connected to them, it is nothing more (or less) than bedroom furniture. The furniture here



functions as a timeless container for Jewish memories, but also as a catalyser for the stories of escape and travel that Rachel's family and relatives share.

One reason why it took such a long time before Rachel showed me the furniture is related to the part it plays in her life story. Had she shown it too early I might not have been able to see its importance and symbolic meaning, I might just have regarded them meaningless grey ornamented Austrian pre-war bourgeois pieces of furniture. This might also explain why the furniture is placed in such a remote part of the apartment; this makes it possible for Rachel (and her relatives) to tell their stories before showing the furniture, and in that manner control how they are considered. By emphasising that her taste is similar to her mother's, Rachel also maintains that the furniture should not be regarded by its appearance, an aspect that further strengthens my interpretation of the furniture as Jewish and diasporic.

Consequently, I argue that Rachel's hesitation to show me the furniture is connected to her wish to present her Jewish heritage and family story in a controllable and advantageous way. She wanted the room to be tidy and the furniture and the objects around it organised in a proper manner. Perhaps Rachel did not want the Jewishness to appear as chaotic and unorganised. She also charged the furniture with meaning by the well planned and careful presentation (Gustafsson Reinius 2005, 40). Furthermore, I do not think it was a coincident that I was allowed to see the furniture when the room was in use by one of Rachel's grandchildren. It was as if Rachel waited until a situation occurred when the Jewish heritage was in use to present it to me. It was not until such an occasion presented itself that I was introduced to the actual materiality of Rachel's rather funny story.

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## **A hard matter: stones in Finnish-Karelian folk belief<sup>1</sup>**

Timo Muhonen

### **Introduction**

One of the typical features of folk belief is that it often covers mundane things and renders them into objects with remarkably surprising qualities; even the most commonplace objects and matter can have a mythological side and be intertwined into the praxis of what we might term ritual. In this article, I address one of the physically plainest natural objects within the sphere of Finnish-Karelian folk belief. This object is an unworked portable stone without any extraordinary physical features, yet when viewed according to its cultural context, it transpires that it is laden with basic and later on derived power, capability, or value. A stone of this kind is quite the opposite of those eye-catching or anomalous things, whose place in folk belief is often self-evidently and immediately recognised. For example Stone Age stone objects, which as thunderbolts have been given many meanings in Finnish-Karelian folk belief (see for example Huurre 2003; Asplund 2005; Muhonen 2006), are among the best-known examples of such striking things. They stand out in our conception of what kind of stones had 'special' properties.

A common unworked stone could also be regarded as being as natural as is possible, and perhaps (therefore) subordinate vis-à-vis objects made or physically shaped by human activity. We are neither particularly eager to see any potential meaning in a plain stone lying on the ground nor are we especially accustomed to spare a thought for a single ordinary stone in a construction. In the latter case, we may see such stones above all as natural building material devoid of individual meaning and function. Discussion related to this topic can be found in archaeological landscape studies, for example. It has been justly pointed out that from our perspective natural is considered relatively unimportant in interpretation, while reading cultural landscapes calls for as much attention to 'natural' form as to 'cultural' form (Tilley 2004, 220). When cultural landscapes, their individual elements and tiny parts of these elements are considered, Finnish-Karelian folk

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Kannike, A. & Lavolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 114–138. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

belief certainly does not share the opinion about 'natural' as relatively insignificant in human life. Due to its 'special' meanings, 'natural' very much influenced 'cultural'. 'Natural' things such as water, forest, trees and branches, anthills and rocks partly in the ground carried powerful meanings as well as inherent force. These associations affected how people could interact with 'natural' things and use them. Hence ordinary single stones, among others, should be reviewed not necessarily only as neutral objects or 'natural' building material waiting to be put together to have cultural contents. And like other 'natural' matter, stones could have had uses that lie far beyond our conventional conception. This is a reminder of the possibility that having an equal focus on 'natural' and 'cultural' things can open up worthwhile prospects in reaching the past. It also suggests that examining 'natural' matter as tiny parts of cultural landscapes – more specifically in man-made constructions – may deepen our understanding about how to classify these constructions and more generally material remains.

Considering this background, I will focus on beliefs and ritual uses related to common unworked portable stones, uses that can be mainly described as domestic, everyday, and outwardly simple. The bulk of these practices did not require any ritual specialist to perform them. The study employs folklore of the traditional Finnish-Karelian agrarian communities to review how they represent material objects and their utilitarian/non-utilitarian uses. This folklore material was collected primarily in the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. In three case examples, selected according to the criterion that they must have close connection to the field of archaeology, the material is used to build a basis to see particular man-made constructions still widely observable in the landscape from an alternative perspective. The overarching feature of these three cases is that the related stones are biographically linked with constructions, which may in turn become everyday subjects of archaeological investigations. In the context of archaeological studies, man-made heaps of stones are automatically subject to difficult questions regarding functions, meanings and classification. However, especially rather recent cairns, such as some of those in question, are often seen in an unproblematic and simplifying manner. They can be considered easily and deceptively as nondescript, 'obvious' and to have been without 'ritual' uses when it comes to their past purposes. This article challenges such notions by looking into the functions and meanings once given to single stones and heaps made up of them. Their functions and meanings are fundamentally related to the classification of these stones and cairns and thus to the very basic idea we accept about how things were perceived before the present day.

Placing emphasis on rituals and beliefs related to common objects means here exploring the same ground that has been mapped by many recent archaeological

studies. This connects directly to the questionable applicability of the conventional theoretical construction according to which things are categorised in a bipolar way. The division into utilitarian and non-utilitarian objects is one example of this idea. As archaeological interest in ritual and religion has in general lately increased (see for example Insoll 2009; 2011), it is perhaps only natural that the debate has also touched on the all too often applied ritual/special/non-utilitarian–secular/mundane/utilitarian dichotomy and on the way in which we comprehend this – in a classificatory sense – fundamental yet merely assumed juxtaposition operating within a given culture. The dichotomy has clearly enacted inadequately in a focal role that consequently needs recasting (see for example Walker 1998; Brück 1999; Gazin-Schwartz 2001; Insoll 2004; Bradley 2005; Parker Pearson 2006; Hukantaival 2007; Herva & Ylimaunu 2009). It is in many respects evident that the reality has not been black and white, and Finnish-Karelian folk belief about plain stones includes many features that support the more colourful view.

### The case of field cairns

I am proposing that in order to reach a more adequate and fuller understanding of the past, it is sometimes more useful to contemplate stones themselves than what lies between or under them. This argument can first be examined in the light of folk poetry, which shows that ordinary stones have a mythological connection and agency. This can be seen above all in healing rituals. As late as in 1920, the following spell was recorded from a 79 years old sage (Fi. *tietäjä*) Tuomas Lomajärvi (Figure 1) in Kittilä, northern Finland (SKVR XII, 3886):

<i>Kiven synty</i>	The Birth of Stone
<i>Kivi, Kimmon Kammon poika, Maan maksa ja manteren silppu</i>	The stone is addressed and its kindred revealed
<i>Mitä haaskasit haamuani, Kovanlaisesti koskettelit?</i>	The stone's motif for this hard incident is queried
<i>Lehä paremmin kun leppä, Hoha paremmin kun honka!</i>	The stone is encouraged to shine beautifully
<i>Älä liikuta lihaani Äläkä koske nahkahani!</i>	The stone is neither allowed to move the flesh nor touch the skin of the reciter
<i>Koskas tunnen olentosi, Paremmin pahat tekosi,</i>	The reciter affirms that he or she knows the essence and evil deeds of the stone
<i>Ota omas, vejä vihas!</i>	The stone is commanded to take back its 'wraths'



**Figure 1.** Sage Tuomas Lomajärvi with his wife in 1920.

The sage pressed a stone against the sore spot while reciting the spell, thus combining powerful words and a concrete operation in the healing ritual. The ritual was carried out if he happened to hurt his foot on a stone (Paulaharju 1922, 155). What is of particular interest is that the cause of pain, a stone, is addressed as if it had consciousness of a living being and it could be responsible

for something that would seem human clumsiness in our eyes. According to the worldview perceptible in the spell, hurting oneself on a stone is not a mechanical accident but instead an incident in which the ‘wraths of stone’ are transferred onto the foot of a person as pain. Curing it requires the wraths to be transferred back to the stone by pressing it against the sore spot (for ‘wraths of stone’, see for example Hako 2000, 39).

The fundamental ideas of the spell can be seen throughout Finnish-Karelian healing spells. One of the prerequisites of healing is that the sage reveals the origin of the cause, i.e. that he or she proves his or her deep knowledge about the nature of the cause enabling him or her thereby to control it (e.g. Siikala 1983, 73–77). In The Birth of Stone spell, the origin is shown to be known by referring to the parentage of the stone: the stone is the son of a mythological being or deity called by many names but here referred to as Kimmo/Kammo (see Haavio 1967, 382–390). I am bypassing questions related to the origin and development of this being; it is more relevant here to address its meaning in actual beliefs as shown by folklore. One of the most interesting matters in this respect is what Christfrid Ganander writes about Kimmo/Kammo in 1789. According to Ganander, we are here dealing with a fearsome and horrific spectre that was believed to dwell in cairns (Ganander 1984, 31; see also Setälä 1928, 42–44), which were assemblages closely linked with the being due to the perceived relationship. A whole – i.e. a cairn – thus gained some of its properties from the associations extended out of single stones. In many similar spells, the stone is also called “egg of the earth” and “clump of the field” (e.g. SKVR I<sub>4</sub> 58; VI<sub>2</sub> 7228; VII<sub>3</sub> 139; VII<sub>3</sub> 172; XII<sub>1</sub> 3857; XII<sub>1</sub> 3864; XII<sub>1</sub> 3882; XII<sub>2</sub> 8450),<sup>2</sup> hinting at one of the most common occasions where farmers ran into stones: ploughing. This also gives clues that stones were perceived as products of the earth; and according to the folk conception, stones really grew in the soil, they “grow like trees” (e.g. Nurminen 1970, 155–156; Kejonen 2004, 226; SKS KRA Pyhäjärvi Ol. Kaarle Krohn 1977 b. 1884; SKS KRA Liperi. KRK 164. Merikoski, Oskari 2. 1935).

One might therefore suggest that at one point within the sphere of traditional agriculture, clearance cairns were not just piles of inanimate matter removed from the field. Their stones rather were parts of living nature, born in the earth and providing an abode for a supernatural being when they were first heaped up. It is noteworthy that in the context of folk belief, cairns have been perceived as dwelling places of various supernatural beings (e.g. SKS KRA Pyhäranta. Lauri Koskinen b4) 170. 1929; Vilkuina 1965, 88). There were many reasons for this, although one possible premise has been the general Finnish-Karelian belief that *every place* has its supernatural master (Fi. *haltija*). Furthermore, field cairns are shown as active places: some of their stones may have been used later on to, for

example, cool off love, after which the stones were returned to the heaps (SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 6139). As another example, it was possible to prevent the homesickness of a bought cow by taking stones from a field cairn, pressing the cow's chest with them and saying: "Be cold forever!" The stones were then placed back on the cairn (SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 7533 a).

However, before cairns were formed from the stones on the field, some of them might have been added to the field or carried away from it for various ritual purposes. One could take stones, for example, from the seller's field to one's own field to prevent a recently bought cow from returning to its former home (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 248); part of the animal's old home was thus taken in the form of stones and transplanted to another place to render it cosy. As another example, a stone taken from another man's field and cast on one's own field protected grain from rust diseases (SKMT III, 18). Stones may also have been cast into the field to prevent bears from eating the cows (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 435).

Cairns also appear in Finnish-Karelian folk belief in another respect. They functioned as places on which, among others, clothes and bed straw contaminated by death were scorched. Places other than cairns were also selected for this, but what is of relevance here is that the stones in these cairns were used later on for healing purposes. In the case of an illness caused by this death-related place (Fi. *kalma*), the sick person was taken back to the cairn and the disease was transferred to one of its stones. This was done by pressing a stone on the sick person and placing it back on the cairn (Muhonen 2010). The dangerous place was thus represented by its single components, which could be harnessed to carry the malady back to its point of departure. This practice follows the overarching idea also perceptible in Finnish-Karelian healing rituals, according to which a cure is obtained in the place from which the illness had come. To my knowledge, there are no references saying that these stone heaps were constructed solely to burn threatening material. Rather, it seems more than likely that some of them were due to field clearance. If the biographical aspect is taken into account here, a single stone might thus have gone through many stages after being literally born. It could have been carried to a field cairn which was later on used in a securing ritual, after which the stone was associated with fear and disease and, ultimately, hope of recovery.

### **The case of sauna stoves**

The Finnish-Karelian sauna, with the stove as its heart, often served many different purposes in addition to washing (see for example Sirelius 1921, 226; Sirelius 1934, 101–102; Vuorela 1975, 380–381; Talve 1990, 54; Tikkanen 2002, 194;





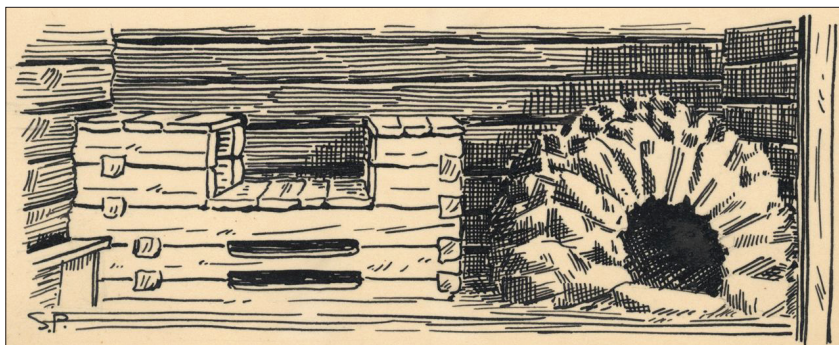
**Figure 2.** Emma Leinonen (1868–1955), an old woman from Lohilahti village in southern Savonia heals a girl's leg by pressing it with a sauna stove stone (cf Paulaharju S. 1929, 2200, 2201 caption).

Paulaharju 2003, 85–87). Among the utilitarian uses of sauna stoves, one could mention that stones were heated in them and then placed in wooden troughs in order to have hot water. In addition to heat, stove stones were capable of binding other things, as healing rituals, for example, show. Sauna was among the greatest assets of healers, and stove stones were no different in this respect. They were an important resource as they, too, were capable of carrying ailments

away. The method has already become familiar: stone was pressed on the sore part of the body and then returned to where it was taken from, in this case to the stove (Muhonen 2010) (Figure 2). In addition, stove stones were sometimes used to find out where the illness had come from (SKVR IX<sub>4</sub> 425). Diseases and ailments could also end up in stoves due to other methods employed, but the result is clear: stove stones became potentially dangerous carriers of illness. They retained some of this quality even after they were eventually, after being burned into fragments, disposed of; splintered stones that had lost their value in retaining heat were piled up near saunas. We might perceive stones in a resulting disposal heap (Fi. *raparaunio*) as discarded waste, but it would be a modern reading of the material, for the stones could still be utilised by healers as they cured the sick following the same method they had used inside saunas (Muhonen 2010). The ‘death’ of a stove was not the end of the ritual use of its stones, and they were thus never entirely discarded.

Discarding and reusing are both common concepts employed in the study of the biography of objects, but the former would apply in the case of such a stone only if its utilitarian properties were underlined at the expense of others. Furthermore, the subsequent healing practices were more like a continuation to the stones’ earlier stage and not about reusing them. Although the stones in disposal heaps were not necessarily ever used again, they preserved their healing potential, which could be utilised if the need arose. In this respect, these stones were never placed beyond the limits of usefulness.

Physical contact was not, however, the only means to remove an illness to a stone. As the myriad of Finnish-Karelian spells attest, stones were suitable targets in invoking diseases, ailments and their causes (e.g. SKVR I<sub>4</sub> 886; VI<sub>2</sub> 4227; VI<sub>2</sub> 4302; VII<sub>4</sub> 1722; VII<sub>4</sub> 2419; IX<sub>4</sub> 284; XIII<sub>4</sub> 13013; Palmén 1937, 251; Pentikäinen 1971, 258). Generally speaking, pains were invoked into sauna stoves as well, and sometimes specifically into their stones; this was undoubtedly partly because of fire which was hoped to consume the illnesses by parching the stones (e.g. SKVR VI<sub>1</sub> 3474; VI<sub>1</sub> 3503; VI<sub>2</sub> 4033; VII<sub>4</sub> 2253; X<sub>2</sub> 5339; XIII<sub>4</sub> 12863; XIII<sub>4</sub> 12888; XIV 2410; Warttinen 1926, 27) (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> It can be pointed out that in this respect, concrete stones had their mythological paragon, the ‘stone of pains’, in the domain of the supernatural agent Pain Girl, the Maiden of Death (Fi. *Kiputyttö, Tuonen neito*; for the ‘stone of pains’ and this being, see for example Siikala 1992, 164, 171–172; Muhonen 2010, 212–217). The mythological connection is significant, as the ‘stone of pains’ was also comprehended as the destination to which pains were driven. The physically out of reach ‘stone of pains’ of mythical language hence functioned as everyday sauna stove stones. In short, stones were perceived as convenient new abodes for pains, as is stated laconically in the spells: “Stones



**Figure 3.** Interior of traditional Finnish sauna in Korpiselkä (former Finnish parish in Border Karelia). The stove is built without mortar, and there are thus empty spaces between the stones. This method of construction made it possible that pain could be exorcised “into the crack of the stove” (e.g. SKVR X<sub>2</sub> 3469). The smaller heat stones, which were among the stones taken from the stove and used in healing and other rituals, are on the top (e.g. MV:KTKKA 733, 14; SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 7322; VII<sub>5</sub> 3988; VII<sub>5</sub> 4540).

neither weep about their pains, nor do flagstones complain about their conditions”.<sup>4</sup> Stones, as hard matter, were thus also durable in this sense.

The different stones needed in sauna stoves were obviously collected according to many principles and hence from diverse locations (see for example Sirelius 1921, 225–226; Sirelius 1934, 101; Vuorela 1975, 381; Tikkanen 2002, 187; Paulaharju 2003, 69–70). It is quite natural that they might also have been carried from existing cairns (see for example Talwinen n.d.; Blomqvist n.d., 17; Nissinen 1887, 72), adding another loop to their lives. For example Samuli Paulaharju (2003, 69) speaks of “cairn stones” (Fi. *rauniokivet*) as one of the stone types used in constructing a sauna stove (see also for example MV:KTKKA 726, 65), which points at one of the places from where they were taken. Undoubtedly many of the stones lying in field cairns, too, have been used in building sauna stoves. When a stove was constructed, there could have been rituals involving its stones (see Pentikäinen 1971, 258–259; Paulaharju 2003, 87) and when bathing water was warmed with one of them, a spell could have been recited. The function of the spell was to influence the hot stone so that it would not break the water pot (SKS KRA Jyskyjärvi. Eino Toiviainen TK 104:54. 1961). The sauna stove was also perceived as a unity which had a favourable effect on water poured through it, as the water could thereafter be used, for instance, in healing rituals and in rituals that secured the health of a new-born child, made people amorous, advanced milk secretion of cows, protected them against wolves and cured a ‘spoiled’ cow

(e.g. SKVR I<sub>4</sub> 1506; I<sub>4</sub> 1522 a); I<sub>4</sub> 1528; I<sub>4</sub> 1538; VI<sub>2</sub> 4104; VI<sub>2</sub> 4546; VI<sub>2</sub> 4667; VI<sub>2</sub> 6118; VI<sub>2</sub> 7481; VII<sub>4</sub> 2306; IX<sub>4</sub> 368; IX<sub>4</sub> 425; IX<sub>4</sub> 654; X<sub>2</sub> 4099; XI 637; XI 2061; XI 2070; XII<sub>2</sub> 6187; XII<sub>2</sub> 7307; XIII<sub>4</sub> 12863; Paulaharju 1930, 134, 212). The sauna stove could even cure milk if it turned bloody, when such milk was brought in it (Paulaharju 1923, 219; cf for example Manninen 1917, 44–45).

It is noteworthy that stove stones may have been pulled out several times prior to their inevitable physical unsuitability for retaining heat and generating steam vapour<sup>5</sup>, for they also had utility value in another respect. For example, some stove stones were taken and a cow was encircled with them to protect it against evil; the stones were then returned to the stove (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 115; cf 122). A stone from a sauna stove also ensured the health of new-born calves (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 163). In addition, a bought cow could be kept in its new home by taking stones from the seller's sauna stove and placing them in its new stall or the buyer's stove (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 248; IV<sub>3</sub>, 1536; SKVR XII<sub>2</sub> 7091). As we have already seen, ordinary field stones could be used for the same purpose. On the other hand, homesickness could be removed from a bought cow by taking stones from the buyer's sauna stove and pressing the cow with them while saying: "This land is as warm to you as is this stone!" The stones were then returned to the stove (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 319; cf for example SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 7536 a; VI<sub>2</sub> 7537; VI<sub>2</sub> 7538; IX<sub>4</sub> 1269; IX<sub>4</sub> 1273). Stove stones were likewise placed back after they were used ritually in improving milk production or turning cows even-tempered (SKS KRA Kuusamo, Määttälänvaara. Marjukka Voutilainen b) 325. 1961; SKMT IV<sub>2</sub>, 1090, 1151–1152) – i.e. as stable as a stone. And if an enemy had spoiled the milk, the situation could be fixed with stove stones (SKVR VII<sub>5</sub> 4116). They were also handy in a spell whose purpose was to prevent bears from eating a horse during the pasture season (SKS KRA Kestilä. H. Meriläinen II 1800. 1892).

Furthermore, sauna stove stones could affect humans as well. To prevent a child from becoming a cry-baby, three sauna stove stones were taken and pressed onto his or her mouth (SKS KRA Pihtipudas. Kaarle Krohn 15869 a. 1885). And in case a child was lost in the woods, he or she could be found with the help of a spell involving three stove stones (SKS KRA Kestilä. H. Meriläinen II 1835. 1892). Stove stones could also be used in spells affecting love affairs, according to the same logic on which some of the cattle spells were founded. Warm stove stones namely had a favourable effect in creating positive emotions, in this case in making someone fall in love. In this spell, it was essential to say: "May your heart be as warm as this stone" (SKVR IX<sub>4</sub> 1491). And conversely, love could be turned cold with stones taken from a sauna stove, in which case the following was said: "May your heart be as cold as is this stone!" (SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 6138) This kind of practice could have been quite malevolent, and the stones might end up in

a spring (SKVR X<sub>2</sub> 4963) – in a suitable permanently cold place. Sauna stove stones could be used for other malign ends, too: for instance when placed in a sleigh with a stove broom, the horse had no strength to move the vehicle (SKS KRA Juuka, Hali. Kaarle Krohn 12341. 1885; cf for example SKS KRA Liperi. Tommi Korhola 779. 1939).

As some of the previous examples show, stones may also have been permanently removed from sauna stoves, as in the cases when a clamp was protected against mice (SKVR VII<sub>5</sub> 4540), a hunter shielded himself against bears (SKMT I, 81) and when someone wanted to spoil the spawn in another man's water (SKMT II, 87; SKS KRA Pielavesi. Antti Tikkanen b) 41. 1897), fishing water in general (SKS KRA Siilinjärvi. Aatto Sonninen b) 155. 1947) or a seine net (SKS KRA Maaninka. Pertti Korhonen 450. 1939). This could happen also when a fish trap was conjured in order to get fish by putting three sauna stove stones in it (SKS KRA Ruokolahti. Kirsti Stauffer b) 298. 1949), when stove stones were fixed on a seine net to improve fishing luck (SKS KRA Uusikirkko Vpl. Samuli Paulaharju 3338. 1907; SKS KRA Kontokki, Akonlahti. I. Marttini b) 658. 1901), when a lost fishing net was dragged with a sauna (stove) stone and a silver ring (SKS KRA Ruokolahti. Kirsti Stauffer b) 297. 1949), when a field was protected by burying sauna stove stones in it (SKMT III, 18) and when three stove stones were cast in the forest to prevent cows from being taken by the forest elf or being harmed by its animals (i.e. bears and wolves) (SKMT IV<sub>1</sub>, 434). A similar protective ritual was to prevent the deceased from haunting (Räsänen 1915). Protection was also in mind when a wolf happened to chase cattle; three stones were therefore taken from a sauna stove. Cattle were encircled with them, one of the stones was thrown after the wolf and the other two were placed back to the stove (SKMT IV<sub>2</sub>, 1090; cf SKS KRA Pihtipudas. Kaarle Krohn 16502. 1885). If damage had already been done – if a cow had hurt itself on a branch – three sauna stove stones were also picked up, the cow was encircled with them and the stones were then taken to a road (SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 5235). And if a cow had been hidden by the forest elf (Fi. *metsänpeitto* caused by *metsänhaltija*; see for example Holmberg 1923), three stones from a sauna stove were taken and placed on a boulder (SKMT IV<sub>2</sub>, 727) or fixed on three trees; the stones on the trees functioned as hernias to the forest elf and it was thus forced to release the cow (SKMT IV<sub>2</sub>, 757; cf SKVR IX<sub>4</sub> 1325). In the latter case, the general folk notion prescribed that it was afterwards important to deconstruct the contraption (i.e. to nullify the aching attribute of the stones). It is also interesting to note that stones may have been removed from different sauna stoves. This was done, for example, when the pot used in cooking slaughter soup was about to be washed. The pot was scoured with the stones,

which were then thrown to the sheep pen to advance the well-being of the sheep (SKMT IV<sub>2</sub>, 1320–1321).

As this short review shows, sauna stove stones were used in rituals related to diverse things: animal husbandry, fishing, hunting, healing and love affairs. It is noteworthy that the same object – a stone – could be used similarly either in a benevolent or malevolent sense. The physical context of a sauna stove stone, i.e. a construction perceived powerful partly because it was charged with *väki*, the force of fire, was taken to be suitable for providing paraphernalia for both rituals of positive and negative aim. What ultimately mattered was the intention of the ritual, to what purpose were the perceived properties of the stone taken to work. In other words, the ‘neutral’ properties of stone were channelled through either a benevolent or malevolent intention and directed towards a target. For example, some of the rituals demanded a stone that could be cold/warm, as this feature was needed from the viewpoint of the rituals’ functional logic. However, it must be pointed out that with respect to many rituals, it was not always deemed required that particularly a sauna stove stone or even a stone was to be used as a concrete object. Many objects could indeed be employed to attain the same effect, and this is a common feature in many Finnish-Karelian spells. Nevertheless, what matters here is that sauna stove stones were widely used, adding another layer of meaning to them. Sauna as a phenomenon must be stressed in this connection. It is clear that these stones were favoured not only because they had been touched by fire – material from other fireplaces have also been used in spells – but also due to the sauna itself. The sauna was a place powerful enough to be used as a favourable scene in healing practices, and already this betokens its especially great potency. This potency also affected stove stones, which partly explains why they were popular in rituals.

While rituals involving sauna stove stones took place in connection with different areas of life, one of them has an interesting link with a certain supernatural being: the versatility of sauna stove stones in rituals related to animal husbandry can be partially explained by the concept of the cattle elf. This was a supernatural being that could protect and take care of the cattle and was in some places believed to dwell in sauna stoves.<sup>6</sup> Among the other presented examples, this belief shows that sauna stoves, too, were clearly associated with, from our perspective, ritual/supernatural properties and that they are constructions that cannot be fitted inside the strictly defined modern category of utilitarian things.

### **The case of crosses and cairns by water**

In folk belief, ordinary stones can also become signs of faith in the transcendent. This aspect, which offers counterbalance to the practice of using the same stones for different purposes, can be illustrated by referring to Orthodox Viena Karelia. There it was customary to erect crosses in many places and for diverse reasons. One of the common locations was along waterways, often at spits of land. These crosses were visited by fishermen and boat travellers alike and the idea of the visit was to ask good luck for the journey or the fishing trip, or to offer thanks for a safe journey so far or a successful catch. God and the Orthodox saints were prayed to at wooden crosses, under which stones were also deposited as offerings. These stones gradually formed bigger assemblages (Muhonen 2011, 324–326, Fig. 1; Muhonen 2012). By the very act, the stones were set apart from stones outside the sacred place, for supernatural beings. There is no mention that the deposited stones could afterwards have been carried off for another purpose. Albeit taking something, even offerings, from sacred places is not entirely unheard of within Finnish-Karelian culture area, it is also in this case unlikely at least in a wide-ranging sense. Folk conceptions concerning sacred sites and their integrity have made sure of that.

The stones were collected according to different principles. They were sometimes taken from a nearby beach, occasionally they were “beautiful” and “white” (SKS KRA Vuokkiniemi, Vuonninen. Samuli Paulaharju 18986–89. 1932; Inha 1911, 339–340; Virtaranta 1978, 116) or “the most beautiful stones people could find” (Virtaranta 1978, 160) and every now and then they were picked up from the lake (e.g. Harva 1932, 473). According to one account, stones were taken from where plenty of fish were caught – no matter what the distance was between a favourable fishing ground and where the stones were to be deposited (Lukkarinen 1918, 68–69). The stones were meaningful above all individually, for they were material expressions of the relation between a person and a supernatural agent. A totality – i.e. a cairn – was only a secondary outcome of the offering practice, although without clear knowledge of it, an archaeologist would probably perceive such stone heaps as far more important than the single stones in them. In addition, while the appearance of some of the stones could indicate that their physical properties might have been perceived important, he or she would probably not consider the original location of plain lake stones essential. This case example, too, shows that, to turn around and rephrase an old dictum, it can be difficult to ‘see the stone for the cairns’ without supplementary information.

## Biographies and meanings

The potential biographies of single stones can be surprising and potentially multifaceted, as the same stones may have taken part in many practices that are quite the opposite of self-evident meanings – or lack of them – that may be anachronistically presumed. For example, one might easily consider sauna stoves to have remained physically rather constant structures after they were built, and that their stones would be removed only when they had worn out; it is not the first thing to expect that they have travelled around farmsteads to be used in various rituals. The presented examples hence suggest that in the framework of Finnish-Karelian folk belief, the biographies of single ‘ordinary’ stones may be rather complex as regards their physical context and meaning.

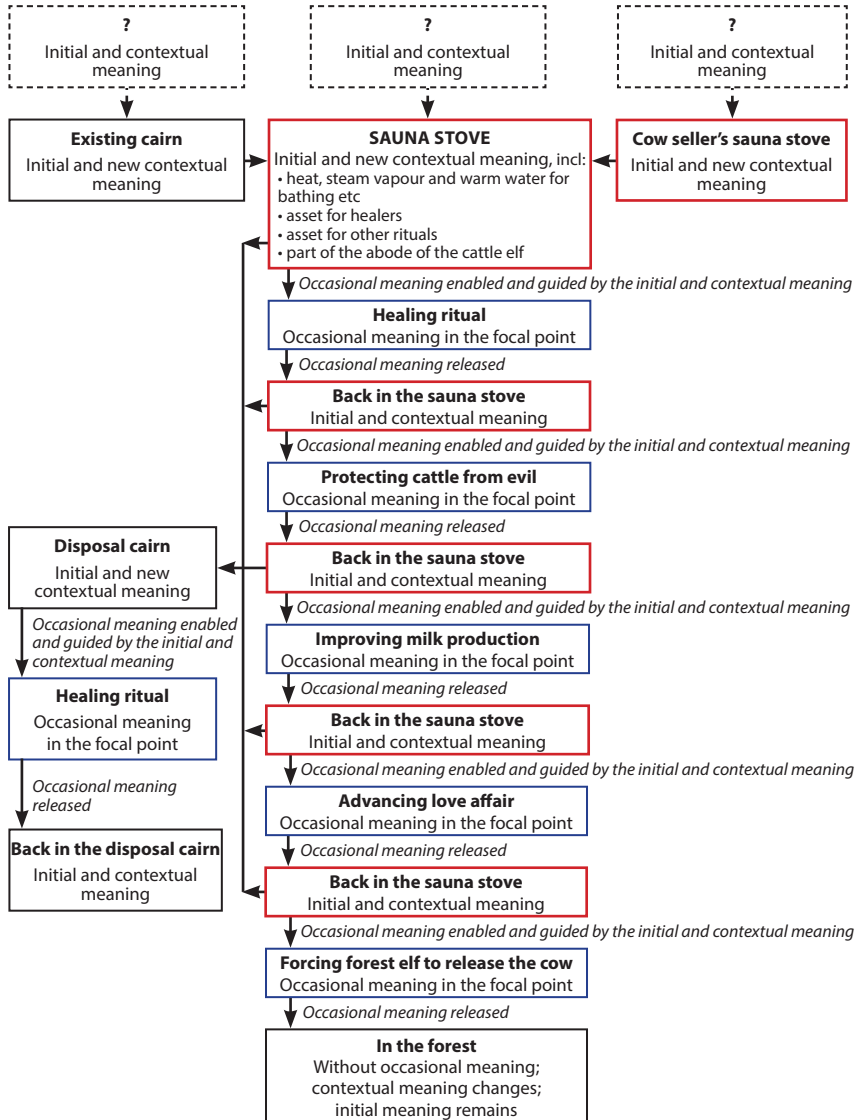
The presented examples also indicate that the relationship between stones and a construction of which they are part is two-way: in addition to physical building blocks, stones with the associated beliefs are elements affecting the meanings of the totality. The incorporeal dimension of this concrete whole partly comprises these elements, yet single stones in turn gain some of their meanings from the totality of which they are part. The totality therefore forms a matrix for additional ideas about the use of its stones.

When the biographical point of view is added to the reviewed stone-related beliefs and ritual meanings and their relationships, the subject matter can be conceptualised in a simple way on three superimposed and interdependent levels: on initial, contextual and occasional level (Figure 4). Meanings on the initial level stand for a shared general set of beliefs of a certain group of people about various properties and dimensions related to stones. These include, for example, the mythological aspect of stones and the conception of how stones, as naturally hard and cold yet matter capable of preserving warmth, can in general be potentially used in rituals for which such attributes are required. It can be said that these material properties do not determine the meanings of these objects, but the properties nonetheless may have some impact on them – as is widely recognised (see Boivin 2009).

The contextual level refers to meanings enabled and guided by the physical context, those that are assigned to a stone and superimposed on the meanings of the initial level when a stone is brought into its new place or something in the qualities of this context changes. The latter might happen when, for example, death-related material is brought to a field cairn for scorching. In the case of a stone placed in a sauna stove, the associated meanings are enabled and guided by, for example, the stove’s function in healing rituals and its role as an abode for the cattle elf. When a stone is picked up from a stove and is active on the intended



**Figure 4. Potential biography of a stone in the context of Finnish-Karelian folk belief**  
 Highlighted from the present-day viewpoint of ritual uses. The diagram represents a case of a stone picked up from a sauna stove for various reasons and then returned. Ultimately, the stone may alternatively end up in many places; two scenarios are here given.



occasional level, a certain meaning enabled and guided by the other two levels actualises in a particular way and superimposes on them. This occasional meaning is now in the focal point, yet released when the stone is returned to where it was. When a sauna stove stone is used in, for example, forcing the forest elf to release the cow, the occasional meaning is assigned for a limited time after which it is revoked. This happens when the contraption used is deconstructed; from now on, the stone lies in the forest with its initial and new contextual meanings. It obviously becomes unusable for rituals where specifically a sauna stove stone is required.

While many of the initial and contextual meanings of stones were constantly present in them and familiar to 'everyone', the occasional and temporary meanings of a particular stone were often known only to the person who took it from an assemblage for a moment. People were aware, at least in principle, that the stone they were about to take may already have been used on a similar occasion, or for a completely different purpose, although it appears that this was not a relevant matter for the future use of the stone. The folklore material referred to above does not contain suggestions or instructions for selecting a stone that had never before been used in a spell. Taking such a stone with any certainty would have been impossible. Just before someone took a stone, then, above all it carried shared meanings and ideas about its potential use, enabled and guided by these initial and contextual meanings. In this way, previous temporal occasional uses become part of the life histories of stones, although these uses have no great relevance as to the current meanings they hold (apart from the 'basic' contextual level which depends on how stones are occasionally used). Thus, while the temporal usage of a stone was not important in this sense, it is, on the contrary, significant from the biographical point of view. It may be inferred that with respect especially to the stones in sauna stoves, their previous momentary functions and *potential* future occasional uses were as important as their current rather constant functions. Hence, sauna stoves can also be grasped in their potentiality, in their capability to function as material resources for diverse practices. Were we to ask 'what were the functions of a sauna stove (as a structure)?' we would miss something very essential: its single components and specifically their functions.

The latter aspect applies to the Viena Karelian accumulating cairns as well, but an answer to the same question would here go even further astray. They, too, are an example of folk belief entwined in stone heaps, yet heaps which formed in quite a different manner: they formed due to worship of supernatural beings, and as such were singularised. These heaps did not therefore incorporate utilitarian uses, and by being set apart their stones had simpler biographies in contrast to some of those in field cairns and sauna stoves. Viena Karelian accumulating heaps

of stones were sacred according to the meanings given and the faith invested in their single components, not because of an intention to build sacred assemblages. Their primary function was not, therefore, to be cairns *used in* rituals but rather their stones were accumulated into cairns *because of* rituals. One of the most basic questions posed by an archaeologist looking at such a stone heap – why was this cairn built? – would therefore not result in very productive answers if they try to describe how an individual placing his or her stone on one felt.

## Discussion and conclusions

These viewpoints about Viena Karelian accumulating cairns may have direct relevance for an archaeologist exploring the region. The concurrent functions and the associated meanings of the stones in quite recent field cairns and sauna stoves in the Finnish-Karelian cultural sphere likewise provide new insights for interpreting these assemblages of the area. But more importantly, these functions and meanings have also a significant wider contact surface with archaeological readings of Finnish-Karelian objects and structures beyond the temporal horizon of the discussed folklore material. The non-scientific view of the material world, which is revealed in folk perception, signifies that there are equally fundamental implications for the terminology used regarding them. These matters are covered in the following, which shares many aspects with recent Finnish archaeological studies and their lively and necessary discussion contradicting conventional views about material culture and its essence. In addition to this they also draw heavily on domestic folk beliefs, and many points made in these studies are in accordance with the observations presented here (see for example Hukantaival 2007; Herva 2009; Herva 2010; Herva & Ylimaunu 2009; Herva et al 2010).

First of all, many of the presented examples of practices related to stones may sound absurd, and from the modern viewpoint, they certainly are peculiar. They were, however, once fully real and have to be understood in their own terms. If one tries truthfully to depict a culture living in the context of folk belief, then ritual practices are neither entertainment nor cultural side tracks of little significance, nor items in a cabinet of curiosities. They are not necessarily ‘an uncanny extra level’ over and above ‘the utilitarian base actions’ relating to the same thing. Rituals reveal worries and even anxieties with respect to imperative fields of everyday life – means of livelihood, health and social relationships – and they also involve very ordinary things. To quote an applicable statement concerning Early Modern northern Finland (Herva & Ylimaunu 2009, 239): “Encounters with non-human beings and things with special properties occurred in the context of everyday life and were not religious-like experiences.”

In the mind of an individual living in the context of the folk belief depicted here, there probably was no great difference between a mechanically functional action and a 'ritually' functional action in terms of that functionality (cf Hunkantaival 2007, 70). A heated sauna stove stone, for example, had the 'natural' property of warming bathing water as much as the 'natural' property of binding and consuming illnesses, just as an axe had the 'natural' property of cutting wood and expelling frightful beings (e.g. Sirelius 1921, 555–556). He or she probably considered an everyday ritual as a practical solution in a given matter (cf Gazin-Schwartz 2001, 269). Such a ritual can be, from the point of view of the performer, basically more a *technique* to achieve a desired goal – as warming water with a hot stone or cutting wood with an axe are – than a mysterious *category* of human action. The same object employed ritually and non-ritually can in both cases be perceived as a tool. Stone-related practices are just one example among many within Finnish-Karelian folk belief that can be only comprehended according to the Western dichotomy between mind and matter on an etic level of analysis (see for example Nikolaidou 2007, 198).

The disparity between 'we' and 'them' is all too clear when we consider how different remains are often still perceived in archaeology. When archaeologists talk of such structures as field cairns or sauna stoves even of one hundred to two hundred years old, ritual practices and supernatural meanings are not necessarily primarily in mind. Rather recent field cairns, for example, attest first and foremost cultivation in the non-ritual sense and stand for land clearance. However, it would be more fruitful to realise them as multidimensional entities structured according to a different view of the world and, consequently, simultaneously incorporating meanings we are accustomed to term mythological, supernatural, ritual and utilitarian. Both single stones and heaps made of them have in this case incorporated utilitarian and non-utilitarian meanings, whereupon if one wishes to classify a stone in such a whole or the totality itself, one cannot do so from one-sided premises. It might even be impossible and certainly uncalled-for to state that one function had more significance than the other, as in the case of sauna stove stones, which played a central role in bathing as well as in healing. Various meanings and functions coexisted comfortably within the same physical entity. Stones in field cairns and sauna stoves were therefore singularly and together composites of the modern Western categories we may speak or think so unnoticeably of. This also implies that we have to be aware of and careful about the terminology used, because referring to things as utilitarian, non-utilitarian, ritual, secular, etc. shape what may become a picture of the very fundamental order of things in the past. And, on the other hand, when such terminology is

not explicitly used, we have to be self-reflective about what qualities are implicitly associated with such categories as, for example, field cairns and sauna stoves.

The salient and often noticed point with respect to ethnographic analogies is that they are important for archaeological imagination, inspirational for producing novel and wider ways of thinking about the material remains of the past (cf for example Parker Pearson 2003, 21, 44; Insoll 2004, 115; Kaliff & Oestigaard 2004, 83; Valk 2006, 145; Jordan 2008, 241–243). The same applies to folklore as well (see for example Gazin-Schwartz & Holtorf 1999, 16; Gazin-Schwartz 2001), and it is very true when it is reflected on what we can learn in the case of stones from Finnish-Karelian material regarding classifying matter and phenomena. Such material always has the power to surprise and to dash modern Western ethnocentric presuppositions.

I would argue that ethnographic and folklore material is most usable when it is employed not necessarily in providing alternative interpretations for single isolated things (in the form of direct or modified analogies) but in presenting wider frameworks for thought that are different from our own (cf Herva et al 2010, 615). Less isolating approach suggested here by folklore and ethnographic material offers, compared to the approach derived from modern premises, a basic framework more applicable also to Finnish-Karelian material culture preceding the time covered by the written evidence. Furthermore, it probably provides a broad basis that can be applied to many other spatial-temporal contexts as well. Its major usefulness, I believe, lies in how it can help in shaping our view of the essence of past things and the aspect of the *potential* array of unspecified ‘non-utilitarian’ uses for things that are found also outside conspicuous archaeological contexts. This less isolating approach dovetails well with recent archaeological studies referred to in the introduction. These studies contain absolutely necessary discussion about the essence of material things in their past context. It is clear that the ritual/special/non-utilitarian–secular/mundane/utilitarian binary model is not applicable throughout the societies where beliefs and utilitarian uses enmesh within the same everyday things. As Amy Gazin-Schwartz (2001, 264) aptly points out, the idea traditionally held within archaeological reasoning is that “the material culture of ritual is identifiable because it is anomalous. In form and in context, ritual artifacts and features are differentiated from everyday items.” Her study shows what those accustomed to working with folklore material are well aware of: the same thing, be it a knife, an iron bar, a shirt or a sauna whisk – just to mention a few other objects from the Finnish-Karelian culture area – can be employed in ‘utilitarian’ as well as in ‘non-utilitarian’ senses. William H. Walker (1998, 247) points to the same matter: “[...] many artifacts used in rituals would be classified on the basis of their forms as ‘utilitarian’ objects. Sometimes even

identical looking objects (e.g. cooking pots, houses, hoes, corn, water) function as either ritual or nonritual artifacts, or both.” These two purposes of use are not mutually exclusive, as the same object has from our viewpoint a different role in different contexts of use. Moreover, as the biographical observations of stones reveal, it can be sometimes more appropriate to view objects at the same time as potentially ‘ritual’ and potentially ‘utilitarian’, as the corresponding uses often actualise only for a while, than as utilitarian things with non-utilitarian capabilities or vice versa. Many features of folk belief hence suggest that archaeology has too often had a blinkered view of its primary source material, and the resulting classifications such as field cairns and sauna stoves – as opposed to structures perceived as ‘ritual’ – are laden with ‘utilitarian’ meanings to an unbalanced extent. This implies that the often referred to joke, in which an archaeologist is said to turn to ritual interpretations when he or she cannot otherwise explain a puzzling phenomenon, needs a companion: in this new anecdote, an archaeologist offers non-ritual interpretations because he or she *feels* not at all puzzled (cf Walker 1998, 249).

Yet ignorance is not a laughing stock, nor is archaeology’s difficulty to reach the incorporeal. They are instead regrettable. When it comes down to identifying rituals, ethnographical visibility and archaeological visibility are self-evidently on completely different levels. It is more probable for the ‘most obvious’ or anomalous occasions – the classic ‘ritual’ things for archaeologists – to pass the filter of time, and even then only partially and with considerable probability of being misinterpreted. This has partly contributed to the existence of the reduced perception. A single unworked stone is an exemplar of a commonplace archaeological ‘find’ with a potentially vast range of meanings and uses that is among the first to be filtered out. I have not, however, the illusion that these meanings can be pinned down solely from archaeological finds, for they are materially invisible. No field archaeologist will nor should bag plain stones just because they might have meant something. The idea of this study is instead to demonstrate how deceptive even the most common and everyday thing so close to our own time can be from the classificatory point of view.

The underlying concern is that even though archaeological studies involving religion and ritual are currently numerous, I feel that in archaeology there are still wide currents that partly unintentionally foster the idea of material culture as above all utilitarian and associate only ‘anomalous’ things with rituals. This is as dismissive as the way of not explicitly acknowledging the, from our point of view, potential flip side of everyday material culture. While we have to recognise that most of the ideas about past things are archaeologically out of reach, we can often attain a more balanced perception about the past by simply making the

statement that many beliefs and rituals were possibly or probably related even to the ‘everyday’ things we here classify as knives, nails, pieces of burned clay – and stones. And we must explicitly recognise that the way we classify – whatever it may be – does not necessarily need to coincide with those of people long gone. Refusal to do so can sustain classifications, such as ‘ritual’, as anomalous, only fitting the eye of the modern beholder and implicitly overplaying one aspect of life – the ‘utilitarian’ – that we can or assume we will better reach and understand archaeologically. With respect to the feasibility of folk belief as a potential basis for classifying past objects and phenomena, one may find a seed of wisdom from the statement written by academic Martti Haavio, even though it is over-simplifying and overly optimistic. It was published in 1935, at the time when the old-world beliefs were finally fading – as were the last sages like Tuomas Lomajärvi.

“An archaeologist may unearth secrets of age-old times. But his rival is a folklorist, who receives a message of antiquity arrived from a man to man, from time to time, which tells of those same secrets, and explains it” (Haavio 1935, 3; translation by the author).

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## Sources of illustrations

Figure 1 – Photograph: Samuli Paulaharju. SKS KRA, The Finnish Literature Society, the Folklore Archives.

Figure 2 – Photograph: Samuli Paulaharju. Otava Publishing Company Ltd, Photographic Archives.

Figure 3 – Drawing: Samuli Paulaharju. SKS KRA, The Finnish Literature Society, the Folklore Archives.

## Notes

1 I would like to thank Sirkku Pihlman and Henrik Asplund for their encouraging comments on the various versions of the article and the anonymous reviewer and Anu Kannike for their valuable remarks.

2 The meaning of the words translated here as ‘clump’ (Fi. *kakara*, *kakkara*) is in this connection somewhat unclear (see SKES 1955, 145–146). From the semantic point of view, they could be associated with ‘child’ in a pejorative sense and ‘bastard’.

3 An analogous perception can also be seen with respect to situations that we may perceive as entirely harmless. For example, the first washing water of a newborn was sometimes considered so unclean that it was poured onto a sauna stove to be consumed by the fire (Paulaharju J. 1929, 15). In addition, new clothes could have been heated up and scorched on a sauna stove before dressing them to prevent both their smell and *power* (Fi. *voima*) entering the body (SKS KRA Pihtipudas, Sydänmaa. Pihtiputaan kirjall.seura, Niilo Huttunen 792. 1893).

4 For example SKVR VII<sub>4</sub> 2833 (“*Ei kivi kipuja itke, paas vaivoja valita*”). Cf for example XIII<sub>4</sub> 12863: “Take, stone, pains away, you are stronger to stand [the pain]!”

5 Yet steam vapour was considered essential not only for bathing but also for healing (e.g. SKVR VI<sub>2</sub> 7389 a).

6 This can be seen in the practice of announcing a new-born calf to the sauna stove, in which the abode of the cattle or sauna elf localises (see for example SKMT IV<sub>3</sub>, 1414–1416; SKS KRA Kiuruvesi, Aittojärvi. A. Lämsä 137. 1936; for an overview of the supernatural being connected with cattle, see for example Haavio 1942, 371–410). A narrative from Valtimo, for example, relates that the announcement was to be made to “the one who dwelled in the sauna stove” (SKS KRA Valtimo. Siiri Oulasmaa 2818. 1954), while another narrative tells of the failure to make the announcement into the stove, which was believed to result in losing cattle luck (SKS KRA Tyrnävä. I. Marttinen (Marttini) b) 1731. 1932).

# An embroidered royal gift as a political symbol and embodiment of design ideas in 1885

Kirsti Salo-Mattila

## Introduction

The Empress Screen was an embroidered dressing screen presented as a gift to the Empress of Russia, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, when Alexander III, Tsar of Russia and Grand Duke of Finland, visited Helsinki in 1885. The screen, now in the National Museum of Finland, consists of five panels. The basic elements of the composition are coats of arms and plant ornament.

Plant ornament was exceptionally important in late 19th century design. In the early 19th century, the internal of Romanticism replaced the external of Neoclassicism in the expression of ideas. Through the consequent disintegration and eclecticism of style, decorative motifs gained a prominent standing in the theory, teaching, and making of art. In general, the discourse of art emphasised the creative force of nature or the perfection of nature's creations. F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854) made the 'objective' expediency of organisms the ideal of visual art. Schelling mainly meant the perfection and symmetry in the result, rather than vital forces in the process. Instead, A. W. Schlegel (1767–1845) included a creating and organising "internal force" in his definition of "organic" art that took nature for a model. In the art discourse of the late 19th century, the concept of organic still had a dual nature along the same lines: on one hand, it stressed functionality, on the other, vitality (Salo-Mattila 2009, 160–161; Waenerberg 1992, 22–25).

This article discusses the commission of the screen and its political background, and analyses the composition, the process of design and embroidery, and the symbolic function. The screen is set in contrast with other textile gifts given to the Emperor and Empress during the visit. They reflected Finnish nationalism, while the circles behind the screen were closer to politically liberal westward trends of thinking. The article asks what were the political and design ideas reflected by the screen as a royal gift, in contrast to the National Romanticism embodied by the other textile gifts.



**Figure 1.** Alexander III and Maria Feodorovna in the mid-1880s.

### **The competing gifts**

In the spring of 1885, Finland started to prepare for an anticipated official visit of Alexander III, Emperor of Russia and Grand Duke of Finland, together with his consort Maria Feodorovna, who was admired as Dagmar, Princess of Denmark (Figure 1). The Senate decided to arrange two exhibitions in Helsinki, one of Finnish art and the other of school craft. They were to open at the end of July, on the eve of the visit (*Nya Pressen* 1885a; *Nya Pressen* 1885b).

For the gifts for the Empress, there were two initiatives. On 3 March, “a number of women in Helsinki” decided to present her with an embroidered dressing screen during the visit, and on 16 March, “the women of the capital” came up with the idea of a boat with coverlets and rya rugs. The boat was to symbolise an invitation to visit “the thousands of lakes and bays of our country and thereby come to know face to face the people who loved her so much”. The textiles were meant to make the gift more interesting and “to show the art craft of Finnish women”. It was reported that they incorporated 21 different “Finnish” pattern designs. Appropriately, the boat and textiles committee was chaired by Emilie Bergbom,



**Figure 2.** Embroidered ornaments for the Empress boat, 1885.

who together with her younger brother Kaarlo Bergbom had started dramatic art in Finnish, in 1869, while Anna Sinebrychoff, businesswoman and benefactress, headed the dressing screen committee (Qvarnström 1932, 522; *Finland* 1885b).

Previous studies have shown that in the first destination of the visit, Lappeenranta, the Emperor and Empress were surrounded by Finnish culture as produced by the Friends of Finnish Handicraft (founded in 1879), in the form of national dresses and textile ornament (Lönnqvist 1979, 125; Kaukonen 1985, 281–283; Priha 1993, 93; Svinhufvud 1999, 126). The painter Fanny Churberg developed the style applied in textile ornament (Figure 2) for the Friends of Finnish Handicraft in the early 1880s. It was based on traditional Karelian embroidery and perceived as old Finnish, although the art historians of the time, and even Churberg herself, were aware of the Byzantine tradition in the background (Salo-Mattila 2000, 80–83; for Karelian embroidery, see Schvindt 1894–95; 1903). The main gift for the Empress, financed by a public collection, was a rowboat built on an old Finnish model and filled with woven and embroidered textiles. It was shown to the public in Helsinki on 30 July, before being taken to Lappeenranta (*Finland* 1885b).

In the capital Helsinki, the Empress received a large dressing screen embroidered with coats of arms and plant ornament (Figure 3). The screen was presented to the Empress on the morning of 8 August 1885, in the imperial palace, the present presidential palace. The papers reported the occasion with abundant



**Figure 3.** The Empress Screen, 1885, embroidery on silk, 158x305 cm.

detail. The attire of the Empress was a simple white dress. Madam Karamzin, a socialite with close contacts with the Romanovs since the 1830s, had given a speech and asked the Empress to accept the gift from the women in Helsinki. The Empress expressed her thanks with grace, and Countess Heiden, wife of the

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governor, presented her the cream of society women one by one. The papers described the five-part screen in detail. It was embroidered by a number of women in the city, and it was based on the drawings prepared by the painters Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905) and Gunnar Berndtson (1854–1895), and by the architects



Helge Rancken (1857–1912) and Karl Leonard Lindberg (1857–1890) (*Helsingfors Dagblad* 1885c; *Uusi Suometar* 1885).

In the spring of 1919, an English battle ship sent by Dagmar's nephew, George V, sailed to Crimea and rescued the empress dowager from the turbulence of the revolution. The screen was left behind. In 1931, the Finnish consul general in Leningrad, Eino Westerlund, found it by chance at a Moscow general store, and it was acquired for the collections of the Finnish National Museum. It is known as the Empress Screen.

### **Political background**

In the international system created by the Congress of Vienna, 1814–15, Russia regarded Austria and Prussia as a bulwark against revolution that could again start to spread from Paris. As the northern extension of that buffer zone, Finland, conquered from Sweden in 1809, provided protection against possibly dangerous ideas coming from Sweden. Consequently, any pro-Swedish attitudes in Finland were suspicious. Romantic nationalism in Finland was tolerated, if not encouraged, as it was seen to weaken the traditional links with Sweden. Young academic intellectuals who sought support from the large agrarian population led the movement, which was essentially apolitical. Similar development was seen in agrarian countries in eastern and south eastern Europe. This differed from western Europe where the bourgeoisie was the driving force for change that was political in nature. In Finland, the bourgeoisie, which mostly represented the small Swedish-speaking minority, preferred the existing state of affairs (Paasivirta 1978, 113–114, 123–124).

The Crimean War, 1853–56, led to new attitudes toward Finland. The empire had lost, but Finland had proven to be its loyal member. The local population had on its own defeated some of the coastal raids of the allied British and French fleets in the Baltic. The impression of loyalty was further strengthened by the uprising of January 1863 in Poland. During the subsequent international crisis, Finland remained calm, and the emperor convened the representatives of its estates in September 1863, for the first time since 1809. The development of Finland as a separate nation gained speed (Paasivirta 1978, 195–199, 238–245, 248–250; Virrankoski 2001, 498–506).

Meanwhile, the internal politics in Finland had become more divisive in nature. There were the Fennomans and their liberal opponents. The Fennomans strived to speed up the development of a distinct national culture, while the liberals saw the culture of the land as originally Swedish and considered links to Sweden essential to maintain its vitality. In internal relations, the Fennomans strived

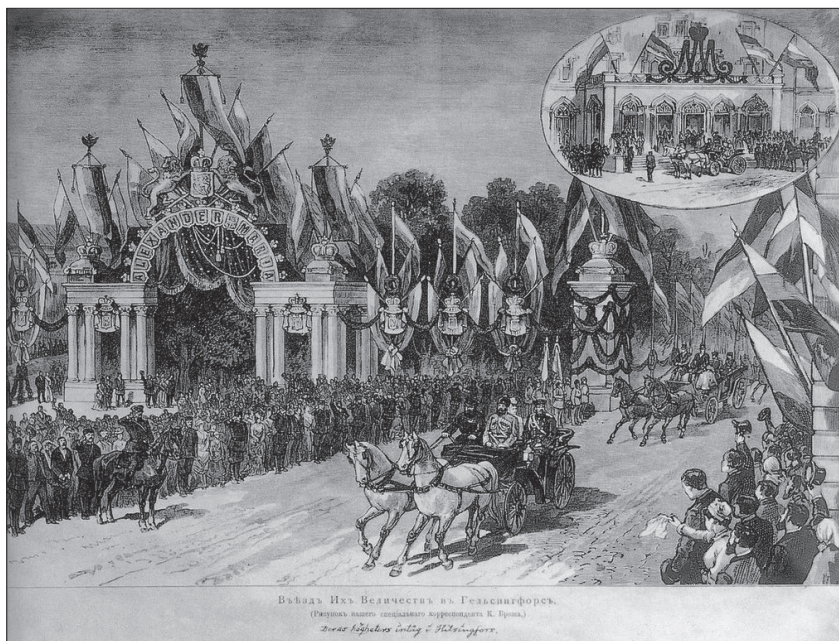
to establish connections with the peasant society whose enlightenment they saw as necessary for the future of the country. Their opponents regarded themselves as representatives of the cream of society and as enlightened aristocrats whose duty was to preserve the traditions, while the population in general was still undeveloped. As to the external relations, the Fennomans saw that loyalty to the emperor created freedom of action for national development. The liberals stressed the role of Scandinavian influence in the development of the Finnish national spirit, and regarded connections to Sweden as important (Paasivirta 1978, 204–205, 209; Virrankoski 2001, 511–514).

By the early 1880s, the politics of language had complicated the internal politics. The Fennomans, either Finnish or Swedish speaking, represented cultural nationalism and promoted the Finnish language. Their main opposition was the Svekomans who could be characterised as conservative with Scandinavian orientation and who wanted to preserve the dominant position of the Swedish language. The liberals, who had lost much of their influence, were on the sidelines. The leading figure of the Fennomans was G. Z. Forsman (Yrjö-Koskinen, from 1882) and that of the liberals Leo Mechelin. Both were university professors and, from 1882, senators. The Svekomans were led by another professor, A. O. Freudenthal. The mother tongue of all three was Swedish. In the empire, Russian nationalism was on the rise, and after Alexander III came to the throne in 1883, Russification became a threat, even in Finland (Paasivirta 1978, 300–303, 306–308; Virrankoski 2001, 567–568, 576–577).

The gift of the boat and textiles originated from the national-romantic Fennoman circles, and the Friends of Finnish Handicraft, a Fennoman organisation, realised the textiles. The idea for the screen came from socialites whose leading figure was a prominent businesswoman, and a group of painters and architects cooperated in the design. According to Reitala, internationalism was an essential feature of contemporary Finnish art, and liberalism supported internationalism. The Fennoman and liberal ways of thinking clashed openly during the great Finnish art exhibition of 1885 when the young art historian J. J. Tikkanen expressed his pleasure in seeing that national art had almost disappeared (Reitala 1980, 387–388).

### **The Empress Screen and its composition**

The screen (Figure 3) has five panels, each 158 cm in height and 61 cm in width. In the original form, it was even higher with gilded brass legs and crowns attached to the corners of each panel. The panels were made by covering a wedged stretcher with silk satin. The ground colour of the silk cloth is natural white in



**Figure 4.** The arrival of the Emperor and Empress in Helsinki, 1885. The triumphal arch designed by the architect S. Gripenberg (*Helsingfors Dagblad* 1885b). Inset drawing of the decorated railway station (upper right).

the picture field and dark blue in the border. The upper border is 20 cm in width, the lower border 23 cm, and the side border 4.5 cm. The panels and picture fields are edged with blue ribbons, and their corners are embellished with blue tassels.

In the composition of the screen, the dominating elements are coats of arms and plant ornament in the picture fields, and plant ornament in the friezes of the upper and lower borders. Plants support the coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Finland in the centre panel and those of the provinces in the side panels. The eight provincial coats of arms are placed according to the cardinal points: the western on the left and the eastern on the right, with the southern lower than the northern in the same panel. The left wing panel represents the province of Turku and Pori, the centre left panel the provinces of Uusimaa, Häme, and Vaasa, the centre right panel the provinces of Mikkeli, Kuopio, and Oulu, and the right wing panel the province of Viipuri. The large size of the grand-ducal coat of arms and

the abundance of plants together with the symmetry of the overall composition focus attention to the centre of the screen.

During the imperial visit of 1885, the coats of arms were commonly used for decorative purposes. Even the imperial seat in the gift boat in Lappeenranta was covered by a light blue silk cloth that was embellished with the grand-ducal coat of arms surrounded by the imperial crowns, although the decorative motifs of the rest of the textiles in the boat were national romantic in nature (*Finland* 1885b). In Helsinki, the triumphal arch (Figure 4) built for the occasion was decorated with the grand-ducal and provincial coats of arms (*Helsingfors Dagblad* 1885b). Even the commemorative medal for the great art exhibition of 1885 had, on its reverse side, “the coat of arms of Finland” set against a spruce twig. The medal was designed by Gunnar Berndtson (*Finland* 1885a).

The grand-ducal coat of arms in the centre panel (Figure 5) consists of a shield and a crown of rank, each separately supported by plants. The shield has a lion rampant wearing a golden coronet and treading on a silver sabre with a golden hilt. The left hind paw is on the blade, the right one on the hilt. The right front paw, which is protected by an armoured silver glove with golden trimmings, holds a silver sword with a golden hilt. The accompaniment consists of nine golden roses in a scarlet field. The crown of rank, which is depicted in three dimensions, is viewed obliquely from below. It has a crimson cap with ermine trimming, crosswise golden main arches embellished with pearls and crosswise golden auxiliary arches; it is topped with a golden orb. Above the grand-ducal coat of arms, there is a shining six-pointed star, presumably symbolising the God-given nature of imperial power.

In form, the device of the shield follows the Finnish lion of 1591 as depicted by William Boyd on the sarcophagus of Gustav Vasa in Uppsala Cathedral. In the heraldic development of the Finnish lion, that form of depiction did not resume before the imperial visit of 1885 (cf Talvio 1997, 33). Unlike the shield, the crown of rank is very different from the one in the Uppsala monument. The Uppsala crown is a coronet attached to the shield, while the crown in the screen follows the tradition started by the grand-ducal crown of 1712 as depicted by Elias Brenner in a book illustration (cf Talvio 1997, 14–15, 22–23; Rancken & Pirinen 1949, 35–36, 41). The provincial shields correspond to the practice of the time as to their devices (cf Rancken & Pirinen 1949). In the outline and mutual proportion of the shields, one can observe some adaptation to the overall composition of the screen. Leaves entwine the shields and make them appear as fruits hanging from branches. In the 1880s, plant ornament was prevalent in textile design (cf for example Parry 1983). On the other hand, it was rarely used in the design of



**Figure 5.** The grand-ducal coat of arms in the centre panel.



**Figure 6.** Detail of the lower frieze in the centre left panel.

coats of arms as supporter. Its expressive use as supporter in the way of the screen appears unique.

Plants in the picture fields cannot be recognised. They are synthesised ideal types that were popular in the European ornamentation of the 19th century. According to Waenerberg, a common goal was to represent the living nature of plants by incorporating different stages of development. Vertical forms expressed a force that sustained life, and spiral forms vigorous growth (Waenerberg 1992, 131, 190). The designer of plant ornament was not to imitate nature but apply its inherent laws (Gombrich 1984, 54).

The plants in the screen are viewed sideways, which suits the wall-like decoration, as stated by Christopher Dresser in his *Principles of Decorative Design*, 1873 (cf Dresser 1873, 96–98; Waenerberg 1992, 136). Leafstalks arising along the stem, leaves, and even flower sepals create strong spiral-like impressions. In addition to the spiral forms, buds about to blossom and flowers in full blossom also express a vital force. The designer may have utilised one of the numerous contemporary books of plant ornament as a source, but he has fully adapted the plant forms for the purposes of the composition.

Plants in the border friezes (Figure 6) resemble acanthus scrolls. In the middle of the 19th century, European designers had started shifting from arabesques to simpler plant motifs, which partly or directly imitated classical or gothic models (Waenerberg 1992, 191). In the screen, the design is related to the Pompeian and

other Roman scrolls introduced to the public by Owen Jones in his *Grammar of Ornament*, 1856 (cf Jones 2001, 122, 134).

## Embroidery

As a whole, the quality of embroidery is high. Although the work was started by a number of young society women who had taken a course in art needlework at the Helsinki School of Handicraft (opened in 1881), Sophie Snellman (1855–1919), the teacher of art craft at the school, had to do most of it. According to her, the ability of the eager amateur embroiderers, and in the summer, their willingness, too, proved to be insufficient (Qvarnström 1932, 522).

Embroidery stitches reveal differences in the patterns that repeat from panel to panel. The upper friezes show handwork of varying quality, while the lower friezes appear to be carried out by one skilful individual. It is likely that there was a similar division of labour in the embroidery of plant ornament in the picture fields, but the applied soft and filling wool yarn has levelled the individual differences in the quality of handwork, unlike the hard and smooth silk yarn used in the friezes. A professional embroiderer was commissioned to perform the difficult and time-consuming goldwork for the coats of arms and realise them as separate pieces (Qvarnström 1932, 522). Such a division of labour is also indicated by the working drawings for the panels: only the outlines of the coats of arms are shown (Figure 7).

The professional in question must have been one of the best in her field as she has so brilliantly expressed the character of different emblems and fields. She was probably Fredrika Wilhelmina Grahn who had won an award for her goldwork at the first Finnish Design Exhibition in 1881 (*Helsingfors* 1881). In 1882, she had implemented Severin Falkman's design for the so-called Lützen banner whose central feature was the Finnish coat of arms with the grand-ducal crown. The banner was exhibited to the public at the Helsinki student house before being taken to Lützen, Germany. There it was carried in a festival procession to commemorate Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden who had died at the battle of Lützen in 1632 (*Åbo Underrättelser* 1882; *Morgonbladet* 1882a; 1882b; 1882c; 1882d; *Helsingfors Dagblad* 1882).

The extensive handwork required by the implementation of the screen and the attention paid to its quality reflected an old European tradition that was certainly familiar to the Empress. As a skill required from gentle women, embroidery was rooted in the importance attached to it by the personal interest of English queens over several centuries (Callen 1979, 96).



**Figure 7.** Working drawing for the centre right panel. The locations of the coats of arms for the Mikkeli, Kuopio, and Oulu provinces are indicated by outlines. Yarn samples on the upper left and right borders, instructions in French along the upper right border.



## Attribution of the design

The newspaper articles and later stories show a tendency to connect the screen to Albert Edelfelt, the most prominent Finnish painter of the time. Anna Sinebrychoff, head of the women's committee, had commissioned Edelfelt to paint two portraits of her in the previous year (Hintze 1953, catalogue, Nos. 308, 317). Sinebrychoff probably tried to increase the value of the gift by connecting it with a name appreciated by the Empress. When Edelfelt had been elected to the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1881, he had arranged an exhibition for the royal family in St. Petersburg and painted a portrait of Xenia and Michael, two of the children (Hintze 1953, 144, 146; Hintze 1953, catalogue, No. 200).

The analysis of Edelfelt's working schedule in 1885 shows that he probably found no time beyond initial sketching of ideas to work on the screen (cf Edelfelt 1926, 45–85, 89; *Nya Pressen* 1885c; *Helsingfors Dagblad* 1885a). This he may well have done in cooperation with his fellow artist, Berndtson, and the two architects, Helge Rancken and Karl Leonard Lindberg. All of them were young: Edelfelt and Berndtson 30, and Rancken and Lindberg 27 years of age, while Sophie Snellman, responsible for implementation, was 30 years old. They probably knew each other well in the Helsinki of 1885 that had some 40 000 inhabitants only.

No design sketches have survived. The extant working drawings of the screen are for three of the picture fields in the centre left, centre right, and right wing panels. The drawing for the centre right panel (Figure 7) includes embroidery instructions in French, and has yarn samples attached. The drawing for the right wing panel is signed by K. L. Lindberg. It is conceivable that Rancken and Lindberg divided the work so that Lindberg designed the plant ornament in the picture fields, while Rancken was responsible for the coats of arms and the plant ornament in the friezes. Rancken had acquainted himself with, for instance, Roman ornament during an extensive continental tour of 1881–83, and in 1885; he started to teach freehand drawing, architectural styles, and building construction for architectural students in Helsinki (Tuomi & Paatero 1999, 7). The person who prepared the embroidery instructions with yarn samples remains unknown. Perhaps it was Sophie Snellman, who used French because her group of volunteer embroiderers included people who did not understand Swedish or Finnish.

The chair of the women's committee was not the only one who had reason to consider design by a famous artist important. It was also significant for those who implemented the design. In the late 19th century, women's handicraft did not try to approach art that much in the person of the maker, but rather within the traditional gender division of labour (Saló-Mattila 2000, 123). Especially in embroidery, the difference between a male head and female hands was clear

(Callen 1979, 97). The creativity of women's handicraft was seen in the implementation of the artist's intention (Callen 1979, 97), although since the 1830s, the ideal had been to unite art and craft in one person (Greenhalgh 1997, 25–26; Deane 1978, 220–223; Cumming & Kaplan 1991, 11–12; Frampton 1980, 9, 42–43; Salo-Mattila 2000, 33–34). Starting with the screen of 1885, there was a tendency at the Helsinki School of Handicraft to connect a design that was implemented for an exhibition with the name of an artist who was as famous as possible (Salo-Mattila 2000, 123).

## Conclusion

In the imperial visit of 1885, women's handicraft had an exceptionally important symbolic function. The prevailing differences in political attitudes showed in the gifts presented to the Empress. In the first destination of the visit, Lappeenranta, the textiles expressed the national romanticism of the Fennomans. In Helsinki, the screen reflected the international orientation of Finnish art, which was favoured by the liberals.

Through coats of arms and plant ornament, the screen represented the history and vitality of a nation loyal to the Emperor. Through embroidery, it expressed the dedication of women to the task of creating this gift to the Empress.

The composition of the screen combined a new way of depicting the Finnish coat of arms with an innovative way of using contemporary plant ornament as heraldic supporter. Its implementation as an embroidery reflected the high esteem that women attached to the realisation of an artist's design through their own handwork.

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Figure 1 – National Board of Antiquities, Finland, 10002: 466.

Figure 2 – Photograph: Valkonen & Svinhufvud 1999, 35. Empress boat: Nordiska museet, Stockholm.

Figure 3 – National Board of Antiquities, Finland, KM 32082.

Figure 4 – Photograph: Helsinki City Museum, Finland.

Figure 5 – Photograph: Kirsti Salo-Mattila.

Figure 6 – Photograph: Kirsti Salo-Mattila.

Figure 7 – Photograph: Helsinki University Museum, Finland.





# **Consuming and the collectable**

## The 'vintage community' in Bucharest: consumers and collectors

Maria Cristache

### Introduction

Over the past few years, a particular trend in clothes and accessory consumption has emerged in Romania that can be associated with certain lifestyles. Small-scale entrepreneurship manifests itself via blogs in which vintage items – from dresses and coats to bags, hats and jewellery – are sold, and in vintage fairs that are organised periodically, mainly in Bucharest. At the same time, a new category of consumer has emerged: these people are loyal customers of vintage shops, either virtual or 'ground', and they are a constant presence at vintage fairs or fashion shows. Being the main setting for these events in Romania, but still unexplored by anthropologists and sociologists, Bucharest was an obvious research site for my study.

Lipovsky (2007) discusses contemporary processes such as the consumer need for constant renewal and how products quickly become old-fashioned. The debate about fast fashion and how some retailers produce up to twelve collections a year is even more intense and controversial (Morgan & Birtwistle 2009). In light of these tendencies, buying and wearing used clothes may seem like an isolated practice, performed by a niche segment. Notwithstanding this, the increased popularity and visibility of this practice paints a different picture, making it an intriguing topic worthy of study.

However, the used clothing market in Romania has a longer history. The initial encounter that Romanians had with second-hand clothes was in the early 1990s, after the fall of communism when the first second-hand shops opened. The items were brought mostly from Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and England. After a period of embarrassment and reticence about wearing clothes that others no longer wanted, Romanians started to accept this practise since it was a way to get good quality clothes that were cheaper than what was available in normal shops. In addition, as this type of trade intensified the second-hand shops became more diverse. Apart from the small, 'neighbourhood shops' where

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Kannike, A. & Lavolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 158–171. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

prices are low but one has to dig into piles of clothes to find something suitable, larger and more organised shops have appeared. Here the selection is more careful and out-dated and worn out items are not sold, although the prices are higher.

In this context, looking at the emerging community of vintage vendors and buyers brings a legitimate need to define what vintage is and how is it different from second-hand. Is the vintage phenomenon just a facet of the organisation and growth of the second-hand market? Or is it a free-standing community? Thus, the first objective of my study<sup>1</sup> is to unravel the specificities of this group. How did this trend start? How is the quality of these items assessed and by whom? Second, I intend to look into the way vintage clothes are used: namely how issues raised by their accessibility and scarcity are dealt with.

On a general level, through my project I would like to bring insights into the broad fields of sociology of consumption and fashion studies, fields that are becoming established worldwide, but are not explored to their full potential in the Romanian context. Hence I think of my research as an exploration of a practice that is new in Romania with the hope that this will encourage further research on the topic. On a practical level, I intend to build profiles of the consumer and the vendor and also to determine a set of criteria in establishing the authenticity of vintage items. I believe this would serve the interests of the whole vintage community. Hence I start from the assumption that its members do not really know themselves as a community. So my study would possibly help to clarify a set of aspects composed of, but not limited to: organisation, authority, the needs of the consumers and suggestions for improvement.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: I will present the conceptual framework that lays at the basis of my empirical study and then the methodology I used. I will continue by discussing the findings of my study, which I have grouped under a series of topics: an overview of the buyers and vendors; the difference between vintage and second-hand; motivations and practices in vintage consumption; and wearing clothes from grandma's closet. I will finish with conclusions and suggestions for further research.

### **Vintage clothes: between commodities and collectibles**

This research draws on a series of theoretical approaches that emphasise the need to look at the diversity of consumption practises found between the poles of the dichotomy of modern mass consumption – luxury (Miller 2001a), and the idea that objects have a social life in which they move between the sphere of the commodity and non-commodity, depending on the temporal and cultural context (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986).



Miller (1998; 2001a; 2001b) points out the danger of taking for granted what consumption is, instead of working towards a definition of it by looking at the consumers and what they are doing with the objects after the acquisition. This involves thinking of consumption as a process or – in Campbell’s words – as “the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (Campbell 1995, 102). These ideas are germane for my study because the consumption of vintage clothing in Romania instantiates the diversity of consumption practises that Miller talks about and brings in the need to see what vintage means for various users (consumers, vendors, collectors) rather than assume a definition of it. Finally, I am also going beyond the moment of purchase by analysing the use, preservation and even discarding of clothes and accessories.

At the same time, the anthropological reflections on the social life of things (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) – specifically how objects enter and leave the commodity sphere depending on the time, the situation and the person who assesses the character of the item, and the concept of singularisation which refers to how individuals classify – that discriminate between things and take them out of the commodity phase (Kopytoff 1986, 73–77) are highly relevant for my research. This is because the vintage items as the focus of this study are objects with a long history and are perceived differently by the various actors in the Romanian context.

The first difference of perception is between those who consume vintage and those who do not. For the former, the age of the object is seen as a marker of its high status, called “patina” (Appadurai 1996; McCracken 1988), while for the latter it can be a downside. In addition, it is often difficult to distinguish between “old enough to be valuable” and “too old to be useful” (Appadurai 1996, 75), which leads to further differences of opinion when it comes to these items. For example, some of the respondents pointed to a conflict between them and their families, friends or acquaintances who considered vintage clothes merely old, ugly and not suitable to be worn in public.

The second difference lies precisely *within* this community of vintage advocates and relates to the way the buyers and the vendors perceive these objects. The consumption of vintage can be analysed using Baudrillard’s notion of “the quest for authenticity” exemplified with antiques as marginal objects that satisfy the need to recollect (nostalgia) and to escape the triviality of everyday life by going back and experiencing the past (Baudrillard 1996, 75–76).

This preference for antiques is similar to that for collecting, but often there are situations when the first is less systematised and organised, more a practice of consumption as opposed to collecting that makes its practitioner look more like an expert or connoisseur. This distinction between collectors and consumers is

also pertinent for my study since it becomes clear that the same vintage item can be placed in different stages of its social life, depending on its owner.

When it comes to the internal analysis of this community, particularly of what differentiates the consumers from the collectors, Bourdieu's reflections on the different forms of capital existent in a society and how these change into one another come in as useful tools (Bourdieu 1986, 46–50). More specifically, the consumption of vintage items is a pertinent example of how economic capital turns into cultural capital, since these are cultural goods that can be appropriated in the economic sense of the word, although a legitimate competence is necessary in order to appropriate them symbolically (Bourdieu 1986, 50). Depending on the amount of cultural capital they have in addition to economic capital, the members of this community can reach the status of experts in fashion and thus advance in this space of hierarchies that Bourdieu (1993) calls the "field".

The idea of the importance of cultural competence for obtaining the status of expert is also present in other studies about second-hand and vintage fashion (Cicolini 2005; Jenß 2005; Palmer 2005). For example, Palmer analyses how old clothes are now perceived as vintage or collectible and states that "the smart consumer can attain the status of a connoisseur, an achievement that mitigates against established associations of fashion consumption with irrational and hysterical feminine traits" (Palmer 2005, 200). Cicolini (2005, 399) adds that in the 21st century vintage "has become a distinguishing marker of cultural and economic capital" and a means of individualisation. Another example comes from Jenß's (2005, 183–184) study of a group of young Germans who dress in the style of the 1960s. In this case, knowledge about the history of fashion and the sources of original artefacts is essential for the performance of these users within their community.

## Methodology

The use of a qualitative methodology appeared as the best way to fulfil the objectives of this study since the nature of my research questions themselves implied the need to explore behaviours associated with certain roles, events, meetings and interactions thus making qualitative field research most appropriate in this situation (Lofland & Lofland 1995, 101–113 in Babbie 2001, 287). Therefore I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with people who buy clothes and accessories from blogs and/or from vintage fairs and also with people who sell these types of items. Altogether, I did 17 interviews, from which 11 were with buyers and 6 with vendors. I did the interviews in Bucharest, in May 2010. All

interviews were conducted in different bars and cafes in Bucharest and the answers were recorded by taking notes.

I selected the interviewees who formed the buyers' group from my network of friends and acquaintances. In this case, the main criterion of eligibility was the frequency of buying vintage clothes: I thought it was relevant to talk to people who buy these items on a regular basis, who have integrated this practice in their consumption habits. I had a series of predefined questions, but during the interview their answers raised additional questions and topics. The main subjects discussed during the interviews were: how they became interested in these types of items, blogs versus fairs as a favourite way of buying, the difficulties they meet as consumers of vintage, and what vintage means for them and how it is different from second-hand.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with vendors. However, in this case recruiting respondents was more difficult and the response rate was lower. I made a list of 38 Romanian blogs where vintage clothes are sold. I contacted the owners, via email, asking them if they were willing to answer a few questions. In the end, I managed to do 6 face-to-face interviews with vendors who agreed to meet me. The main topics discussed were: reasons to start this activity, advantages and disadvantages, their relationship with their clients, and the difference between vintage and second-hand.

### **An overview of the buyers and vendors**

The buyers of vintage I interviewed are women, currently living in Bucharest, in their 20s. They work in various areas, but in all cases their job requires graduate studies, such as advertising, research, medicine. Most of them started to buy vintage clothes quite recently: the earliest in 2003 and the latest in 2009. This observation is consistent with the answers given by the vendors, who said that they started their activities around the same time. In addition, most of the buyers associate their starting moment as vintage consumers and the consolidation of this practise as a habit with the moment when they started their graduate studies in Bucharest (most of them were not born in Bucharest).

The interviewees who sell vintage items are also women, in their 20s, working in Bucharest. They all sell vintage clothes and accessories through their blogs where they upload pictures of the items for sale, and at the fairs that take place periodically in the city. They are graduates or in the process of completing their studies, but in areas that are not directly connected with fashion (such as philology, sociology, medicine). Only one of the respondents is specialised in design and she sees her activity as a profession planning to further develop it. The others

see it more as a hobby that they plan to carry on, but not to expand into a more serious business, mainly because of lack of time and money.

As I expected, these vendors are also consumers of vintage, since, as one of them said, they could not sell something in which they did not believe. As users of vintage items, they have access to a larger amount of clothing and accessories (they estimated vintage making up to half of their wardrobe). This comes naturally since their job is to find and select clothes that they will either sell or keep. However, a common statement from the vendors was that they do not acquire any type of item for themselves, but that they prefer better pieces, like collectibles.

I only keep/buy 'pieces', not a type of vintage. I have dresses from the 50s and 70s ... and bags, a collection of metal bags from the 20s, hats and belts. I also have a lot of dresses that could be in a museum, I don't even wear them and I don't want to sell them, they are part of my personal collection (O., 5 May 2010).

In this way, vendors differentiate themselves from buyers; they place themselves on a somehow superior level based on their experience in the field, the access they have to a wider range of items and the ease with which they can obtain certain pieces of clothing. From their point of view, their clients are rather consumers of vintage while they like to see themselves as collectors. This contributes to seeing vintage items as the objectified cultural capital and the vintage community in Romania as a field where the position of each actor is determined by the amount and type of cultural competence possessed (Bourdieu 1993). In this case, the vendors have more cultural capital and social capital than the buyers, since they are part of a professional network that eases their access to vintage clothes and accessories and they also have a larger amount of knowledge about what makes a piece valuable and authentic.

### **Vintage versus second-hand**

Throughout the research it became apparent that, in the Romanian context, there is a heated debate about what vintage is and how it differs from second-hand. The opinions of various actors involved the following two main directions. Vintage clothes are either a 'luxury' category of second-hand, constituted through careful selection based on the decade of provenience, design, cut, and fabric; or there is merely a marketing difference between the two categories.

The first category of opinions define vintage as 'a selected second-hand', meaning that the sellers search through a large quantity of clothes and select what they

consider valuable vintage: garments with special cut and details and good quality fabric. Thus, second-hand shops are places where genuine 'vintage treasures' can be found, such as clothes from over half a century ago or the creations of famous designers. This observation is coherent with the history of buying and wearing used clothes in Western Europe and the USA, which reveals a systematisation of this practice. Specifically, as the interest in second-hand clothes grew, these items were moved from the market stalls onto the shelves of boutiques and were labelled vintage (Cicolini 2005, 399).

As expected, the decade of provenience is a decisive factor, although not the only one, when determining the difference between vintage and second-hand. Vendors reached a consensus that clothes made between the 1920s and 1960s are vintage, but there are still debates whether to consider those from the 1970s and 1980s vintage as well. Anyway, throughout the interviews I noticed that the respondents were not that strict about this temporal delimitation: they also used examples from the 1970s and 1980s when talking about vintage clothes.

In addition, an opinion shared by some of the respondents is that the value of a vintage piece is not given only by its age, but the item must have had value when it was new as well. For example, a piece of clothing that is the creation of a famous designer can be considered vintage even if it is not that old. "Vintage can be also a piece made by a well-known designer, something that was a statement in its year of release, even if it was 5 years ago," says O. (5 May 2010), one of the vendors I interviewed. This indicates the debatable definition of vintage, depending on the cultural context, an idea that is also present in Jenß's study about retro clothes in which some people see retro as a mixture of old and new, some as something exclusively old and others as something new that replicates an old design (Jenß 2005, 179).

The second set of opinions belongs to some of the buyers to whom I talked. They see the difference between the two categories as lying mainly in the way vintage clothes are promoted, in how certain characteristics are attributed to them. Vintage is expensive, second-hand is cheap. Vintage is more pretentious, second-hand more obscure, underground. People who share this opinion call vintage "marketed second-hand" or "nicely dressed second-hand" (in the sense of nicely presented), probably because they feel that vintage blogs offer clothes that they could find themselves in second-hand shops or at flea markets, clothes that have an unjustified high price only because they are labelled vintage.

## Motivations and practises in vintage consumption

Most of the interviewees pointed towards their passion for clothes, especially old clothes as the reason to become advocates of the vintage trend. Buyers often emphasised their wish to have a diversified wardrobe and a different style in clothes, and vintage fairs and online shops were the best means to get special items with minimum costs. For instance, one of the informants noticed with dissatisfaction that an overwhelming number of girls were wearing in that spring the same type of jacket – one that imitated leather – and pointed to the need to break this pattern by looking for clothes in places other than the shops of international fashion retailers. This is on a par with Lovász's observation from her essay on vintage dresses bought on eBay that these were cheaper than the ones created by famous designers and at the same time "didn't look exactly like the dress everyone else in town bought this month" (Lovász 2006, 286).

On a more practical level, vendors emphasised the need to make room in their closets by selling things they no longer needed. This confirms one of the assumptions with which I started my study: that selling vintage clothes and accessories started as a rather informal and unregulated practice and is becoming more and more systematised, as the number of blogs and fairs increases.

When it comes to the sources of acquisition, most of the people I talked to chose fairs as their favourite way of obtaining vintage clothes and accessories. The first set of advantages has a practical nature: they can see, touch and try on the clothes, thus being able to determine the quality of the fabric and spot possible flaws. This is not the case for blogs, where buyers only see pictures of the items before buying them and sometimes find themselves in the situation where what they get is different from what they expected. The vintage fairs also attract several vendors, which diversifies what is on offer and decreases the prices. On the other hand, buying clothes from blogs means having someone do things instead of you – going to the shop, gathering information and selecting the items – and this increases the price.

The second set of reasons is more connected to the emotions and beliefs of the buyers. Fairs create a pleasant environment in which people become more involved in the buying process: they search through the piles of clothes and select what they like themselves. Moreover, some of them say that they experience a feeling of participating in some kind of "ritual". This description offered by the buyers is in line with the idea that participating in vintage fairs recreates the experience of a treasure hunt. In this way the feeling of fulfilment when buying an object increases, and the longer and more difficult the search is, the more authentic the result is considered to be (Steiner 1995, 152 in Palmer 2005, 203).

The description of fairs given by one of the respondents encompasses most of the characteristics discussed above:

I prefer fairs, first of all because I see exactly what I buy, no surprises of any kind, and also because wearing vintage – in general – requires imagination [...] you have to see the item that you buy in an outfit, it has to talk to you [...] buying things from a website deprives you of the majority of aspects related to buying and – especially – wearing vintage (G., 16 May 2010).

In my respondents' view, comfort seems to be the only virtue of buying vintage online: you do not have to go to thousands of shops to find what you want; it is enough to browse through the websites while at work or home. As Jenß (2005, 184) points out, this creates a different experience of consuming vintage and is a sign of the democratisation of fashion.

One of the most popular reasons for wearing and buying vintage is the uniqueness of the items – not necessarily in the sense that no similar items were ever produced, but more that due to their age, there is no risk of someone having the same piece. This uniqueness contributes to the individualisation of the buyers and gives them the feeling of escaping the ordinary: “These clothes make you look more bohemian, romantic, sophisticated,” says E., one of the interviewees. This advantage becomes more prominent and powerful when coupled with the accessibility of the price: vintage clothes are less expensive than the new clothes commonly found in the shops and their price is also convenient when thinking about the quality of the items.

However, there is something that can be called the reverse of the advantage of uniqueness, a disadvantage perceived by the buyers and acknowledged by the vendors as well. Since these clothes are so rare, buying and wearing them raises several issues. There is often only one size available, some items come with flaws that introduce the need to modify and adjust them. However, buyers have to accept these inconveniences if they want to obtain valuable pieces. Uniqueness also brings problems of accessibility and scarcity since finding these items frequently involves the laborious activity of searching in scattered places that are not always easy to reach.

When asked about the manner of wearing vintage, all the people I interviewed agreed that the best way is to combine new items with vintage clothes and accessories. This means that normal shops, where new pieces of clothing are sold, are not to be disregarded. First of all because recently produced items can still be original and of good quality, and secondly because they can contribute to the creation of inspired outfits that combine old and new.

Two other observations support the idea that vintage is meant to be worn in such combinations. First, most of the buyers estimated 20–30% of their wardrobe to be vintage, meaning that these items cannot be used other than together with new clothes. Second, the vendors indicated that vintage accessories (bags, belts, hats, jewellery) are the most sought-after products, probably used to accessorise 'normal' clothing.

Nevertheless, in order to make successful combinations one must be daring, imaginative, and also have the necessary knowledge and competence when picking the items and creating an outfit. Through this practice, vintage consumers prove that they are original and receptive, but at the same time selective in a way that brings them closer to the status of a professional in fashion. From this point of view, vintage clothes can be seen as what Bourdieu calls the objectified form of cultural capital because they are transmissible in their materiality, although they must be appropriated in a specific way; more precisely users must learn "the means of 'consuming' the objectified cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986, 50). This is very much the case for the consumers of vintage. They can easily become possessors, in the economic sense, of these old and rare objects, but they also must find a way to appropriate them in a symbolic way, by learning how to wear them without being distasteful.

More specific observations about how vintage clothes are consumed touch on the occasions on which these are worn and the existence and justification of a favourite vintage piece. Most of the respondents integrate vintage items in their everyday outfits, rarely buying something for a special event. This happens mainly because of the limited range of styles and sizes which often leads to the situation in which the consumer buys a garment that is suited only for some occasions even if he/she does not need it for a particular event.

When it comes to favourite pieces, two categories of objects are shaped: first, pieces that are chosen strictly by aesthetic criteria (beautiful, special, rare, of good quality). The respondents themselves usually bought these. O. describes in detail her "latest favourite object":

It is a beauty case purse. I like its shape, fabric, how it closes, it makes me think of the 50s. I like its shape because I like geometrical shapes very much. Plus, you can see that the leather is rubbed, the metal a little bit worn-out, you can see the patina (18 May 2010).

Second, there are cases when the sentimental value prevails over the aesthetic when choosing the favourite item. These are objects inherited from the mother or grandmother or received as a gift. In this sense, G. describes a silver necklace:



“My mum got it when she was 18 and she gave it to me when I turned 18 and it has a huge sentimental value” (16 May 2010). This observation shows how an object becomes an intermediate between two people. It has to be associated with a close friend or relative in order to be valued by more than aesthetic criteria.

### **Wearing clothes from ‘grandma’s closet’**

As my research was inspired to a large extent by the observation that women are very interested in clothes that belonged to older family members (grandmothers, mothers), I wanted to find out more about this practice. Almost all the women I talked to said that they started by wearing clothes that belonged to older relatives and that they still liked to do this because thus they “steal something from the aura of the person who had them before”. Only one respondent said that she did not do this, not because she was not interested, but because she had no access to them.

Going further, I tried to explore how the people I interviewed relate to these ‘inherited’ clothes and accessories by asking them if they modify them in any way. A large number of the consumers stated that they did not modify them or they intervened to a minimum level (to adjust the size) mainly because they did not have the required skills to do more. There were still a few people who emphasised their interest in ‘playing’ with the style of these clothes in order to modernise them, make them more suited to their own style or simply exercise their creativity. For example, G. explained how she started modifying clothes and how her mother reacted to this:

Ever since I understood how my grandma’s sewing machine works I modified almost all I could find, in order to modernise various pieces of clothing. I did most of the changes on skirts and I still do this even when I buy new ones. In the beginning my mother was protesting when she saw that, again, I’m modifying her old clothes [...] in time she started to actively take part in my projects (16 May 2010).

Vendors, on the other hand, relate quite differently to these pieces from ‘grandma’s closet’. Most of the girls see them as valuable objects that should not be changed unless one has solid knowledge in fashion and design. “I don’t want to interfere, I would ruin the model,” says one of them. Others are even more involved in this topic on an emotional level and use phrases like: “it would hurt me to change them,” “modifying vintage clothes is a small sacrilege,” “they would lose their charm”.

This idea together with the observation from the previous section about vendors who acquire special and rare items that they treat as collectibles makes the relationship between the vendors and the vintage clothes comparable to that between an owner and his/her collection. Acquired vintage pieces as well as those inherited from older relatives are taken out of the economic circuit and protected from external factors that could damage them (Pomian 1990, 9). They are what Baudrillard (1994, 7) called "objects of passion", which gain a new meaning and are endowed with a certain value when they become the property of the collector.

At the same time, these vendor practises point towards the process of singularisation (Kopytoff 1986, 73–77), which describes the human tendency to classify, to discriminate between things, and to take them out of the commodity sphere. Thus, the vintage clothes and accessories that the vendors preserve with such care indicate a stage in the social life of an object. They have moved from the stage of commodities by destination, "objects intended by their producers principally for exchange", to that of ex-commodities, "things retrieved, either temporarily or permanently, from the commodity state and placed in some other state" (Appadurai 1986, 16).

## Conclusions

This study aimed to describe and analyse the community of vintage consumers and buyers in Bucharest. I tried to determine how vintage is defined mainly – but not only – in relation to second-hand and also wanted to look into the ways vintage clothes are used in situations that raise issues of accessibility and scarcity.

The first conclusion is that the manner in which they acquire and wear vintage clothes and accessories makes the followers of this trend gain the status of fashion experts. They invest more time and effort in the whole process of buying and assembling pieces to make an outfit and they do not settle for the prefabricated outfits that they see in the shops, on TV or in fashion magazines. This makes vintage items an objectified form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), indicating that it is not enough to be appropriated in its materiality because there is also a specific way of 'consuming' it.

This is also one of the reasons why vintage consumers prefer fairs over buying online, because by going to fairs the feeling of involvement in the whole process is more intense. If they simply bought clothes from websites, where the pieces are already selected, their expert status would be undermined since they would let someone else do the 'work' instead of them. In addition, by combining old with new or by accessorising new outfits with vintage elements they gain and maintain the status of expert. On the whole, this description of vintage consumers is an

accurate illustration of the importance of seeing consumption as a process that extends beyond the moment of purchase because it looks into the specific ways these objects are used (Miller 2001a; Miller 2001b; Campbell 1995).

In what concerns the vendors, both the way in which they behave as buyers of vintage clothes and how they treat clothes inherited from their mothers and grandmothers makes them seem rather to be collectors than consumers of vintage. They only buy what one of the respondents called “pieces” – rarer or more special items. Sometimes they buy, out of pure passion, clothes that cannot be worn because they are too old or are inappropriate for today. In addition, they see the clothes from ‘grandma’s closet’ rather like art objects and are reluctant to modify them, fearing that this would ruin their original charm and beauty.

A third conclusion concerns the definition of vintage and what distinguishes it from second-hand. An opinion shared by the majority of respondents is that vintage is a ‘luxury’ category of second-hand, a selected second-hand based on criteria like age, fabric, cut and design. The decade of origin is an important factor, but not the only one in deciding to label something as vintage. There are situations in which an item is considered vintage because it is a famous creation, a reference piece in fashion.

The study presented here is just a first step in the exploration of this phenomenon in Romania. Further research could reveal more detailed information about the manner in which vintage items are used and about the larger scale significance of these items in Romanian society. An ethnographic approach would be highly recommended for this: spending time with the consumers at their homes and on various social occasions, accompanying them to the vintage fairs they attend and also following the daily activities of the vendors would help an understanding of the specificities of this phenomenon.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This research would not have been possible without the goodwill and cooperation of my respondents, vendors and buyers of vintage clothes and accessories, who shared their opinions and experiences with me.

## **The visual form of newspapers as a guide for information consumption**

Roosmarii Kurvits

This paper examines how the visual form of Estonian general information newspapers has guided the reception of information by readers. The visual form together with the linguistic text creates the overall meaning of a newspaper.

I argue that over the course of time the visual form of newspapers has began to guide the reader's informational choices to a greater extent. This process has changed the relationship between the reader and the newspaper; control over information retrieval has increasingly transferred from the reader to the producer. Readers are expected to be less active in information taming (choosing, reading, interpreting) while newspapermen become more active and undertake increasingly more responsibility for readers' choices.

Estonian material is particularly interesting for this kind of research because of the rapid and radical social changes within a relatively short period, diversity of cultural and social influences (Estonia as a 'melting pot' of Baltic German, Russian and Nordic influences) and the importance of newspapers for the development of national identity.

### **Theoretical model: material textuality, data and method**

The visual characteristics of printed publications have usually been studied and analysed separately from the linguistic text – as a part of graphic design (e.g. Meggs & Purvis 2012, first edition by Meggs in 1983) or as an art of typography, influenced mostly by technological developments (e.g. McMurtrie 2012 [1937]; Chappell & Bringhurst 1999 [1970]<sup>1</sup>; Hutt 1973). During the last twenty years, scholars of different scientific disciplines have created models which indicate that the meaning of the text is contained not only in words but also in the physical or material form which is used to convey linguistic text.

Jerome McGann introduced the concept of materiality of text, pointing out that text is not exclusively linguistic. He proposed a dual division for a more comprehensive study of textuality, analysing text as “a laced network of linguistic and bibliographic codes” (McGann 1991, 13). Linguistic codes are contained in

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 172–203. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

actual words, and bibliographic codes in typography, binding, and page format. The text is transmitted by both codes, which combine to create the overall meaning of the text (McGann 1991, 13, 57, 67; Mussell 2012, 70–71).

George Bornstein introduced ‘material textuality’ as an umbrella term that highlights “the physical features of the text that carry semantic weight and the multiple forms in which texts are physically created and distributed” (Bornstein 2001, 1).<sup>2</sup> Thus material textuality also includes the appearance or visual form of the text, which is the objective of the current article.

Researchers of literary magazines have proposed a more precise specification for magazine research and discuss a particular subset of bibliographic codes – the periodical codes, i.e. devices related to the periodicity of magazines. Periodical codes include *inter alia* page layout, typographic features, use of illustrations and advertisements – in short, typography, design and layout of magazines (Brooker & Thacker 2009, 6).

A similar ‘materialist turn’ (Brooker & Thacker 2009, 5) has occurred in the research into newspapers over the last ten to fifteen years. Instead of separately analysing verbal texts (i.e. stories) and visual texts (i.e. photos, caricatures), researchers have begun to explore the content of newspapers in a more comprehensive and integral way, trying to bridge the dichotomy of verbal and visual information. Thus, this kind of analysis of the newspaper content includes linguistic text, pictures, and also their physical appearance referred to as the ‘visual form’ or simply ‘form’. Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone indicate that “[f]orm includes the things that are traditionally labelled layout and design and typography; but it also includes habits of illustration, genres of reportage, and schemes of departmentalization”, and consequently form gives a newspaper a ‘visible structure’ (Barnhurst & Nerone 2001, 3).

This kind of research interprets the visual form of newspapers as a social construction. Not narrowly as a form of graphic design or a part of art history, but as a form of social history, a universal cultural reflection of the newspaper’s contemporary social environment. Thus the visual form of newspapers reflects the role and functions of journalism in contemporary society, as well as journalistic practices and technological developments. In conclusion, the transformation of the visual form of newspapers signals the conceptual changes of society and journalism.

Barnhurst and Nerone introduced this approach to newspaper research,<sup>3</sup> analysing the history of news in North American newspapers through design and textual forms, and relating the changes of visual form to the changes of civic culture<sup>4</sup> (Barnhurst & Nerone 2001; Nerone & Barnhurst 2001; 2003; see also Barnhurst 1994). This kind of analysis, in which linguistic text, pictures and visual

presentation modes constitute an intertwined unity has also been used to analyse European newspapers (see Broersma 2007a; Rupar 2010a).

Newspapers are very much the products of their time, influenced by their contemporary social environment and addressed to the readers of that moment. On the basis of the visual form of newspapers, scholars have made implications about contemporary journalism and society, i.e. about the sender of the media message, about information production and about the media environment. However, the visual form of the newspaper also reflects another 'end' of the information process – the receiver of information. Newspaper form shows how the newspaper approaches the reader: how the reader is presumed to use the newspaper. "Through its [newspaper's] arrangement of articles, departmentalization, typography and use of graphic elements such as photos, drawings and charts, the number and the size of articles and headlines, a newspaper expresses how it wants to be read" (Broersma 2010, 21–22).

This notion is the point of departure of my current paper. Newspapers have a potential to provide insight into their consumption and "can say a great deal about the behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of the people who used [read] them" (Hughes et al 2004, 89). I will consider how Estonian newspapers with their visual characteristics have addressed their readers in the course of two hundred years. I will interpret the theoretical conception of material textuality from the novel point of view exploring how the visual form has influenced the interaction between the newspaper as an informational artefact and the reader.

This relationship is the focus of the current analysis. Previous academic research into the visual form of newspapers has sometimes mentioned the existence of this kind of interaction (e.g. Barnhurst & Nerone 2001; Hughes et al 2004; Broersma 2010), but so far there is no systematic methodical longitudinal study of how newspapers imagine their readers' interests and reading habits, *how* a "newspaper expresses how it wants to be read" (Broersma 2010, 22). On the basis of previous research (Kurvits 2008; 2010) I draw on five visual parameters in my current analysis:

- the size of the page;
- the structure of the newspaper issue (i.e. the topical sequence and patterns of information segmentation);
- the structure of the page (i.e. linear or spatial juxtaposition of elements; balanced or focused page structure);
- the headlines (their presence, formulation and size);
- visuals, i.e. line art illustrations and photographs (their presence and quantity).

The data was compiled using content analysis and visual qualitative analysis (for details see Kurvits 2010). I interpret the existing data in the framework of

the theoretical conception of material textuality, focusing on one side of the interaction between newspapers and the people who read newspapers – the visual form of newspapers.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the aforementioned visual factors say implicitly to a reader *how to use the newspaper*: what is the expected reading path, how to relate the bits of information to each other and how to interpret them, is there any piece of information that needs to be considered more important than any other.

The results of contemporary experimental studies<sup>6</sup> point out that readers process newspaper information according to visual clues: bigger elements attract readers' attention first; pictures and graphics are the main entry points to stop glancing and start reading the story that the entry point belongs to; visually coded information hierarchies guide readers' attention processes (e.g. Garcia & Stark 1991; Holmqvist et al 2003; Bucher & Schumacher 2006; Quinn et al 2007). These studies have been conducted over the last twenty years but I assume that the cognitive nature of people's reading practices was fundamentally the same also two hundred years ago – the visual form of newspaper gave its signals, and readers responded to visual stimuli and read the newspapers accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

My interpretations are based on empirical data collected from core Estonian-language general newspapers which have been published since 1806 (for a more detailed review see Kurvits 2010). The newspapers are chosen according to three principles. First, I analyse only print newspapers, not online newspapers as their materiality is totally different. Second, I analyse only general interest newspapers, i.e. the newspapers which give topical and timely ordinary information to common audiences. Initially these newspapers were weeklies, then, since the beginning of the 20th century, dailies. I do not analyse special interest newspapers (e.g. culture weekly *Sirp ja Vasar / Reede / Kultuurileht / Sirp*, published since 1940) or contemporary news weeklies (e.g. *Maaleht* (1987–), *Eesti Ekspress* (1988–)) as these newspapers are relatively recent phenomena of Estonian journalism, and their content and design are different compared to general information dailies. Third, the analysed newspapers are chosen according to their central role in Estonian media and society – these are big mainstream nation-wide newspapers – with consideration given to their temporal continuity.

### **The visual form of newspapers and suggested reading patterns**

The following analysis is structured chronologically. The whole two-hundred-year period is divided into five sub-periods according to the changing visual form of newspapers, which also brought about the changes in audience reading patterns.



### Book-like newspapers (the first half of the 19th century)

The first Estonian-language newspapers appeared at the beginning of the 19th century (*Tarto maa rahwa Näddali-Leht* 1806; *Marahwa Näddala-Leht* 1821–1825) when almost all Estonians were peasants working for Baltic German landlords; however the territory of Estonia belonged to the Russian Empire (for historical background see Raun 2001, 37ff). Estonian newspapers were published and edited by Baltic German Estophiles wishing to enlighten and educate their Estonian fellow countrymen (see Høyer et al 1993; Aru 2002).

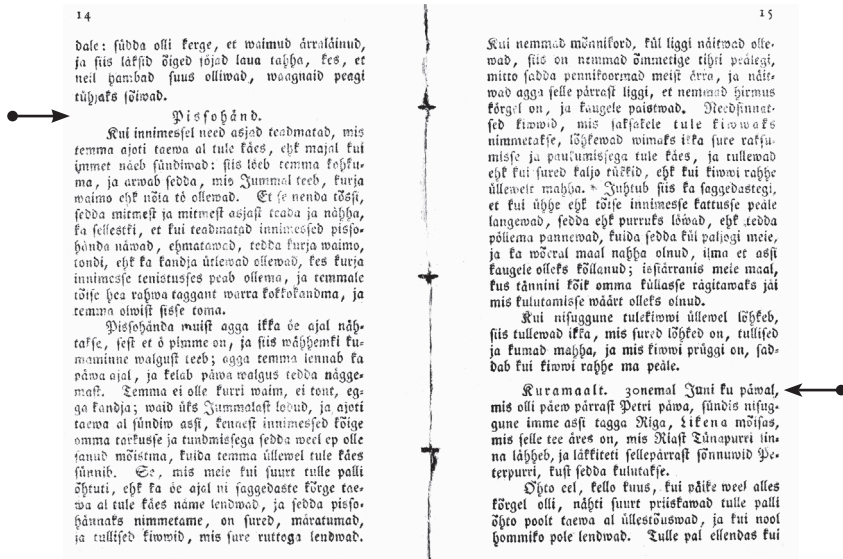
The initial Estonian newspapers presented information like contemporary books (see Figure 1). They used a small page size (approximately A5, later A4). Their content was structured linearly – single-column elements followed each other from column to column and from page to page. The structure of the page at this juncture was irrelevant because one-dimensionally linear allocation of stories did not take into consideration the existence of pages; indeed the borders of pages interrupted the stories at random.

Only longer stories had headlines. News stories did not have headlines, they were divided into sub-divisions labelled with topical headings. Headlines as well as headings were small and visually weak, scarcely bigger than text type. Pictures were published very rarely and at random. Approximately 80–85% of editorial space was given to verbal content (i.e. body text) and the remaining 15–20% was used to structure and present the body text, i.e. for white space, lines and borders and a few headings and headlines (Kurvits 2010, 106).

Newspaper issues were numbered as one unit throughout the year. Single issues of newspapers could not be bought, the reader could only acquire an annual or semi-annual subscription to a newspaper.

In conclusion, the visual form shows that newspapers identified themselves as a subset of books (for more details see Kurvits 2008; 2010, 144–161).

In the context of production, linguistic information in a newspaper was not reprocessed in order to be accommodated into a newspaper issue. For example, if the story was too long and could not fit into the newspaper issue, it was continued in the next issue a week later. Otto Wilhelm Masing, the editor of *Marahwa Näddala-Leht*, wrote the newspaper like a serial novel; sometimes the print shop accumulated nine or ten weeks' supply of newspaper manuscript. "Please let me know in good time, when the manuscript will run out," Masing wrote to Johann Heinrich Rosenplänter (the printer) on 6 May 1825 (Masing 1997, 97–98). In short, the newspaper was like a yearbook printed and distributed in weekly 'doses'.



**Figure 1.** *Marahwa Näddala-Leht*, 12 January 1821, 14–15 (50% of original size). Book-like newspaper is visually dense and monotonous. A headlined story about a meteorite begins in the upper part of the left hand page (first arrow). In the lower part of the right hand page, a news story begins without a headline (second arrow).

*How did this newspaper guide the reader?* The monotonous and dense visual form implicitly set its own conditions for interaction between the reader and the newspaper.

Firstly, information was presented mainly verbally and this code could not be understood swiftly, momentarily and by everyone. Understanding of this abstract code required special training, concentration and time. It is significant that the peasant (i.e. Estonian-language) newspapers looked like the contemporary elite (i.e. German-language) newspapers which were meant for Baltic Germans. Thus the visual form of initial newspapers implicitly equated the reading serfs with their reading masters.<sup>8</sup> Still, there was one revealing difference: the text type of Estonian newspapers was bigger than that of Baltic German newspapers (12p versus 10p). The larger type aided the peasants (as new readers) who were being introduced and accustomed to reading.

Secondly, the monotonous visual form gave somewhat contradictory instructions to the readers. On the one hand, the content was mainly verbal and presented linearly; this implicitly defined the ‘right’ reading path of the newspaper

issue – from the beginning to the end. Readers had no choice, they had to perceive the information in an order that had been decided for them. On the other hand, the monotonous visual form did not point towards either more important or less important information. It gave the reader a lot of freedom to interpret the information in their own terms.

Thirdly, such a newspaper presumed that the reader had time for reading, as the content of newspaper was without apparent emphases and highlights. The majority of stories appeared without headlines, and only a few geographical and topical labels assisted information retrieval (e.g. “Sannumed ommalt maalt”, “Sannumed wõeralt maalt”, “Sannumed põloharrimisset” (“News from our own land”, “News from foreign lands”, “Farming news”). In order to get a review of information, the newspaper issue had to be read from the beginning to the end. This was quite a reasonable expectation as the newspaper issue was only four or eight pages long and appeared once a week. We can see that newspapers were still a subset of books, encouraging Estonians’ reading habits through timely and topical information which was presented similarly to the contemporary popular books (the Bible, the Psalter, school textbooks, calendars).

Such a newspaper, in which the visual form did not have much emphasis and did not attempt to stimulate the reader’s interest in the content of the newspaper, had to assume that readers were interested in the newspaper and they were enthusiastic, active participants in the communication process, able and willing to acquire and interpret information.

This type of newspaper was well suited for reading aloud (oral delivery and aural reception). Listening gave as good a review of the content as reading, because the content was composed by the editor as one unsegmented linguistic narrative, visually coded emphases were uniform, and there were few pictures. Newspaper information was regularly double-coded as visually emphasised verbal information (i.e. section labels) was also repeated in small print. For example, the section label “News from foreign lands” was followed by editor’s introductory/explanatory sentence: “Now, let’s go across our border to a foreign land and see how things have gone in the last week”<sup>9</sup> (*Perno Postimees*, 19 October 1860, 326). This kind of presentation encouraged reading as a social activity, one person reading to others in a group.

The early newspapers suggested multiple readings, even years after being published. Newspaper issues were numbered consecutively through the year, table of contents and title pages for the year were printed at the end of the year. Thus, the visual form of the newspaper implicitly suggested that newspaper issues established a yearbook: issues were meant to be bound and kept and read as annual volumes. Bound volumes of *Marahwa Näddala-Leht* (1821–1825) continued

to be sold for almost two decades after the demise of the newspaper (Peegel et al 1994, 64). The first Estonian newspapers were arguably read in the same manner as favoured books. For example, the journalist Hindrik Prants recalled that when he learned to read as a small boy in the middle of the 1860s, among his favourite literature were the 40-year-old volumes of *Marahwa Näddala-Leht* (Prants 2010 [1937], 56).

### Linear newspapers (the 1850s–1910s)

At the end of the 1850s, the first visual division was introduced into Estonian newspapers: editorial content and paid content were visually separated (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

The editorial content was still presented quite modestly, but the design of the paid content became visually stronger and more accentuated. Every announcement was separated from others by a line. Typographically emphasised keywords and small wood engraved pictures were used to attract readers' attention.

During the 1870s, three constitutive changes occurred in the visual form of the newspaper. Firstly, the pages almost doubled in size (approximately from A4 to A3), page numbers were no longer used, and the annual tables of content and title pages were abandoned. These changes clearly distinguished the newspaper from other printed work.

Secondly, the paid content was visually divided into two parts. Some announcements were designed more prominently and strongly, using bigger keywords, pictures, lines and frames, white space and multicolumn setting. Thus, advertising was introduced into Estonian newspapers. As a result, the visual form of paid content became hierarchical. Institutional announcements were presented as display advertisements; they were large and visually more salient. Private announcements were presented as classified advertisements; they were small and compressed.

Thirdly, editorial content was also, as the *feuilleton* was introduced, visually divided into two parts. Here a spatial visual strategy was used for division, as opposed to the hierarchical one for paid content. A horizontal line across the page was introduced and used to structure the information according to its content. Newspaper-specific topical information, such as news, leader comment, and economic reference material was located above the line. The space beneath the line was the *feuilleton* where there was timeless general information, such as cultural texts like serial novels, travelogues, poetry, human interest briefs (for more details see Kurvits 2008; 2010, 162–203).





*How did the late-19th century newspaper guide the reader?* Primarily, the newspaper provided the reader with the opportunity to choose a starting point according to his or her interests.

Firstly, as the editorial content and paid content were clearly differentiated, the reader could at a glance discern which voices were speaking, the editor or other people (in the paid content). The visual form of newspaper encouraged the reader to look and read the paid content first because it was more salient.

Secondly, visual hierarchy was the noticeable characteristic of the paid content. It guided the reader in a novel way as it implicitly indicated that the importance of various pieces of information on display was not equal. It is significant that a visual hierarchy was introduced in the paid content, showing that the idea to rank information and to direct readers' attention was introduced to newspapers because of economic development and economic stratification, not because of the editorial ideas of newspapermen. The introduction of the hierarchy clearly indicates the beginning of the transformations of the newspaper from an educational forum to a market driven enterprise, and of Estonian society from feudal to capitalist.

Thirdly, the visual form of the editorial content offered readers two clearly defined starting points: topical material (above the line); culture and 'lighter' content (below the line). The visual form of the feuilleton simply separated the two types of content and did not provide any clues about the importance of either starting point. This approach, by inviting the readers to freely define their own path through the content, shows that the readers were perceived as active and equal participators in the communication process who were able to make choices and decisions for themselves.

### **Hierarchical newspapers (the 1920s–1930s)**

With the collapse of the Russian empire in World War I, Estonians declared their independent state in February 1918. However, peace was established only in February 1920, after the War of Independence against Soviet Russia (for historical background see Raun 2001, 99ff).

During the 1920s, six core conceptual changes were introduced into the form of Estonian newspapers (for more details see Kurvits 2008; 2010, 204–239).

First, the most important change was the consistent use of multicolumn and variously sized elements, primarily headlines and text blocks. More important stories acquired a longer body text, bigger and wider headlines, sub-headlines; these stories were also segmented by text-breakers<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 3). The use of multicolumn elements (headlines, visuals, stories) made the structure of the





newspaper page non-linear and two-dimensional: stories did not follow each other linearly but were juxtaposed side by side; more important stories were located at the top of page. The page structure was visually balanced, without a clear focal point.

Secondly, the stories no longer continued from page to page, thus enabling the pages to develop into separate comprehensive visual entities. Although visual completeness was achieved, substantive completeness was absent as many different themes were juxtaposed on each of the large pages. The main selection criteria for news stories were their interest factor and social importance (e.g. state rituals and political events were emphasised).

Thirdly, the content of the newspaper issue was structured differently. The topical news was set in the spotlight of the 'front stage'. News started the newspaper issue and had the most salient headlines and photos. Enlightening and advisory stories were located on the back pages and their presentation was visually weaker. The content of enlightening stories also changed from being mainly educational (e.g. how to keep farm accounts) to being consumption oriented (e.g. the latest fashions).

Fourthly, the presentation of the content of newspapers fundamentally changed. Previously the stories were presented as uniform mass, segmented by a few small (geographical and topical) labels (e.g. "Estonian news"/"Foreign news"). Now the stories were presented individually, each story had its own headline which brought forward the essence of the event not simply its topic. Bigger stories were presented by multi-level headlines which highlighted the several important perspectives of the event. For example, one story was headlined "Catastrophe in Tartu glass factory. A storm flung the 24 metre chimney onto the factory building. Six workers fell under the debris" (*Postimees*, 25 January 1935, 1); ten years earlier this story would have been titled as "In Tartu factory" or "Accident". The novel formulation of headlines enabled the emphasis of a few pertinent facts for readers.

Fifth, photos and illustrations became a daily component of newspapers and were a new kind of information in both content and perception. On the one hand, pictures convey realities and emotions as opposed to abstractions. On the other, readers perceive pictures differently from linguistic information as there is no need to understand the conventional abstract code – visual information is interpreted analogously. Images are perceived and understood at a glance without linear reading. (For theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence see for example Arnheim 1974; Barthes 1977; Paivio 1986; Garcia & Stark 1991; Messaris & Abraham 2001; Becker 2003 [1992]; Hagan 2007; Horstkotte & Pedri 2008.)

As a result of introducing individual and variously sized headlines as well as photos and line art illustrations, information was presented fundamentally differently from previous periods. Approximately one third of editorial space was used to promote and structure editorial content (6–7% of space was given to photographs and line art illustrations; 25% was used for headlines, sub-headlines, labels and logos, but also for white space, lines and borders which connected and disconnected all the other elements). Two thirds of editorial space was given to core linguistic content (i.e. story body text) (Kurvits 2010, 107).

Sixth, the typography of newspapers became more varied. The headlines as well as body text were set in various typefaces which had stylistically different designs and different sizes.

The visual form of display advertising had become more salient (bigger display typefaces, more pictures). But the visual difference between advertising and editorial content had decreased as the visual form of editorial content had adapted the same devices that were previously used exclusively in advertising (e.g. visuals, variously sized typefaces, multicolumn elements). Still, advertisements were visually stronger than editorial content, and their importance was also strengthened by their striking location on the front pages and in the midst of the stories.

In the context of production, the novel visual form also set a few demands on the linguistic content of the newspaper, mostly involving the creation of informational highlights according to a preset structural template. For example, the length of headlines of the bigger news stories needed to match the parameters set by the column widths (e.g. a three-column headline had to fill in the entire width of three columns). This means that these headlines were formulated according to the visual ‘demands’ in order to ‘cover’ the spatial width of the respective story. There were not, however, any rigid demands about the length of the stories as the layout could be adjusted accordingly. For example, if a longer story did not fit as a perfect multicolumn rectangle, the last column was filled with random briefs or the end of the story was folded into the next column, outside the rectangle. In conclusion, the content of visually emphasised verbal texts was slightly revised, trimmed and reprocessed in order to package it better.

*How did the interwar newspaper guide the reader?* The newspaper displayed the information using contrast and hierarchy. Thus the visual form of the newspaper suggested a selective method of reading, concentrating on highlighted elements, and perhaps skimming or skipping other information. Journalists had already made some decisions for the reader: they had determined and formulated what was the more important information (using declarative and summarising

headlines), they had also emphasised the more important information visually (via the story's position in the newspaper issue and on the page, and via the size of the headline). Now there was no need to read the entire newspaper issue word for word to get a quick review of the newspaper content. This was a reasonable transformation, as newspapers appeared more frequently (daily, not weekly) and had grown larger (the average page count had increased from four to ten).

The interwar newspaper suited solo reading; it was not meant to be read aloud in a group. This was not a readers' or listeners' newspaper, but a viewers' newspaper. The newspaper not only had to be read but also witnessed and experienced, in order to get a proper review of its content and the world behind it. Information was visually coded and as this code was not contained in linear linguistic text, it had to be retrieved analogously by the readers' eyes. For example, the photos and line art illustrations had to be looked at, while the importance of stories was implicitly indicated by their juxtaposition on the page and by the size of their headlines. The heterogeneous visual form, varied typography and large page-size indicated that the world was complex, eventful and unexpected, with many different events occurring at the same time.

This kind of newspaper was meant to be a disposable object (i.e. it was not for keeping or re-reading). Topical newsstories were the core of daily newspaper and their visual form enabled quick acquisition of information. These facts show that the newspaper was meant to be consumed at once and on the spot. The general information daily consequently had a brief 'shelf-life' of no more than the day of publication and purchase.

In conclusion, newspaper's visual form indicates that this kind of publication wanted to attract broader audiences. The content and sequence of information was changed: newsstories were the heart of the newspaper, visuals brought in novel emotional and analogous information, for which interpretation was intuitive and did not require special training. In addition, the information was reprocessed by journalists in order to make it more easily understandable and retrievable for the readers, e.g. headlines summarised the main points of news stories, and the size of the headlines indicated the importance of the news.

### **Soviet party-line hierarchical newspapers (the 1940s–1980s)**

In 1940, Estonia was incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (for historical background see Raun 2001, 149ff). The media was nationalised and subject to strict totalitarian control by the state authorities (see Høyer et al 1993).

Notwithstanding this, the nature of the visual form of newspapers did not change much. Soviet newspaper issues were shorter (four pages) and their form

was simpler and visually 'flatter': the stories became longer, the structure of pages was simplified, design and size of the typefaces were less varied, headlines became shorter and their formulation was less specific and less detailed, sub-headlines and text-breakers were used more seldom and the amount of visuals decreased (for details see Kurvits 2010, 240–289).

At the same time, the sequence and accentuation of different topics were dramatically changed. Because the Soviet form of newspapers was ideologised, it emphasised state events, official resolutions, documents, etc., and de-emphasised news. This hierarchy was implemented through topical sequence and visual highlighting. On the front page, ideologically important information was presented with large, bold and uniformly repeated headlines. The news was squeezed onto the back pages, was short and presented with small headlines (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The entertainment and consumer contents (comic strips, serial novels, film scene sections, the women's sections) were omitted. Instead, newspapers gave instructions on when to plough and sow (literally, not metaphorically). The volume of the paid content shrank and its visual form was downplayed. Newspapers were allowed to publish only 'commercial announcements' but not display advertisements. The difference between the two was defined primarily by the presence of visuals – 'commercial announcements' used neither photos nor line art illustrations.

Despite this, over the course of fifty years the visual form of Soviet newspapers was not totally unvaried, but consisted of three phases which roughly corresponded to social development, especially to the strictness of ideological regulations: the Stalinist phase, the Thaw, and the Stagnation phase. During these phases, Estonian newspapers had differing extents of topical diversity, of visual segmentation, contrast and visuality. For example, during the Thaw (the 1960s) topical diversity increased and the strictly ideological structure of newspaper issues was somewhat neglected: newspapers became more entertaining and consumerist (e.g. serial novels were published, film and humour sections were re-introduced, consumer sections were established); daily news, and not only ideologically important information, was also presented on the front pages of newspapers.

*How did the Soviet period newspaper guide the reader?* The visual form of the newspaper guided the reading process, using devices and modes introduced during the previous periods. However, in reality, a different reading practice emerged during the Soviet era. Many readers overlooked the visual emphasis and started reading at the end of the newspaper, which was visually weak in presentation. This kind of reading practice is confirmed by judgmental stories about the

PÜHAPÄEV
5. MAI
1985
Nr. 104 (12 895)
Hind 3 kop.



Kõigi made proletariaadid, ühinege!

Rahva Hääli

ESTIMAA KOMUNISTLIKU
PARTY NSV ÜLEMÜUKOOTE
JA ESTI NSV MINISTRI
NOUKOU HALEKANDIA
ILUUB 1946. 8. JUUST



V. I. Lenin sõnum.
Nõu NSV-sse tulemistele 9. Veebruaril
1921. aastal.

TÄNA ON AJAKIRJANDUSE PÄEV

On tarvis teha all kirjeldatud artikli
sisu analüüsi. Kirjandus on mõeldud
inimestele, mitte ainult ajakirjanduse
väljaandjatele. On tarvis teha
ajakirjanduse kohta üldist
arvamist, mis põhineb
ajakirjanduse
olukorrale, selle
ajaloolasele,
ajakirjanduse
ajaloolasele,
ajakirjanduse
ajaloolasele...

AJAKIRJANDUSPÄEVA AUKS

1. Kui teie ajakirjanduse
väljaandjad on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjad,
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjad,
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjad...

ANNETUSI

Kõik, mis on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

TUNNUSTUS AJALEHEKUJUNDAJALE

Arvestades teie
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

EILNE LAUPÄEVAK LÄKS HÄSTI

Miljooni nõukogude inimesed tähistasid eila
õhtul 40. aastapäeva meie Eestimaa
Ülemnõukogu
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOHTLA-JÄRVEL

1. Kõik, mis on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

Säätetud materjalist

Täna, 5. mail, on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOOS ABILISTEGA PÖLLUL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

E. HONECKER SAABUS MOSKVASSE

NSKP Keskkomitee
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

ESTI NSV ÜLEMÜUKOOTE PRESIDIUMI
SEADUS

Hõukogu
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

OLEHUKOOLINE
RÄNDLIPP TARTU
HISIOLOOGIA
NAADIL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

RAHVASTE SOPUSSU
PÄEVAD

Täna, 5. mail, on
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väljaandjate
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väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOHTLA-JÄRVEL

1. Kõik, mis on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

Säätetud materjalist

Täna, 5. mail, on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
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väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOOS ABILISTEGA PÖLLUL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

E. HONECKER SAABUS MOSKVASSE

NSKP Keskkomitee
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

ESTI NSV ÜLEMÜUKOOTE PRESIDIUMI
SEADUS

Hõukogu
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
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väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

OLEHUKOOLINE
RÄNDLIPP TARTU
HISIOLOOGIA
NAADIL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

RAHVASTE SOPUSSU
PÄEVAD

Täna, 5. mail, on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOHTLA-JÄRVEL

1. Kõik, mis on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

Säätetud materjalist

Täna, 5. mail, on
ajakirjanduse
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ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

KOOS ABILISTEGA PÖLLUL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

E. HONECKER SAABUS MOSKVASSE

NSKP Keskkomitee
ajakirjanduse
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ESTI NSV ÜLEMÜUKOOTE PRESIDIUMI
SEADUS

Hõukogu
ajakirjanduse
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OLEHUKOOLINE
RÄNDLIPP TARTU
HISIOLOOGIA
NAADIL

Arvestades, et
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
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RAHVASTE SOPUSSU
PÄEVAD

Täna, 5. mail, on
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate
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väljaandjate
ajakirjanduse
väljaandjate...

Figure 4.1. Rahva Hääli, 5 May 1985, 1 (25% of original size).
The front page of Soviet Estonian newspapers traditionally held ideologically ordered content, in this case an illustration of journalist Lenin, an editorial about the day of journalists, a list of awarded Estonian journalists, an official decree about an award to the War Veterans Committee, several stories and news items about hardworking collective farmers, workers and working teams.

algas Praha operatsioon

Viimane löök

1945. aasta mai alguses sõjaga lõpetatud Praga linna vabastamine. Sõja lõpetamise viimane etapp. Sõja lõpetamise viimane etapp. Sõja lõpetamise viimane etapp.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated. Praga operatsiooni arenguga seotud teated.

KAS OHELIK KATKEB?

Kõige raskem on sõjajärel... Kas oheлик katkeb? Kas oheлик katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb?

Kõige raskem on sõjajärel... Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb?

Kõige raskem on sõjajärel... Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb?

Kõige raskem on sõjajärel... Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb? Kas ohelık katkeb?

PROTESTINOOT USA VALITSUSELE

VARSAVI, 5. 5. 1945. Napp napp Poola... Protestinoot USA valitsusele. Protestinoot USA valitsusele.

USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks

USA Kongress Brant... USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks. USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks.

USA Kongress Brant... USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks. USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks.

USA Kongress Brant... USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks. USA Senat kiitis sõjalise eelarve heaks.

Nikolai Dmitrijev

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev.



Ühiskondliku liikumise... Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev. Nikolai Dmitrijev.



TÄNA AJALEHES... TÄNA AJALEHES. TÄNA AJALEHES.

TEADAANNE

1945. aasta 5. mail Tallinn... TEADAANNE. TEADAANNE. TEADAANNE.

Pühapäev, 5. mail... Pühapäev, 5. mail. Pühapäev, 5. mail.

LEHIVÄRSKAD TELEKORD... LEHIVÄRSKAD TELEKORD. LEHIVÄRSKAD TELEKORD.

Pühapäev, 6. mail... Pühapäev, 6. mail. Pühapäev, 6. mail.

KESTETELEKORD... KESTETELEKORD. KESTETELEKORD.

KESTETELEKORD... KESTETELEKORD. KESTETELEKORD.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Pühapäev, 5. mail... Pühapäev, 5. mail. Pühapäev, 5. mail.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Ühiskondliku liikumise... Ühiskondliku liikumise. Ühiskondliku liikumise.

Figure 4.2. Rahva Hääl, 5 May 1985, 4 (25% of original size). The back page of Soviet Estonian newspapers traditionally held foreign news and commentaries, sports news, TV and radio listings and culture classifieds. In this case note also a small block of text titled "Announcement" ("Tedaanne", indicated by arrow, sandwiched between an obituary and sports news) which informs readers that a passenger plane from Tallinn has crashed (the death toll – 94 people – is not mentioned).

'wrong' reading sequence in contemporary newspapers, by memoirs (e.g. Uus 2009, 235; Liiva 2009, 267) and by the current author's own recollections about reading newspapers during the 1980s.

In short, readers read the newspaper *irrespective* of visual signals. They had learned to ignore the visual emphasis as an implicit users' guide and followed their own routine reading path, which was determined by their own interests and previous reading experience. Readers were accustomed to the structure of newspapers, they knew the location of the essential themes, whether they were explicitly labelled or not. In addition, readers learned to interpret visual emphases and specific labels as a warning. For example, the label "Party life" ("Partei elu") was used in all Soviet Estonian newspapers from 1940 to the end of the 1980s and functioned as a 'scarecrow' for average readers, who avoided all stories labelled this way (Uus 2009, 235).

The reason for ignoring the visual guidance was obvious: the visual form that emphasised Soviet partisan content did not correspond to the readers' interests and expectations. The attitudes and mentalities of readers had not been essentially changed; they were roughly the same as during the interwar period. Common Estonians still expected the newspapers to fulfil the functions of informing, entertaining, holding society together, acting as a community forum. For empirical evidence of these expectations see the sociological surveys of Estonian newspapers (conducted since the middle of the 1960s), which clearly indicate that readers wanted to get information on local life and activities, everyday life arrangements, leisure activities, culture, but not resounding official propaganda and production reports (e.g. Uus 1985; Lauristin et al 1987, 80ff).

At the same time, the form of Soviet newspapers trained readers to read the entire newspaper carefully, to notice liminal details and literally to read the fine print. As headlines were 'foggy' and standing headlines were regularly used (i.e. the same headline was applied several times, to present different themes and stories), an interesting and important event might be concealed behind a small and routine title. Major accidents and catastrophes were always 'buried' this way in newspapers.

For example, on 3 May 1985, the biggest accident in Estonian aviation history occurred involving a passenger plane from Tallinn colliding with a military aircraft near Lvov, killing 94 people. Two days later, a four-sentence official announcement, entitled "Announcement" ("Teadanne", a typical standing headline) was printed in the daily *Rahva Häääl* on the last page of the issue of 5 May (see Figure 4.2). The announcement mentioned neither the cause nor the number of deaths. A short sentence merely noted: "The passengers and the crew died". Juxtaposed above this announcement was the obituary of a pilot, Nikolay Dmitryev.

An observant reader could discern the connection between the two stories by the ritual phrase stating that Dmitryev “died performing his official duties” (“*hukkus ametikohustuste täitmisel*”). Still, the reason for publishing the obituary was not the catastrophe but that Dmitryev was a representative of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic and a Hero of Socialist Labour (a specific Soviet honorary title).

The downplay of the newsworthy event was not due to journalistic free will but a common and obligatory practice of Soviet authorities of announcing ‘uncomfortable’ events which were so serious that authorities were unable to cover them up, they *had* to communicate them to the public. However, the authorities’ main concern was to maintain social stability and so they demanded the media downplay the crisis. Newspapers, like other printed work in the Soviet Union, were censored. Journalists were not allowed to change a single word or the visual form of these humble announcements.

In conclusion, the visual form of Soviet Estonian newspapers taught readers to ignore the eye-catching and straightforward features and to detect and read the barely noticeable visual devices. Thus, the notorious capability of Soviet Estonians to ‘read between the lines’ did not apply only to linguistic features but also to visual features. In order to find information that was important and interesting to common people, the reader had to know where to look and what were the usual hiding places of ‘dangerous’ and ‘uncomfortable’ topics. The reader had to notice the stories ‘buried’ under the small nondescript headlines lacking any attractive visuals.

### Focused newspapers (1990s onwards)

During the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the visual form of newspapers changed again. The change was, in a way, a return to the pre-Soviet journalism: news were once again located at the heart of the newspaper, the size of headlines and the presence of visuals once again reflected the newsworthiness and hierarchy of information. But two novel tendencies also appeared (see Figure 5).

Firstly, the focused page structure replaced the previous balanced and diffused one. In this model, information was not simply set out in a hierarchy and contrasted, but every page acquired a clear focus. This was created by a visually dominant headline, a dominant photo and a dominant textblock, which were clearly bigger than others on the page. Other elements also had their sizes fixed each day. As a result, the information was categorised into three cells: the focus, the medium level and fillers (the briefs) (Kurvits 2010, 290–334).





Secondly, the newspapers became much more visual and promotional. There were two important trends (Kurvits 2012, 16). First, photos and illustrations took more and more space at the expense of body text. For example, in 2010, visuals took 29% of the editorial space in the biggest Estonian dailies. And second, the promotion and structuring of stories got more and more space at the expense of body text. This means that more space was given to headlines, labels and logos, lift-out quotes and also white space, lines and borders. In 2010, promotional and structuring elements took 38% of the editorial space. As a result, the content of newspapers became sparser, two thirds of editorial space was given to visuals, paratexts (headings, headlines, sub-headlines, etc.), and structural elements. In short, two thirds of editorial space was used to recapitulate, promote and propose the information. Body text got just one third of editorial space (down from 50% in 1995).

In the context of production, this template of presentation is created *before* events take place and before the reportage. Thus, the events are accommodated into cells which are predetermined and predesigned “in order to efficiently and profitably manage the world’s unexpected events” (Lowrey 1999, 10). In this way, the packaging begins to dictate the creation of verbal and visual content. For example, the front page must always have a large visual, certain stories have the obligatory lift-out quotes. The packaging even excludes some kinds of content – topics and stories which do not fit in with the existing package because they are difficult to visualise, are missed or downplayed in the editorial hierarchy.

*How does the contemporary newspaper guide the reader?* The newspaper aims to guide with maximum efficiency. The focused page structure simplifies the perception of information, because it gives a clearly defined starting point for information taming. The structure also suggests a particular reading path by way of the artfully proportioned and neatly juxtaposed elements. The structure systematises the information into bite-size fragments that are easy to consume, since they are neither strenuous nor cognitively demanding. ‘Speed’ is an important keyword, because the modern daily presumes that the readers are forever in a hurry.

As a result, the modern newspaper “assumes that the only way to allow users’ interactivity is through a process of control and organization [...]. The potential of the user to become a participant is not addressed” (Trumbo 1998, 8).

The great proportion of promotional and visual elements invites the reader to browse, skim and scan information. In short, to glide along the surface but not to ‘dive’ into content. This gives the reader a quick *impression* of the content but not a *review* of the content as glancing at the visually emphasised ‘high-speed’ elements – photos, declarative headlines, lift-out quotes – mainly supplies the emotional information and clear unequivocal standpoints. A comprehensive

review can still be gained through reading the newspaper in depth, although common readers really do not have time for this as newspaper issues are too voluminous to be read word by word every day.

In summary, the visual form of contemporary Estonian dailies shows that the newspaper is unsure of the reader's interest and intellectual abilities. The newspaper assumes by default that the reader's interest must be constantly stimulated, and that they must be constantly visually attracted through simplification of complicated themes. This is clearly visible in longer stories, which are consistently 'chopped' by text breakers, lift-out quotes and small photos – a totally different practice compared to British or German 'quality' newspapers, for example, which do not segment news stories, regardless of their length.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The visual form of Estonian newspapers has changed radically over two centuries. The early 19th century newspaper was visually monotonous and cognitively demanding. The modern Estonian general information newspaper is highly visual, promotional and aims to relieve readers' cognitive and mental exertions, guiding readers efficiently and swiftly to tame information. Thus, over the two centuries the interaction between the newspaper and its reader has also totally changed. We can distinguish between four phases in this process.

First, the newspaper with its linear structure equalised information visually. This newspaper expected the enthusiast reader to read the issue from the beginning to the end without many visual clues. This newspaper gave discretion to the reader, who was free to decide the importance and interconnection of various events. In conclusion, the reader had to be an active participant in the communication process.

It is important that there was no difference in the initial visual form of differently targeted newspapers. The first Estonian peasants' newspapers were as monotonous and mentally demanding as their contemporary Baltic-German masters' newspapers or the first English and American 'gentlemen's newspapers' (see for example Hutt 1973; Nerone & Barnhurst 2003). Thus the various early newspapers in various parts of world presumed the readers (gentlemen as well as peasants) to be intelligent actors in communication process. Therefore I raise objections to the conclusion that this kind of newspaper "had inscribed in its form a deep social and political ignorance and delusion" (Nerone & Barnhurst 2003, 117). I argue that the similarity of the visual form of the 'rubes' newspapers' as well as 'gentlemen's newspapers' indicate social inclusion – cognitively and

mentally demanding visual form of initial newspapers equated the 'rubes' and the 'gentlemen'.

Still, this kind of newspaper was targeted at the elite of the Estonian peasantry, as the peasants' economic resources were poor, circulations of newspapers were low and their spread was narrow. At the end of the 18th century the literacy rate of Estonians was around 50–65%, in the middle of the 19th century around 80% (Zetterberg 2009, 250, 312).

The second phase started during the 1870s when the first visual structuring devices were introduced to Estonian newspapers (i.e. the feuilleton and the first display advertisements). As a result, the visual form of editorial content still equalised the information but also classified the content spatially. Thus the reader had to be an active participant in the communication process, although newspapers recognized that individual readers might have different interests and assisted them in finding the starting point from which to acquire information according to their interests. At the same time, the visual form of advertising started to attract and guide the reader's attention (bigger typefaces, some visuals, multicolumn text blocks, sparser layout). In summary, consumerism was enhanced through the perception of paid content. Knowledge (i.e. the information acquisition from editorial content) was the readers' own concern.

It is significant that this phase started in the last quarter of the 19th century along with great social and economic changes. During these years, the Estonian nation was formed: Estonians gradually ceased to be 'non-Germans' (*Undeutsch*) and developed their own national consciousness. Estonian newspapers were a highly important factor here, making a real contribution to the formation of the nation. At the same time, a great number of peasants bought their farms for perpetuity, thus transforming from tenants to masters of their own farms and land. These developments caused substantial changes in the mentality of Estonians and were reflected in the intercourse between the visual form of newspapers and newspaper readers.

The third phase started during the 1920s and was principally different from the previous two. The non-linear hierarchical page structure added the second spatial dimension to the visual form of the newspaper. The different salience of elements showed visually that the various pieces of information had unequal importance. Consequently, the visual form of the newspaper gave clues as to how to evaluate this data and thus guided the reader through the weight of information. At the same time, the use of visuals and visually highlighted paratexts (headlines, sub-headlines, etc.) accelerated information retrieval and indicated that the newspaper was appointed to a broader readership. The Estonian newspaper

was no longer an elite medium and did not expect proficient and serious readers but rather strived to give a swift review of current issues to larger audiences.

The phase of the hierarchical visual form started at the time of greater stratification and modernisation of Estonian society. Estonian society became much more 'vertical' and variegated. In their own independent state, Estonians acted at all social levels: they were workmen, businessmen, white-collar employees, students, politicians and diplomats, actors, etc. This diversification and hierarchy was reflected in the intercourse between newspaper readers and the visual form of newspaper. Newspaper readers were addressed in many ways – through visuals and numerous differently sized paratexts but also through the juxtaposition of elements and the presence of contrasting typefaces. It is significant that social stratification, with its upward mobility for Estonians, was accompanied by a more easily accessible visual form. We can see that Estonian newspapers had become a mass medium targeted to versatile social strata.

The Soviet period did not bring considerable transformation to the hierarchical visual form of newspapers. Still, there was one significant change, the visual form was 'filled up' differently – hierarchy did not emphasise the news but rather the propaganda content. Obviously this did not correspond to readers' expectations and they learned to ignore the guidance of the visual form. This change shows that the visual form of the newspaper is not an almighty device but still a guideline. Readers do not automatically react to visual stimuli but are active in their "intention driven selection process" (Bucher & Schumacher 2006, 347). If the visual form of newspapers highlights information that does not correspond to the readers' mentality and interests, readers develop their own schemas of what (visual) elements to avoid and how to find suitable information in a short time.

The fourth phase started during the 1990s when the third dimension was added to the visual form of newspaper, i.e. the structure of the newspaper page became non-linear and focused. This kind of visual form not only shows that various pieces of information have unequal importance but also that the importance of information is predictable, as there are appropriate cells for every possible event or topic. Thus the current visual form has a soothing effect, as it assures readers that the world is the same every day.

In conclusion, we can see that each new visual phase changed the relationship between the readers and the newspaper. The visual form becomes constantly more helpful to the reader; it has begun to assist readers and guides their informational choices to a greater extent. There is a clear sound in this transformation: control over information retrieval has increasingly transferred from the readers of newspapers to the producers of newspapers. Within every subsequent phase, readers are expected to be less active in information taming (choosing, reading,

interpreting) while newspapermen become more active and undertake increasingly more responsibility for readers' choices. Journalists provide readers with the suggested reading path, easily accessible paratexts (headlines, lift-out quotes, etc.) which clearly formulate and highlight the interpretations of events and their standpoints. Thus, newspapers are supposed to be active senders of information with audiences as mentally passive receivers.

The transformation of the visual form of newspapers has brought the transformation of reading practice. Reading has become selective and fragmented as only some fractions of the newspaper are read instead of the entire issue. This shift is clearly visible in the recollections of contemporary readers. Newspaper readers from the 19th century talk mostly about reading certain newspapers or sections of newspaper (e.g. Kitzberg 1925, 69–71; Hanko 1941, 37–38, 52–55; Prants 2010 [1937], 56, 64–65, 120) but newspaper readers of the 20th century recollect the reading of individual stories (e.g. Lõhmus 2006, 35, 77).

The process of more selective reading is guided by journalists who have seized increasing power over readers' choices in information taming. Within every new phase, journalists increasingly reprocess the information in order to make it more visual, more easily and quickly accessible. For this purpose, different accelerating techniques were introduced. In the second phase information was segmented (editorial content/paid content; timely information/culture). In the third phase information was contrasted and made into hierarchies (by using differently sized elements, by using visuals, and by capitalising on their analogous quality). In the fourth phase information was focused and categorised.

In addition, social changes have contributed to the fragmentation of reading. The social world has become more complex, various new media have been launched (newsreels, radio, TV, online media), media produce increasingly more information and the information has become increasingly more visual. As a result, readers spend less time reading newspapers; and journalists, in response, strive to change the content of newspapers to become more easily accessible in order to transmit information more swiftly and smoothly.

The reader's nature, lifestyle and interests have also changed in the course of time. The initial Estonian peasant reader was replaced by new characters, e.g. workmen, educated people, public servants, collective farmers, clerks. An originally enlightening Estonian media acquired other central characteristics, i.e. contemporary media are informative, consumerist, entertaining.

As a result, the visual form of information has become increasingly more important. There are three trends in the increasing importance of formal presentation.

1. The visual form becomes more and more intensive, imperative, compelling and pressing – contrasts increase, more information is presented for viewers.

2. The visual form becomes more important at the expense of content – more space is given to information promotion (i.e. duplication of information) at the expense of the body text. Content becomes visually determined as visually attractive themes are preferred.

3. The proportion of informative elements and promotional elements of the visual form changes to the detriment of information – promotional elements get increasingly more space.

In conclusion, during the last twenty years, there has been a marked change: in general information dailies the priority is given to visual form over content. The visual form is no longer a servant of newspaper content but the master. As the content is produced to fit into a pre-made visual form, the package has become an end in itself.

The current analysis was based on Estonian material. The Estonian case is particularly interesting because of the rapid and radical changes within the last two centuries, the diversity of cultural and social influences, and the importance of newspapers for the development of national identity. The rapid and profound changes of Estonian society provided a good opportunity to conduct analysis of how specific social, political and cultural milieu have been articulated in the visual form of the newspaper; and particularly to analyse how the newspaper has addressed readers and what the characteristic features of the ideal reader are, as implied by the form of the newspaper.

So far, journalism historians of the other countries have not raised the issue of how the visual form has addressed newspaper readers in different societies and cultures. But studies show that the visual form of newspapers has developed in the same direction in various cultures (see Hutt 1973; Mervola 1995; Barnhurst & Nerone 2001; Broersma 2007b; Wilke 2007; Rupar 2007; 2010b). This allows us to suppose that the relationship between the visual form of the newspaper and the readers has developed in the same direction as the Estonian example (excluding the Soviet detour in some cases). Thus the visual form of Estonian newspapers is a paradigm exemplifying the overall development of the visual interaction between readers and newspapers. This particular aspect of visual form needs further and more detailed comparative intercultural study.

## Newspapers

The years in parentheses indicate the analysed period

*Tarto maa rahwa Näddali-Leht* (1806)  
*Marahwa Näddala-Leht* (1821–1825)  
*Tallorahwa postimees* (1857–1859)  
*Perno Postimees* (1857–1885)  
*Eesti Postimees* (1864–1905)  
*Ristirahwa pühhapäwa leht* (1875)  
*Sakala* (1880)  
*Olewik* (1882–1905)  
*Postimees / Tartu Kommunist / Edasi / Postimees* (1886–2012)  
*Päevaleht* (1910–1940)  
*Tallinna Teataja* (1910–1915)  
*Waba Maa* (1918–1938)  
*Uus Eesti* (1940)  
*Noorte Hääl / Päevaleht* (1940–1995)  
*Rahva Hääl* (1940–1995)  
*Eesti Päevaleht* (1995–2012)  
*Õhtuleht / SL Õhtuleht* (2000–2012)

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## Notes

- 1 The first edition was written by Chappell only.
- 2 This notion is analogous to Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura’, which he proposed in his essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (“The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”) in 1936. Aura appears in the entire work of art and defines it in time and space (i.e. in history) (Benjamin 1999 [1955], 214–215).
- 3 We should also acknowledge Finnish journalism researcher Pekka Mervola, who gave a profound empirical overview of the visual form of Finnish newspapers since their introduction in 1771 to the present day (Mervola 1995). Mervola also formulated the theoretical model of visual changes (Appearance Spiral Model) on the basis of his detailed quantitative material. The model related the changes of visual form to the volume of newspaper issues and social changes. Alas his research has not received the wider attention of international academia as it was written in Finnish. Still, his monograph has a rather exhaustive English summary (see Mervola 1995, 413–429).
- 4 For them, a civic culture constitutes the citizen’s acceptance of the authority of the state and of the citizen’s participation in political life and discussions.
- 5 I do not study reader responses to the visual form of newspaper, as this kind of research requires different methods. For example, eye-tracking studies record individual reading paths and time. The first newspaper eye tracking studies were conducted at the end of the 1980s (see Garcia & Stark 1991). This method has never been applied to Estonian newspapers. The reader surveys and target group interviews are older methods of studying reader behaviour; this method has been used in Estonia since the end of the 1960s (Vihalemm 2004).

6 Newspaper eye-tracking studies are experimental studies that record readers' eye movements. It is possible to track the reader's reading sequence, see which information is looked at ('scanned'), which texts are read and for how long.

7 The visual form of the newspaper is certainly not the only factor guiding the reader's informational choices. Important factors are also readers' prior knowledge, individual topical interests, settled individual reading habits and patterns, individual cognitive style (i.e. if a reader is 'word oriented' or 'picture oriented', preferring to acquire information from words or pictures). However, in the current paper these factors are insignificant, as I focus on the relationship between the visual form of the newspaper and newspaper readers.

8 In the Baltic provinces (Estonia, Livonia, Courland) serfdom was abolished in 1816–1819, but peasants still lacked the right to purchase land, and a system of statute labour continued until the middle of the century.

9 In Estonian: "*Lähme nüüd jälle ülle omma piri wõerale male, ja watame, kuidas seal loud selle näddala sees on läinud.*"

10 Text-breaker – a small headline used to divide text into smaller sections.

## Sources of illustrations

Figures 1, 2, 3 – Collection of Digitised Estonian Newspapers, <http://dea.nlib.ee>

## **Design for individuality: the Jordan Individual toothbrushes and interpassivity in material culture**

Visa Immonen

### **The trinity of consumption, individuality and gender**

I needed a new toothbrush in 2007. In my local store in Turku, Finland, in front of a shelf filled with toothbrushes, I rather carelessly chose the one that looked nicest, with a foil with black-on-white geometric patterns inserted inside an otherwise transparent handle. At home I took the implement out of its plastic packaging and was astonished by the product I had bought. The toothbrush's name was "Jordan Individual", as printed on the package. The patterns covering the handle were actually tyre marks, and a small male gender symbol accompanied the design. I was vexed by such symbols appearing in products usually less overtly gendered. This set me to explore ways in which the toothbrush works in the spheres of individuality, gender and consumption.

Contemporary consumer products repeatedly make similar claims on the individuality of their consumer. Their individuality, however, can be approached with scepticism considering that the number of available product designs is often limited, and many products are widely available in supermarkets across the globe. The paradoxical relationship between individualism and product anonymity is much debated in contemporary cultural theory (e.g. Baudrillard 2002; Smith 2007; Miller 2009; Bevan & Wengrow 2010); in addition, since the 1990s, Jacques Lacan's idea of interpassivity has taken hold as one way of analysing the situation. This concept refers to the arrangement in which subjects experience emotions through the external other while this delegation act simultaneously becomes a defence against the very same experience. Slavoj Žižek (1989; 1997) and Robert Pfaller (2000; 2007; see also Campbell 2004) have attached such a diagnosis to their discussion on ideology.

My perspective on the Jordan Individual is of a Finnish archaeologist, but due to the lack of appropriate archaeological or consumer research on the use of

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Kannike, A. & Lavolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 204–221. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.



**Figure 1.** A Jordan Individual toothbrush in its original packaging from 2007.

toothbrushes in the country, I have also collected my diagnostic examples from various other contexts. The aim is not to give an exhaustive ethnological account of contemporary toothbrush use, however valuable that might be, but to chart the terrain for a new interpretative scheme based on interpassivity. After presenting various aspects of the individuality, gender and consumption trinity, I will analyse the theoretical effects of interpassivity and explore the interpretations that it allows me to draw on material culture. As a conclusion, I will argue that despite its problems related to materiality and historicity, the concept of interpassivity provides discordant currency for the claim of individuality.

I will begin, however, with artefacts: Jordan Individual toothbrushes, which, based on an IKEA-like idea of affordable design, were launched in September 2007 (Figure 1). Cederroth, the company marketing the product in Finland, introduced

the totally unique Individual series in which the needs and brushing habits of the consumer have been taken into account in a new way. Sixteen different design brushes are available with soft and medium-hard bristles. At last there are toothbrushes on the market that allow you to show your personal style, for instance in the bathroom (Cederroth Oy 2007; translation by the author)!

The press release continues by summarising the essence of Jordan Individual in terms of functionality and design: “Each of us has our own personal way of brushing our teeth and preferences for toothbrushes.” Indeed, design is a way of making a break with the past (Attfield 2000, 15), and in this case, with the tradition of non-individual toothbrushes. Jordan, a company based in Norway, received acclaim for the new product line and its designs. In 2008, the Norwegian Design Council (2008) awarded the Jordan Individual the Industrial Design prize, and in 2009, the Design Effect prize (Norwegian Design Council 2009).

The designs of later product generations lack a feature which makes the 2007 Jordan Individual series intriguing: in the first generation, some of the toothbrushes were marked with one of two symbols known from biology, ♀ or ♂.



**Figure 2.** Some of the Jordan Individual toothbrushes from 2007 were marked with symbols indicating gender, ♀ or ♂.

The designs with these symbols conform to traditional visual stereotypes (Figure 2): the female symbol appeared on a completely pink toothbrush and on one with red floral ornaments, while the toothbrush with the tyre marks, and a neon green toothbrush, were furnished with the male symbol. In contrast, the designs without explicit gender symbols included a toothbrush with geometric ornaments on a blue background, one with red floral ornaments, and another with green and yellow stripes.

The use of gender symbols as well as the press release bring forth consumption as a gendering and individuating practise. From this point of view, toothbrushes can be understood as a technique of maintaining oneself, a practise that brings together both the material and the discursive as well as the bodily and the artefactual. In 2003, Elizabeth Shove pointed out, however, that the application of products and product families in advancing such aspirations of higher order, or regimes, as “a cosy apartment” or “individuality” were still inadequately understood. These are phenomena not easily delineated, either temporally or spatially, as they are fundamentally norms and sites of desire. Yet they are also

tangible processes, the cosy apartment forming the space of home. All products participate in many such regimes without excluding one at the expense of another. On the contrary, they can be seen as ways of establishing connections between different regimes, drawing them together and reinforcing one with the other (op cit, 164). This is also true of the Jordan Individual products, which, in addition to participating in the emergence of individuality, are woven into the narrative of modernity's progress.

### **Narratives of technology, ideology and desire**

The particular trinity of consumption, individuality and gender is characteristic of the Late Modern Period. However, the narrative into which the Jordan Individual is embedded stretches much further back in time. The first press release on the Jordan Individual ends with a section titled "Interesting facts about toothbrushes". It is a chronologically ordered collection of historical details beginning with a Babylonian chewing stick from 3500 BC, presented as the ancestor of modern implements. The home of the very first toothbrush with bristles, however, is said to have been in China, from where it was brought to Europe by merchants. "In 1780 Willian [William] Addis made his first toothbrush which became the predecessor of the mass-produced toothbrush" (Cederroth Oy 2007).

By adding such a narrative into the press release, the Jordan Individual is made into the high point of toothbrush history. As if emphasising the groundbreaking nature of the initial launch, the technological tale is not repeated in later press releases (Cederroth Oy 2008a; 2008b). The first press release, however, is not a pioneer in linking oral hygiene with progress and civilised conduct. In a 1935 article, David W. McLean puts it unequivocally: "Wherever there had been a trace of civilization, white and even teeth had been valued, and there had always been some practice of mouth hygiene" (1935, 824).

Historian Peter Englund (2005, 149, 157) goes against the grain by pointing out that the toothbrush, as an implement of cleaning one's teeth, is not "an invention". Its working principle is so ancient that it cannot be traced to any particular point in time. Consequently it is more worthwhile to focus on the changes that the toothbrush has undergone in Europe during the modern period. Englund describes the development of toothbrushes in terms of the forms of production. The first objects that a modern-day consumer would identify as toothbrushes were made in the 17th century. In the era of handwork, in the earlier part of the 18th century, the variety of shapes and sizes in handles carved by hand from wood or bone was large. Bristles made of horse, pig or badger hair were attached to a set of holes randomly placed and drilled on the tip of the handle. By the end of



the 18th century, however, a transition into factory production started to unify toothbrush designs. Now tips had three parallel rows of holes for bristles. The rate of mass production and standardisation accelerated throughout the 19th century.

The transformation of toothbrushes from implements of the higher social strata into products used across a wide social spectrum did not occur, however, until the 1870s. The mechanisation of production allowed lower prices, and subsequently a wider access to the product. At the same time the motivation for their use changed. Teeth were no longer brushed in order to enhance the natural elegance of the upper classes, but to prevent tooth decay and other health risks (Gaitán Ammann 2005, 84).

Handles of organic materials were replaced by celluloid in 1884, and electric toothbrushes came to the market in 1908, which for Englund also marks the beginning of the industrial era. Nylon was adopted for bristles for the first time in 1938, and handles of new commodity plastics were introduced in the 1940s (Hyson 2003). In the course of the 20th century, toothbrushes have become ubiquitous objects. A survey study made at MIT in 2003 revealed that Americans rank the toothbrush as the most important invention without which they could not live (Legon 2003). Cars came second.

The plastic toothbrush revolutionised the markets, Englund argues, because the new product was significantly more hygienic and practical as well as cheaper compared with the earlier models. The introduction of plastic also augured the end of functional development in toothbrushes. Stephen Wilcox, a principal at Design Science Consulting, agrees that substantial investment in purely technical development has ceased altogether: “We’ve quit improving it. Now we’re just competing for the consumer’s attention, so we’re seeing a lot of mindless tweaking” (Schindler Connors 2007).

Timothy Dowd, a senior analyst with the research firm Packaged Facts, is of the same opinion: “This rush for innovation is all madness,” since “[i]f you didn’t have product innovation, the market would rise or fall with the population because everybody brushes his or her teeth” (Schindler Connors 2007). As everybody already has one, toothbrushes do not constitute a growing market, and in the competition for market share, an advantage can only be gained through design (Segrave 2010, 133). Innovations are small enhancements of the basic design, like changes in the angle between the handle and tip, or such additions as tongue cleaners or systems alerting the user when too much pressure is applied on the bristles. Toothbrushes are no longer the object of technological ambition, but devices of design trickery, at least in the narrative of technological progress. As a parallel development, the designing and marketing of consumer products has become increasingly informed by anthropological and sociological

research on the selection and use of such products (see Pink 2004). Accordingly, contemporary toothbrushes represent both the high point and the anti-climax of the technological tale.

Compared with Englund and other like-minded scholars, the history of toothbrushes unfolds differently in the works of archaeologists Mark P. Leone (1988) and Paul A. Shackel (1993). Instead of a technological narrative, their focus is on toothbrushes as material culture and particularly, following Louis Althusser, as ideological devices. They analyse how social practices produce modern subjects, or self-conscious and self-sufficient agents, whose thoughts and actions appear to have a causal relationship. Subjectivity is imposed within the structure of social practises that interpellate or hail an individual into existence. Hence the subject does not precede these practises but is created by them. In effect, Leone and Shackel argue, toothbrushes contribute to the emergence of subjects.

In this light, the technical evolution of toothbrushes does not reflect the industrial revolution, but on the contrary, like other consumer products, toothbrushes were a crucial factor for the revolution to happen in the first place (Olmert 1996, 61). Since the late 19th century, oral hygiene has gradually become more complex, the instructions provided for consumers and citizens have increased, and the use of toothbrushes, especially recommendations on the length of intervals between brushing and the time used to brush, have come to the focus of hygiene education. On the one hand, the intensifying concerns over personal hygiene led to the wider proliferation of toothbrushes, which, in turn, contributed to the strengthening notion of an autonomous individual successfully enhancing her or his social position. On the other hand, the standardisation of toothbrush production required a disciplined and uniform labour force that had adopted the practices of time management. These two processes establishing the individual and the labourer were, in fact, aspects of the same phenomenon (Deetz 1996; Olsen 2003).

The archaeologist Felipe Gaitán Ammann (2005) does not dispute the relation between modernism, the emergence of individuality, and the profusion of oral hygiene products, but he wants to shift the emphasis more on the materiality of toothbrushes. In his view, an inquiry into material culture that abstains from approaching the sensuality of artefacts is highly problematic. Such an analysis overlooks the complex dependences between objects and humans, where the former are not simply vehicles for meanings given by the latter. Things and material processes should thus not be detached from the emergence of both subjectivity and modernity. Although in archaeological analyses of material culture temporal development is often paralleled with the increasing demands posed by the modern capitalist society, such a framework lacks a narrative that would allow equal

weight to be put on desire and the complexity of its movements (Gaitán Ammann 2005; cf Shove 2003, 10). In the contemporary world, consumption is a practice where desires can be brought forth and expressed, and therefore consumption is also a source of power (Partington 1996, 205).

The three intertwined narratives establish different histories for toothbrushes and provide three different places for the Jordan Individual. The first narrative is a tale of technological progress, while the second addresses the practises in which toothbrushes function and bring forth modern notions of individuality. The third narrative, in contrast, discovers the desire present in the practises and implements of oral hygiene, and exposes the network of affective intensities and material flows in which technology and individuality are embedded. With the last narrative as a guideline, the analysis of the Jordan Individual will next focus on the gendered and desirous individuality that the toothbrush assumes.

### **The toothbrush in gendered consumption**

Some of the first generation Jordan Individuals were marked with the two symbols for gender, although even before this many toothbrush designs have been aimed at either men or women. In a 2001 writing competition collecting traditions and memories relating to oral hygiene and dentists in Finland, an informant recalling her youth in school after World War II remembers how

for years we had distributed toothbrushes of delicious colours and different shapes, and made name tags for them. You just had to be careful that no boy was given a toothbrush with a red handle, because it was well known to be the 'girlie colour' (Sotamaa 2004, 164; translation by the author).

Another more recent example is a toothbrush advertisement with the slogan "Life is tough, Jordan gentle" (Figure 3). It was published, for example, on the back cover of a 2005 issue of the weekly Finnish Donald Duck comic (Jordan 2005). The advertisement is based on a photograph that parallels toothbrushes with human individuals by showing the objects in an upright position like people standing in a street scene. The toothbrushes are arranged into groups, the one furthest away being a pair formed by a light blue and pink brush. The couple seems to be kissing. On the basis of conventional colour coding, they are a boy and a girl. Their young age is revealed by the name of the product as well as the text accompanying the image, which states that the new Jordan Click Teen model will protect your teeth, because "it flexes back if you brush too hard". The advertisement thus

**Elämä kova, Jordan hellä.**

Uusi Jordan Click Teen pitää hampaastasi huolta, se notkahtaa taaksepäin jos harjaat liian kovaa. Puhtaalla suulla voit osallistua @junkmail kilpailuun osoitteessa: [www.jordan.fi](http://www.jordan.fi)  
Sanoita "Kun kaikki muuttuu" -kappale uusiksi ja voit voittaa iPodin ja @junkmailin uuden levyn.

NEW  
CLICK  
TEEN  
Jordan

Figure 3. Advertisement "Life is tough, Jordan gentle" (Aku Ankka, 26 October 2005).

combines the general education of the young on the importance of oral hygiene with assumptions on gendered behaviour, pairing and colour coding.

In addition to colours and patterns, Jordan Individual emphasises gender even with the explicit symbols. They are like an echo of the 18th- and 19th-century custom of engraving the owner's initials on this valuable implement (Olmert 1996, 62). With the help of initials and gender symbols the relationship between the owner and the object is sealed and given a tangible expression. Indeed, the utilitarian reason for the application of different designs on Jordan Individuals is to make it easier to identify the toothbrushes in a family bathroom. As recognised by all and subscribed to by many, the functioning of the symbol of gender, however, surpasses the working of initials as rigid designators. This is further underscored by the fact that the symbols of gender are borrowed from a biological notation anchoring sex to all animals and nature itself.

Marking the gender on the Jordan Individual toothbrushes, however, does not appear to force the consumer into a particular mode regarding the decision to buy (Räsänen 2008, 124–125; Riihelä & Sullström 2008, 77). How many of those who bought the toothbrush even noticed the small male and female symbols? And how many of those who noticed it in the store allowed the symbol to affect their decision to buy, either following the symbol or decidedly buying against it? Posing these questions, nonetheless, does not obliterate the fact that there must have been consumers who made their decision to buy, whether for themselves or for someone else, on the basis of the gender symbol.

According to a consumer study by Anu Raijas and Terhi-Anna Wilska (2008), among Finnish heterosexual couples of the early 21st century men were most often the decision-makers in charge of major purchases, while women were usually responsible for small-scale purchases. Statistically, then, it seems that women are more likely to choose and buy toothbrushes than men in heterosexual nuclear families. Raijas and Wilska (2008, 260–261) point out, however, that the concept of 'choice' in this context is very slippery: is it a gendered character of consumption based on distribution of work, or expertise and interests, or power relations in families? And whose needs is the person making the choice in fact following or assuming to follow?

In Finnish consumption, generally speaking, such everyday consumer products as toothbrushes appear to attract feminine connotations. Kaj Ilmonen and Mika Pantzar (1990, 220, 223–225; see also Douglas & Isherwood 1979, 5, 25, 48, 53, 66, 72) argue, however, that even subtler gender dynamics affect the field of consumption. In fact, neither the categories of gender nor the subsequently gendered products are stable. Statistically and historically women as a consumer group tend to shun excessive overtness in the gendering of products, and to

appropriate product categories that have previously been prominently masculine, like trousers and cars. Male consumers, in contrast, are not often as comfortable using feminine products, and are inclined to change their consumption patterns to avoid feminine connotations. This leads to a process in which products aimed at male consumers are constantly modified in order to differentiate them from feminine products (Partington 1996, 209).

Ilmonen and Pantzar (1990) conclude that as a consumer group, men are more conservative than women. On the basis of statistics this is undoubtedly so. However, if objects are involved in the emergence of subjectivities, what are, in fact, these women and men who are discussed in consumer studies? To what extent are masculinity and femininity anchors for gendered consumer decisions, if they are at the same time produced through these choices?

### **From statistics to materiality**

So far I have engaged with discourses surrounding toothbrushes. The fluidity of gendered meanings and desire, however, seems to be at odds with the material, concrete presence of toothbrushes, or rather the notion of materiality as the natural bedrock of things. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Jane Graves (1999, 364) argues, however, that objects are neither nature nor people, yet they contain elements of both. Despite the fact that objects remain unaffected in their materiality if scratched, damaged or destroyed, they are not closed entities but rather a disturbing and perverse interface between the subject and the world, and moreover, between the subject and the heterogeneous aspects of the self.

This ambiguous nature of objects suggests another kind of understanding of their materiality, not only as mute and thus culturally malleable, but also something potentially resistant, inhuman and accumulating. Human bodily experiences and gestures, established in interaction with objects, are partly defined by that which is inhuman and outside the body. Taking this ambiguity into account slightly refocuses the aim of the study of toothbrushes. After revealing statistics and correlations between consumption and gender, the analysis should now scrutinise how these correlations or relationships are established in the first place.

The analysis of such relationships begins with moments of disturbance. Hypothetically, we can easily say that we would manage well without a toothbrush and oral hygiene for some time. However, in those cases where one is unable to follow everyday routines, the result might be an uncomfortable feeling of uncleanness and a throbbing sense of abnormality: what might others think of me? The feeling of unease brings into consideration the act of brushing one's teeth, and how this practice conditions the perception of oneself as a social being (Shove 2003, 2).

Englund (2005, 149) points out that when mainstream films seek to convey some remote past, a device often used are missing or dirty teeth. Whether this visual convention is actually derived from historical facts or not, in traditional Finnish agrarian society up to the early 20th century, living with bad or missing teeth was not exceptional or noteworthy. Moreover, brushing teeth was not necessarily everyday practice for many, particularly in the countryside, until World War II (Sotamaa 2004, 29, 30). Englund's observation, however, should be extended from representations of the past to the depictions of contemporary social marginality in which missing teeth are signs of the elderly and the poor, or they encapsulate the aggressive masculinity or slow-wittedness of boxers and the abasement of vagrants.

The association between material realities, bad teeth, and certain social positions gathers momentum in everyday experience. For instance, in a 2005 study made in Japan, it was discovered that, statistically, slim people tend to brush their teeth more often than those who are overweight. The researchers suggest that the correlation between good oral hygiene and slimness derives from the same tendency to take care of one's body (Anonymous 2005). A recent Scottish study, moreover, found that the regular brushing of teeth decreases the risk of cardiovascular diseases (de Oliveira et al 2010).

Clean white teeth belong to the imagery of modern prosperity and success. However, overly white and shiny teeth are a representational device which denotes modernity gone too far, a sign of uncontrolled narcissism echoing shallowness and artificiality. Compulsively rigid, sparkling smiles are particularly often seen in satires of American society. The complexity of these images and emotions translates into the importance of the toothbrush in the individual's being and the materiality of toothbrushes.

### **Towards a psychoanalysis of the Jordan Individual**

Individuality and its relation to desire open a not so often trodden path between material culture of design and psychoanalysis. Toothbrushes as such are rarely, if ever, discussed in psychoanalytic discourse, but their significance can be approached through teeth, a body part mentioned by Sigmund Freud. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he considers dreams of toothache and teeth being pulled or falling out as masturbatory wishes and repressions of young men. In a footnote Freud remarks of Carl Gustav Jung's suggestion that women's toothache dreams are birth dreams and linked with the fear of castration: "[...] in both cases (castration and birth) what is in question is the separation of a part of the body from the whole" (Freud 1953, 386–389). The idea of separation also appears in Lacan's

writings when teeth are mentioned as parts of a subject both disgusted and fascinated by the disintegrated and predisposed body (Grosz 1990, 59–60; Lacan 2002, 75–81). This ambiguity leads, among other things, to dreams of dissolving body parts, including teeth (Lacan 2002, 84–86).

The Lacanian decentred subject has no other being than as a void that manifests itself as a pulsation giving rise to the process of subjectification. This process hides the original void by establishing a twofold division in the subjectivity, namely alienation and differentiation (Žižek 1989, 175). Alienation refers to the subject's submission to language, one's being-in-language. It provides a concrete, identifiable form – a name or signifier – for the subject to take (Grosz 1990, 60). The subject becomes a relation in the symbolic order that remains outside the self (Fink 1995, 13–19). Differentiation, in contrast, does not refer to language, but to the tangible desire of the other, or more prosaically, to the desire of parents, which the alienated subject encounters. The other's desire betrays an imperfection: the other is also a lacking and alienated subject. Hence, in differentiation, the subject tries to fill the other's lack with the lack of its own being, and in the process, learns to desire as the other. The other's desire is controlled through a pure signifier or phallus which neutralises the devouring lack of the other and gives rise to the imaginary order or superego. In this way, the subject is no longer a mere potentiality, a signifier in the semiotic order, but a desiring subject (Fink 1995, 41–59; Lacan 2002, 575–584).

Freud and Lacan consider dreams of toothaches and the loss of teeth as ways of coping with the fear of and fascination with the shattering of the foundation of subjectivity. The toothbrush, apart from its suggestive phallic shape, is an instrument for avoiding toothache and the loss of teeth, and thus a means to sustain and strengthen boundaries between teeth, mouth, and the world. In addition to easing anxieties, by removing dental plaque and the bacteria it contains, the toothbrush prevents caries, or progressive disintegration on the levels of both teeth and self.

The analysis of teeth and subjectivity in psychoanalysis, however, cannot be directly amalgamated with individuality in toothbrushes. They are two different, though interrelated, phenomena. Individuality, as expressed by the Jordan Individual, is first and foremost present in the act of buying. More precisely, it is a choice made between the aesthetics of the sixteen designs. Apart from visually pleasing patterns, this process of individuation is both extended and conditioned by the devices of sexual categorisation – colours, patterns and gender symbols.



## Individuality as ideology

The notion that the subject realises itself only through the other directs Lacan to analyse Greek tragedy in a particular way. He argues that when you go to the theatre in the evening, your thoughts may still be caught in the things that happened during the day. This hinders your full engagement with the play. However, your “emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage” (Lacan 1992, 252). The chorus will experience emotions for you, but allows you to have the purifying and relaxing effects of catharsis. In this way, subjects experience enjoyment through the other, and simultaneously with this gesture, the delegation of emotions functions as a defence against those feelings, the various demands of the real, and the symbolic and imaginary orders. This ambivalent non-act is a way of passivising and pacifying both oneself and the other (van Oenen 2008, 5). It allows us to momentarily retreat from the constraints of subjectification (Žižek 1997, 115; Pfaller 2002, 203–210).

Žižek (1989, 33–35; 1997, 112–117) and Pfaller (2000; 2007) call the arrangement described by Lacan *interpassivity* and link it with discussions on ideology (see also Magee 2000, 56–58). For them, ideology is not Marxist false consciousness, but the reality in itself is always already perceived ideologically. It is the part of social reality “whose existence implicates its participants’ non-knowledge of its essence” (Žižek 1989, 21). Hence ideology does not hide the actual order of things, but crystallises a fantasy. The Lacanian fantasy is a remnant of the real, or the disturbing surplus left by the signification process and encased in the imaginary order. The real is the material, non-signifying aspect of a signifier. Fantasy – as a securely encapsulated piece of the real – structures the social reality and provides an escape from the devastating totality of the real. In other words, ideology is the pure signifier or phallus giving significance to the world and subjectivity (Žižek 1989, 2, 21, 32, 45, 99–103). Ideologies are those discourses that fill the lack, and orient and give coherence to subjects and to their everyday relations with the real. Here Žižek shares Althusser’s conception of ideology as something lived and material, and thus giving shape to subjects and their reality.

Consumption and individuality are ideologies through which subjectification and subsequently modern reality occur to the subjects. Nonetheless, the more tightly subjects are attached to these ideological structures, Žižek argues, the less they seem able to enjoy the actual acts of consumption. In fact, this enjoyment is not pleasure, but rather a demand dictated by the imaginary order, or ideology. The imperative of acquiring products seems to constitute both the beginning and end of consumption and its enjoyment. However, although the subject’s faith in consumption and capitalism might amount to nothing, in practice, when in

a store, in the interpassive act of buying, the other, i.e. the products to be consumed, is called upon to sustain the necessary belief in consumption (Žižek 1997, 112; Pfaller 2000, 34).

Another example of interpassivity given by Žižek is the canned laughter used in sitcoms. The imposed laughter is not used so much to indicate where to laugh, as to give viewers the impression that they enjoy the show, although the other does the affective reacting. The imperative to enjoy is delegated to the other, in this case to the soundtrack. In addition, the use of VCRs or DVRs can constitute an interpassive phenomenon, when one resorts to recording favourite films or programmes in order to save time for work, although actually many of the recordings will never be watched. The machine nevertheless takes care of the enjoyment for the potential spectator (Žižek 1997, 114).

Beliefs, Pfaller and Žižek argue, are fundamentally exterior realities embodied in the practice of the everyday. Even if consumers do not subscribe to individuality as the Jordan Individual toothbrushes present it, material things as commodities in their circulation and exchange believe in such individuality instead. In my thoughts, I am free to believe as I like, but objectively, in my actions as a consumer, I subscribe to the individuality of the Jordan Individual. Beliefs can be delegated to things as rituals without any inflation in their sincerity, and in this way, the objects support the fantasy regulating social reality (Žižek 1989, 33–35, 43).

### **Biographies of subjects and objects**

Gijs van Oenen (2008, 7, 11, 14) points out that the weakness of Žižek's and Pfaller's way of developing the concept of interpassivity lies in its ahistorical framework. The notion of interpassivity should instead be understood historically as a phenomenon particular to Late Modernism. The interpassive attitude, he continues, should be approached as an ambiguous situation in which the subject expresses both its feeling of overburden, and its inability to disengage from the relation demanding the activity. The interpassive subject is an element in the production of the social reality, but does not see the result – the reality – as a socially shared thing but a product to be consumed.

Van Oenen's criticism of subjectification can be supplemented with the idea of cultural biographies or the life cycle of objects. Žižek's example on VCRs as interpassive media can be read under the assumption that the objects are indeed inanimate and inactive by their nature, and only momentarily activated in interpassivity. The example does not speak of the things outside a very narrowly delineated situation. However, like the spectator entering the theatre and feeling

exhausted by the day's activities, objects also have histories which enter into the situation affecting and moulding the movements of desire. Paradoxically, when the activity of the subject and the other is pacified in interpassivity, the movement of objects has a heightened role. Moreover, everything cannot be expressed at the same moment, and thus some objects become crucial elements in the ideological constitution of the world, only to later become invisible and substituted by other objects. In their materiality, objects carry the potential to defy and derange human-object arrangements even in interpassive situations.

Despite its problems, the gist of interpassivity is in the reproduction of individuality in which the consumers of the Jordan Individual participate. As an ideological formation individuality implicates and produces pre-ideological pleasures structured as the fantasy of a self-contained and autonomous subject free of the other. At the same time, the objectified individuality embodies the impossibility of a society of such subjects by showing the disconcertingly material bonds needed for individuality to appear and persist. This impossibility returns in the form of anxiety over decaying teeth.

Capitalism is a condition of consuming subjects in interactive and interpassive situations, but it also depends on the continual transformation of subjectivity's desires. Such consumer products as toothbrushes participate in these bodily processes (Partington 1996, 206). The Jordan Individual engages with subjects through the tactile experience of smoothness, which remains more or less the same with every model, while differences between the models are created visually. In the Lacanian view, the sense of vision emphasises the distinction between subjects and objects, and assimilates the latter to the former without corporeal proximity. It offers a totalising image for the imaginary self (Grosz 1990, 59).

In the visual differentiation of the brushes, gender has a particularly prominent position. As a semiotic system, the signs of gender expand the effects of toothbrushes from the sphere of bodily movements into the reality of symbolic differences, into the space of notation (Grosz 1990, 70). The use of gender symbols can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, they can be considered as yet another repetition of gender norms, where an old way of marking sex is brought into the new context of toothbrush designs. Secondly, the markings can also be seen as a symptom of fear caused by the introduction of a new and allegedly revolutionary product. In the technological narrative on toothbrush evolution, the use of toothbrushes as individually used items has been developed since the 18th century, although the new, cutting-edge design in an everyday product could weaken consumer response. According to Jordan, when Jordan Individuals were brought to the market in 2007, "[t]he concept was to transform the toothbrush, a product in which there was traditionally little interest, from dental hygiene to lifestyle

product, thereby creating a design experience that would stimulate purchasing desire and build brand loyalty” (Jordan 2010).

Launching a novelty is a risk, a disturbance. The psychoanalysis of toothbrushes suggests that combining the design with traditional gender symbols provides a point of reference, a secure place for the consumer to make the product part of an interpassive arrangement. Besides these arrangements of desire and subjectivity, they participate in the discourses of technological process and ideology. Having said that, the concept of interpassivity as a methodological tool is not easily applicable to products on the level of practice as the discussion on consumer behaviour shows. The materiality of individual things and their subsequently unique biographies mean that the forms, which the actual arrangements take, cannot be predicted in any apparent manner without anthropological, archaeological or sociological study.

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## Sources of illustrations

Figures 1, 2 – Photograph: Visa Immonen.

Figure 3 – Reproduced with the permission of Jordan AS.

## **Collecting the Nagas: John Henry Hutton, the administrator-collector in the Naga Hills**

Meripeni Ngully

Browsing the net on “Museums and Nagas”, one is amazed at the number of exhibitions being organised on the Nagas and their material culture.<sup>1</sup> From bead collection to sculpture, to textiles and photographs and films, the list is impressive. With interesting display themes like *Naga Tribal Adornment: Signatures of Status and Self* (Washington D.C.), *Naga People – Jewelry and Ashes* (Vienna), *Nagas: Hidden Hill People of India* (New York), one is intrigued by why the West continues to be fascinated with the Nagas and their culture even though many artefacts displayed in such exhibitions have become things of the past, and many rituals associated with them are forgotten and abandoned. Far from being cut off and isolated, the Nagas seem to be very much engaged with the external world when such collections are put on display in different museums across the globe. One cannot help but wonder about the reasons why the Nagas are so well represented, perhaps even over-represented in comparison with other ethnicities of the region in various museums in the UK, Europe and USA. I will therefore examine how these exhibitions bring into focus the question of collecting and what is the story behind these collections.

A recent exhibition on the Nagas under the theme *A Forgotten Mountain Region Rediscovered* held at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland presented rare and exquisite Naga items that had been assembled over the last 120 years. The exhibition, curated by Richard Kunz, covered a period dating from 1870s to the early 2000s. It showcased artefacts gathered by Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), the founding father of German anthropology, one of the first to conduct research on the Nagas in 1878–79. The other collections were those of the German Han Eberhard Kaufman (1899–1986), the Swiss Paul Wiz (1882–1955) and the celebrated Czech-Indian Milada Ganguli (1913–2000) (Herald 2009). The exhibition was complemented by rich supporting programmes like guided tours, workshops, lectures, films and exhibition talks. The local dailies in Nagaland carried a special news item on the exhibition and reported that the Naga show turned out to be a big hit in Switzerland. The Naga delegates who participated

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Kannike, A. & Lavolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 222–241. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

in the exhibition described their experiences as “unique” and “very satisfying”. However, one Naga woman delegate said that while she was awestruck at the craftsmanship of these times, which “was incomparable to those of today”, she regretted that “these treasures are now lost to the Nagas [...] and they have become relics of Naga history in the exhibition” (*Morning Express* 2009). The Naga woman’s lament on the ‘loss of Naga culture’ and ‘relics of Naga history’ draws us into the larger context of colonial collecting and the resulting collections in museums.

The tendencies of Western museums to fix non-Western cultures within a timeframe, and to see them as non-changing and non-evolving, have come under a lot of criticism in recent times. Perhaps the Naga woman’s lament serves as an interesting start-up point to examine the ‘behind the scenes’ story of Naga collections in European museums, particularly the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The Naga collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum provides a fascinating insight into the collecting activity and how colonialism shaped the perfect conditions for the collection of ethnographic materials from the most obscure outposts of the British Empire. One person who stands out in collecting large amount of materials from the Naga Hills is John Henry Hutton, the first well-known administrator-turned-collector of ethnographic artefacts. This paper will thus follow the life of Hutton as a collector and show how his collecting gives us an example of colonial officers’ entanglements with anthropology and colonialism.

Born in Yorkshire, John Henry Hutton (1885–1968) received his early education at Chigwell School and later joined Worcester College, Oxford where he received a third class degree in modern history. Having completed his studies in 1907, Hutton joined the Indian Civil Service and went to India in 1909. He spent most of his administrative career, from 1909 to 1936, in Assam, on the border between India and Burma. Of his twenty seven years, Hutton spent twenty years in the Naga Hills as magistrate and Deputy Commissioner. As an administrator, Hutton came into contact with the life of the individual, the family and the community which enabled him to be involved with the ways of life and culture of the Nagas. In fact the time in the Naga Hills provided him with materials for his two monographs, *The Angami Nagas* and *The Sema Nagas*, which were published in 1921. He also wrote many articles on the Nagas which were published in scholarly journals such as the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *Folklore*, etc. His extensive writings have not only added to the ethnographic knowledge of the Nagas but also earned him distinction as an anthropologist. He was awarded the Rivers Memorial Medal in 1929 for his services to anthropology in the field in Assam by the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Annandale Memorial Medal in 1937 by the Asiatic Society of



Bengal. Along with his published corpus, Hutton amassed several collections of artefacts, the largest and most colourful of which is in the Pitt Rivers Museum. This collection also includes many of his photographs and some rare wax cylinder recordings. All the above no doubt helped to make the Nagas one of the best documented tribal groups in the world, although questions remain. Why was Hutton collecting? How did he collect the Naga artefacts? How did anthropology of the period shape his collecting?

### **The sources**

The present work relies primarily on Hutton's tour diaries, correspondence and publications. These are available at the State Archives in Kohima, Nagaland as well as in digitized form which can be accessed or viewed on the website Naga Exploratour.

Hutton's tour diaries are detailed reports of his day-to-day activities as administrator, hearing and settling cases of land disputes between villages and *khels* (Pashtun tribal divisions; ed). For an officer who considered his responsibilities to be more than just a job or tour of duty it is not unusual that his tour diaries are filled with details of his interactions with the local people and individuals, and at times interspersed with comments and impressions.

A meticulous recorder and a keen observer with an eye for detail, Hutton's tour diaries are a mine of information. They are filled with rich descriptions of the villages he toured, artefacts he collected or came across and even notes of comparisons between the Naga groups and villages, and other cultures (for example in Southeast Asia and Oceania). These notes provide the researcher the necessary data for understanding Hutton's anthropological ideas. The letters and correspondence exchanged between Hutton and Henry Balfour, curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, are documents that show Hutton's connection with the museum and how the Naga artefacts were sent there.

Although Hutton's tour diaries provide valuable information, his comments on certain tribes and villages indicate his bias and lack of adequate anthropological training. There is no doubt that the data for his writings were collected during his official activities and the description he gives is generally from an official's perspective. Nonetheless his observations are important in constructing Hutton's frame of mind and reflect how he tried to construe the culture of the various Naga tribes and groups. His tour diaries and monographs remain important documents on the study of the Nagas.

### **John Henry Hutton: the assignment**

Hutton's entry into the Naga Hills in 1912 was significant for two reasons: one, it was connected with changes that were emerging within the Indian part of the British Empire. It was a crucial period in which the British government had brought under its control a great part of the Naga Hills (the Nagas had always been independent hill tribe people), placing it under direct control. The administrative focus was now to maintain stability in the Naga Hills, and with this, the need for information about the people being administered increased. This required the officers assigned to the cadre to be sympathetic and interested in the local customs and culture of the Nagas. They were also expected to be interested in ethnography. As officers took to ethnography, there was a special emphasis on rescuing knowledge of the Naga culture that was perceived to be under threat of extinction, giving a sense of urgency to colonial officers to record what they could.

This sense of urgency is perhaps best explained by looking at the history of British anthropology in the 19th century. When British anthropology emerged in the 1840s, there was a fear that native peoples were rapidly disappearing leading to loss of essential information. As the notion of the 'disappearing race' became more dominant, anthropologists' determination was to record customs and ways of life before it was too late and to provide such evidence in the construction of European society's 'primitive' origins. In 1890 S. E. Peal, while writing about the Nagas in his *Fading Histories*, had lamented the delay in the study of the Naga tribes and the consequent loss of much Naga historical material. He pointed out the remarkable rapidity with which the Nagas were changing. He therefore urged a careful study of the Naga tribes before they were "reformed and hopelessly sophisticated" (Peal 1890)<sup>2</sup>.

Secondly, intricately entwined with colonial administration was the professionalization of anthropology. As authority of Britain over its colonial subjects had become much more secure, anthropologists presented themselves qualified to analyse and prescribe solutions for problems confronting colonial governments. It was argued by figures such as J. G. Frazer that colonial officials could not control their subjects without anthropological knowledge and training (Frazer 1914). Explaining the anthropology-colonial connection, the Secretary of the Royal Anthropological Institute reported that "anthropology was not merely an academic science, appealing to few experts, but had real practical application [...] an imperial function to perform in the promotion of the well being of the colonies" (Urry 1993, 110). The colonial officials relied on the anthropologists' practical utility and knowledge at the time when the 'native problem' formed

a very important factor in colonial and Indian administration. Thus Kuklick concludes that the colonial rulers were committed to use anthropological data since British policy was everywhere predicated on the assumption that the best guarantee of assent to colonial rule was the preservation of subject peoples' traditional institutions (Kuklick 1991, 184).

These developments in anthropology as well as its connection with colonialism were important to Hutton as they provided the context in which Hutton began his collecting. When Hutton took up his post in the Naga Hills, the responsibilities that came with his new assignment were to observe the changes and preserve what was perceived to be vanishing. Hutton's first hand observation of the 'primitive' populations enabled him to become an eager collector of Naga artefacts which according to him were vanishing examples of dying cultures. As a result, Hutton alone donated a total of 3439 objects to the Pitt Rivers Museum. Thus for Hutton the Naga Hills represented more than just a job or tour of duty.

### **Into the museum: the link between collecting, the Nagas, and the Pitt Rivers Museum**

The story of Hutton's collecting is invariably linked with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and its curator Henry Balfour (1863–1939). The Pitt Rivers Museum, which was founded in 1884 by Lieutenant General Pitt Rivers (Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers) (1827–1900), has a large collection of ethnographic and archaeological objects collected over many years. This ethnographic museum was distinct because the displays were unusual, in that the objects were arranged typologically and not geographically (Petch 2006). The ethnographic artefacts were systematically collected, selected and arranged in order to illustrate the progress of human history according to different cultures, different places on the evolutionary ladder. This typological representation in the Pitt Rivers Museum, observes Henrietta Lidchi, brings out the determination of the founder to promote a particular strand of anthropological enquiry, and therefore of knowledge and discourse (Lidchi 1997, 188). This view of functional evolutionary discourse that Lt. Gen. Pitt Rivers stood for became the basis for the collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

After Lt. Gen. Pitt Rivers' death, the one person whose presence helped to continue the evolutionary typology in the Pitt Rivers Museum was Henry Balfour. Balfour began his work in the Pitt Rivers Museum on 28 October 1885, and was employed to set up the founding collection of Pitt Rivers displays at Oxford. He was in fact the second natural sciences graduate (the first being Henry Nottidge Moseley (1844–1891)) to be employed for the Pitt Rivers Collection. His scientific

training and skills of observation were being considered valuable in the service of anthropology. He was involved in the day-to-day handling of objects at the museum, i.e. “unpacking, arranging and labelling” (Petch 2006, 260). It was only in 1890 that Balfour was finally appointed Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum. His role was to fill in the typologies and to create new ones as artefacts became available. A keen observer with an artistic sensibility, Balfour was always on the look-out for modifications in the objects. As he was constantly adding material and rearranging the exhibition, he had an unfaltering enthusiasm to get more information on similar objects or traditions, for which he used his vast network of friends and acquaintances from diverse backgrounds – colonial servants, military men, missionaries, dealers, travellers, etc. Thus it was not surprising that colonial officers like Hutton, whose encounter with Balfour saw a friendship develop, sent a steady flow of artefacts from the Naga Hills. Hutton’s friendship with Balfour assumed significance with Balfour’s visit to the Naga Hills in 1922–23, an event that turned the Naga Hills into a ‘collectors’ field’ with the collection of numerous Naga artefacts as well as linking the Naga Hills to the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Close personal contact with Balfour seemed crucial because he was such a pivotal person in the Pitt Rivers Museum. His interest in ethnology and ethnographic objects was a well-known fact in academic circles. Although I have not been able to ascertain the year(s) of meeting or the occasion of the first contact between Hutton and Balfour, there is hardly any doubt that Hutton’s link with Balfour was through objects. In fact in his first letter to Balfour, dated 25 March 1916, Hutton mentioned sending Naga objects like “the Angami conch shell [...] the big daos of the Phom and Konyak villages...”<sup>3</sup> (Hutton to Balfour). Apart from these, instances of objects being sent to the museum were replete in Hutton’s many letters to Balfour.

In 1919 Hutton wrote to Balfour clearly stating his eagerness to meet the man in person saying that “I am much looking forward to meeting you” (Hutton to Balfour, 16 February). So it seems that a large exchange of letters as well as the sending of objects had set a tone of familiarity between the two before they met in person. I have prepared a chronological table to show the possible points of contact between Hutton and Balfour and the many ways in which they are connected. From Figure 1 it is easy to tell how Balfour and Hutton moved in the same social and intellectual circles. It is also quite clear that Balfour held various positions, which meant that he had powerful connections. Aware of this fact, Hutton felt that he could lobby for resources for amateur anthropologists like himself and apparently sought Balfour’s recommendation to push through the publication of his monograph *The Angami Nagas*. Hutton wrote: “[...] if you could get at the Assam government through the Anthropological Institute, it would

**Figure 1. Connections between John Henry Hutton and Henry Balfour**

Year	Henry Balfour	Year	John Henry Hutton
1904	President of Anthropological section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science	1903–1907	Student at Worcester College, Oxford
1905	Founding member of the Oxford Committee	Year unknown	Member of the University of Oxford
1909	President of the Museums Association	1909	Joined the Indian Civil Service
1923	President of the Folklore Society	1915	Member of the Folklore Society; Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Assam
1922–1923	Visited the Naga Hills	1917–1935	Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills
1924	Fellow of the Royal Society	1920	Director of Ethnography, Assam

probably help tremendously” (Hutton to Balfour, 16 February 1919). As for the second monograph, the letter revealed how Hutton fretted he would not be able to induce the university press to publish *The Sema Nagas*. He wrote: “I imagine it is endowed and if so, it functions out to publish works that can’t pay their own cost.” Clearly Hutton is seeking Balfour’s intervention to get his monographs published as he was finding it difficult to get funds from the Assam Government.

Balfour’s foreword to Hutton’s monograph *The Sema Nagas* (1921a) is also another indication of Hutton’s close association with Balfour by acknowledging him as his academic mentor and godfather to his book. What emerged from their friendship was Balfour’s visit to the Naga Hills in 1922–23 which formed an important juncture in shaping Hutton’s collecting of Naga artefacts. Since then, all collections from eastern and north-eastern India were donated to the museum by the collectors via Hutton. As a principal collector from Assam and the Naga Hills, one may ask in what way the idea of cultural evolution and Balfour’s idea of the Pitt Rivers Museum influenced Hutton’s collecting.

The study of material culture through objects formed a fundamental part of major theoretical debates of the day. W. H. Flower who spent his career associated with museums had claimed that objects were “one of the most potent means of registering facts and making them available for future study and reference [...]” (Flower 1989, 253). Speaking in a similar vein, Balfour shared his eloquence on the efficacy of artefacts to demonstrate geographical distribution, affording valuable clues to the intricate problems of racial dispersal and migration routes as well as supplying evidence of the cultural contact between various peoples (Haddon 1940). It was quite obvious that for these anthropologists, notes George

Stocking, “knowledge was thought of as embodied in objects” (Stocking 1985, 114). One may take the view that within the cultural-evolutionist paradigm, the central role is allocated to artefacts as data in order to study subject peoples who lacked written evidence or histories, so as to provide understanding of whether a particular culture that possessed a given category of artefact was thought to be of considerable significance in determining the evolutionary stage of the society, or conversely, in tracing the linkages through which a given technology had historically diffused this culture (Hanlon & Robert 2000, 5).

In this framework Balfour’s choice of objects from the Naga Hills is understandably important to ethnographic collecting. Balfour’s intention was, however, that objects had an intrinsic appeal for the ethnographer. The choices of objects were to be based on the general principle of ‘affinity and divergences’, on the line of diffusion and culture contact. The items sent to the museum, such as conch shell, daos, celts and cloth, were thus specific, which also suggests that these items must have been either unique in the sense of indigenous origin or had gone through some modifications (technologically) that would fit well into the typological series in the Pitt Rivers Museum. In sending objects, Hutton made sharp observations about the beginning of change in the design of Naga cloth, as in comparing the case of the Rengma cloth made in Themokedima village to that of the Insuma village. It may be noted here that the Themokedima Rengma cloth referred to by Hutton had already been sent to the Pitt Rivers Museum (Hutton to Balfour, 12 June 1920). When Hutton saw the Rengma cloth from Insuma village, he recognised differences from that of the Themokedima cloth by giving fine details of the change in patterns. In the letter to Balfour, Hutton expressed his anxiety that the designer from Insuma village did not know the significance of the patterns in the cloth (Hutton to Balfour, 26 May 1921). To Hutton, such modifications revealed loss of culture and originality which meant the cloth might not fit into the typological series of the museum. This illustrates the fact that Hutton was more concerned with the significance, symbols and meanings attached to the artefact, unlike Balfour, for whom the anatomical structure of an artefact took a focal point in understanding change and linkages.

Thus, for Balfour it was important that specimens collected be of ethnological value. For this reason, Hutton was particularly instructed “to give plenty of time to ethnology and the distribution of arts and appliances etc” so that the specimens would be worth investigating for a wider comparative study within the several Naga tribes (Balfour to Hutton, 7 March 1923). For instance, Balfour had shown interest in the special use and distribution of the bull-roarer among the Nagas as well as tattooing implements and bows among the then untouched Naga tribes. He was curious to find out “if over the frontier the bull-roarer retained still

a ceremonial or magical use. I am much intrigued by finding it in Khonoma – even though as a toy. Do you know if the children are prevented from sounding it at special times e.g. before harvest is reaped etc [?]" (Balfour to Hutton, 7 March 1923). Balfour's pick of the bull-roarer was interesting as this object was not only familiar to English country lads but this so-called folk toy was also found in Australia, New Guinea, North and South America, Africa and the rest of Europe. Although known as a toy, its common occurrence in male initiation rites has made it one of the classic subjects of cross-cultural enquiry among anthropologists since 1880 (Dundes 1976). The bull-roarer was believed to have ritual purposes to summon rain and wind but strangely this toy was kept secret from women (Hagens n.d.). Despite its various uses, the particular importance of the bull-roarer was that it had intrigued anthropologists who had argued for its significance in the theories of diffusion and independent invention (Hagens n.d.; Dundes 1976). Considered as a favourite subject of discussion among anthropologists for its widespread distribution, the bull-roarer in Khonoma (Naga Hills) caught Balfour's attention and he intended to further investigate its uses by the Nagas.

Having such an intense interest in the Nagas, it was hardly a surprise that an invitation brought Balfour to the Naga Hills in the winter of 1922–23. With nothing short of an official visit and a well-planned itinerary, Balfour set out his imperatives to explore evolutionary development of objects through history and across different cultures. Balfour's visit indeed marked a significant turn in Naga collecting. Not only was collecting intensified for the Pitt Rivers Museum, it further ensured a flow of objects from the Naga Hills through Hutton and his colleague J. P. Mills. It was said that the number of objects accessed in the Pitt Rivers Museum for the year 1923 alone was placed at the highest total of 3188 (Hutton Collection). Since Balfour's visit, a systematic collection of all items of material culture seemed to have followed. Weapons, bows, textiles, art and craft were items that formed the bulk of Naga collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Balfour was also particularly interested in music and collected many musical instruments, which formed the foundation of the Pitt Rivers Museum's impressive ethnomusicology collection. When Balfour set out to the Naga Hills, his main agenda was to collect 'something musical' (musical artefacts) which he could add to his growing collection. So when he heard the sounds of a primitive clarinet being played some way off, "I chased around till I found the small boy musician and promptly purchased his instrument". The instrument he described was of "a type hitherto unrecorded from the Naga Hills. It was unknown to Hutton and Mills and I was delighted to get it" (Balfour Diary, 30 October 1922). Balfour had a reason to be delighted as this primitive clarinet would fit as a perfect example

of 'evidence' and 'proof' to illustrate the evolution and survival of a type not recorded or collected from the Naga Hills.

Another aspect of Balfour's collecting was his attention to decorative art. His tour diaries reveal the objects he collected. For instance, when he visited Wakching village Balfour picked up "a Konyak pipe carved with human figures in relief" (Balfour Diary, 14 April 1922). While on his tour to the Angami village, he collected "a pair of dance-baldrics (worn over the shoulders and crossing diagonally) and a pair of ear ornaments" (Balfour Diary, 16 September 1922). He also obtained "an ingeniously modelled toy, a percussion gun" on his visit to Swemi village (Balfour Diary, 8 October 1922). Balfour also collected a huge number of Naga craft items through business transactions and gifts from Naga families and friends. Some objects were for a price, like the Ang's stool from Wakching (3 rupees), a weeding hoe with an X-shaped handle (4 annas<sup>4</sup>), and 2 cupping horns (2 annas); he also bought a dao blade from the smith for 2 rupees and a fine ivory armband for 85 rupees from an Ao Naga (Balfour Diary, 30 November 1922).

Besides Balfour's own 'fieldwork', Hutton's detailed references to the objects and artefacts being sent to the Pitt Rivers Museum indicate their importance to his collecting activity. Hutton's letters revealed the many occasions when he sent objects. On one case he wrote: "I will send it sometime in a case by boat [...] as I have a lot of other things to send" (Hutton to Balfour, 25 March 1916), and elsewhere Hutton mentioned that he arranged the objects to be "posted direct to Balfour" (Hutton to Balfour, 2 July 1935).

In short, the collecting activity of Hutton and Balfour and their Naga collection reveal the intellectual agendas of the collectors, and the Pitt Rivers Museum as a site that not only functioned as a laboratory for anthropological theories or the showcase of empire, but also provided the space, in the case of Hutton, to advance his professional interest as an administrator-collector through the close relationship between Oxford anthropology and colonial rule. As for Balfour, the emergence of anthropology as a museum-based science would enhance the public profile of the Pitt Rivers Museum as well as fulfil its role in public education.

### **Hutton the collector: a glass case of native things**

Hutton's diaries and accounts describe the objects he collected, which included the everyday to the ornate, anything from "a carved wood-cock to as ordinary as an unidentified snipe" (Hutton Diaries, 14 December 1934). Balfour who had visited him in 1922, also observed that even his bungalow was "crammed with Naga and other curios [...]" (Balfour Diary, 14 September 1922). For Hutton, every aspect of life became the intrinsic interest for the collection of objects. Hutton's



comprehensive collection of artefacts from the area where he was employed was to facilitate a cross-cultural comparison of types of artefacts as well as to locate local differences. His notes, which were compiled carefully, included observations on the similarity of objects, for example the “flint and steel [...] as well as the cowrie belt which were both common to the Southern Konyaks and the Changs” (Hutton Diaries, 13 November 1922). Hutton’s diaries also give account of resemblances of Naga artefacts to artefacts from other cultures in South-East Asia and Oceania. For instance, he wrote of the resemblance of Tobu basket-work hats (Konyak Naga area) to those of the Igorot in the Philippines. In another instance, an iron hoe from Ledo in the north-west of the Konyak Naga country was compared with a stone hoe of exactly the same type from Malay (Hutton Diaries, 13 November 1923). While his administrative duties took him on tours to unvisited Naga territories, his anthropological interests would have him always searching for something ‘exotic’, the ‘queer’ and the ‘ingenuous’; so much so that when he went over to the frontier in Kalyo-Kengyu in Yimtsunger country, he expressed frustration in a letter to Balfour when he found that the village was “very dull indeed! And practically no material culture of any novelty or interest” (Hutton to Balfour, 31 March 1935). To add to his frustration, he found “the village squalid, without art and very poor” (Hutton Diaries, 13 March 1935). Through his collecting, Hutton was drawing a particular conclusion about the Naga village: for him the richness of the village was based on material artefacts that were worthy of anthropological enquiry. The presence of artefacts was meant to determine the salvage factor as well as use for typology and the theories of historical diffusion.

Hutton’s collecting also led to identification of various artefacts with the Naga tribes. As Hutton collected objects in the Naga Hills, the objects were assigned to particular tribes, for which they functioned as an identifying badge. Hutton’s particular references to the Angami conch shell, the big daos of the Phom and Konyak, the Rengma cloth made in Themokedima village, the Tangkhul head-dress, Chui carvings, etc., are all illustrative of the creation of a classificatory system according to which a diversity of facts could be arranged. For instance, daos, which are commonly used by the Nagas as weapons of warfare, are distinctly differentiated from the big daos of Phom and Konyak villages. The daos were clearly identified not only by size but as Hutton noted: “I have not seen a Naga dao that was not plane-convex. It was a Konyak dao fresh from the forge at Wakching with a flat edge on both sides. I fancy it was about the first Naga dao ever made so. That was in 1916, and I have not seen any more since” (Hutton 1921b, 257).

Quite remarkable in Hutton’s collection was the fact that weapons formed the largest number of objects collected from the Naga Hills. Two factors can be attributed to weapon collections. One, it was an offshoot of Pitt Rivers’

intellectual interest in weaponry which was to show the evolution of design from the simple to the complex (Petch 2006, 253). This interest of Pitt Rivers, established as a maxim, assumed central significance in Hutton's ethnological collection. It only seemed natural then for Hutton to follow this principle to illustrate the development that had taken place in those branches of human culture. Secondly, Naga weapons such as daos and spears were given to officers as a token of submission. Early references to such submission were re-

corded in the tour diary of Woodthorpe when he wrote: "I accepted a spear in token of submission" (Woodthorpe 1876). The Assam Administration Report also gave an account of a *gaonbura* (village chief) who "was made to show his formal submission to Government in the presence of his villagers by presenting the Deputy-Commissioner with a dao and a spear" (R88404). Another fact was that daos form a major item in gift-giving. They were a traditional gift item among the Nagas. These narratives divulge the reason for Hutton's large collection of weapons.

However, Hutton's particular interest in crossbows was conspicuous in this weapon collection. Inspired by Balfour, Hutton closely followed the various works on bows. Balfour's earliest work "On the structure and affinities of the composite bow" was published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* (Balfour 1890).<sup>5</sup> When Balfour visited the Naga Hills, he particularly instructed Hutton to "study [...] the bow among the untouched Naga tribes" (Balfour to Hutton, 7 March 1923). Following his chosen subject of crossbows, Hutton began by identifying the Naga tribes that were familiar with the use of the bow and the arrow. He observed that the Changs, Kalyo-Kengyu, Sangtam and Naked Rengmas use powerful crossbows and poisoned arrows. In his article "Use of the bow among Naga tribes of Assam", published in *Folklore* in 1922, he reported that the crossbow was used by a number of Naga tribes towards the north and east who were in touch with the Singphos or with villages who were in trade communication with them. Even some of the Semas had acquired the use of the crossbow from neighbours further east, but used only a wooden quarrel without the usual iron head. For Hutton, the crossbow was not merely a weapon of war but it was a craft where aesthetic sensitivity and functionality became points of comparison among the Naga tribes

### Figure 2. Hutton's top seven collected items

The items were collected from India, Burma, Bangladesh, the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom.

Rank	Class	N of objects
1.	Weapons (definite)	847
2.	Ornaments and beads	562
3.	Clothing	442
4.	Status	407
5.	Currency	383
6.	Tool or weapon	330
7.	Basketry	251

(Hutton 1922d). Naga snares too formed an area of interest to Hutton, and these find a mention in his letters to Balfour. He wrote: “I sent specimens of the Phom form to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford”, while the specimens of the Konyak snare, recorded Hutton, “were being taken for the Pitt Rivers Museum by Mr Balfour” (Hutton 1922a; 1922c).

### **Heads and tales: collectors and Naga encounters**

While acknowledging that ethnographic collecting was a worldwide phenomenon, collecting of human heads has always captured the imagination of the west. Recently the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna planned to hold an exhibition that was to show human skulls from the Naga region of India.<sup>6</sup> The museum sought approval from the Naga tribes: the curator Christian Schicklgruber visited and consulted the tribes, who told him they neither wanted the heads back nor objected to them being exhibited. These were the skulls preserved by the Nagas as trophies of slain enemies which were collected by Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf, an Austrian anthropologist, in 1936. Furer-Haimendorf participated in the Pangsha expedition and recorded his experience in graphic detail in his essay *Return to the Naked Nagas* (1939).

I was determined to try my luck with the trophies of Pangsha's colony. Quickly I cut four heads from the head tree and packed them into a carrying basket [...] I hoisted the gruesome booty on my back [...] as I wanted to take them home as museum specimens [...] (Furer-Haimendorf 1976, 127).

The heads that Furer-Haimendorf collected were brought to the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna. The curator claimed that after transport these heads were not seen again until his exhibition. He believed that the approval of the Nagas legitimized the exhibiting of the skulls (ASEMUS 2011).

The story of the heads takes us back to a time when Nagas were headhunters. With colonial rule in the Naga Hills headhunting was prohibited, yet this practice was of interest to the consumers of Naga ethnography in England. Thus collecting in the Naga Hills was shaped by very specific encounters in the region that tended to highlight particular themes of exoticism. The practice of headhunting remained of special interest to the British. Curious at the Nagas' keenness to bring home a head, or at least a finger, to gain the coveted head-taker status, the British saw this practise as a bloodthirsty superstition and a threat to colonial peace in the hills as it caused many incursions into British territory. They termed headhunting as 'barbaric' and 'savage', yet it gained popularity, not only because the

practise was recorded by anthropologists, but also because the British recorded it as administrators. The British retaliated effectively by taking out expeditions to punish the offenders for their head-taking raids in the unadministered Naga villages (Foreign Department 1886).<sup>7</sup> Although the British prohibited headhunting, head-taking raids persisted and instances like the Sakhai raid in December 1897, the Yachumi incident in 1900, and the Chinglong expedition of 1910–13, etc., were all duly recorded (Reid 1983, 127–129).<sup>8</sup>

When Hutton arrived in the Naga Hills, he also took a strong position against the practice of headhunting and reiterated the Government's policy that "he too could and would not tolerate headhunting [...]" (Hutton Diaries, 15 November 1921).<sup>9</sup> Despite administrative warnings, Hutton had to admit that the practice continued and cited an instance where he had to visit the Konyak village of Yungya in connection with a recent raid, in which

[...] the men of the Yungya village had wounded a man of the village of Kama-hu, pursued him in to the administered side of our frontier and there had killed him and taken his head (Hutton Diaries, 6 April 1923).

The object of Hutton's visit was to stop the practice of raiding and headhunting in adherence to the prohibition policy laid down by the British government. But in another such encounter with the raiding village of Yungya, Hutton took a different stance and gave an account on how he collected Yungya trophies consisting of skulls decorated with horns:

We brought away eighteen of the best or most typical of them. Five were complete human skulls [...] one of them must have died hard, for he was fearfully chopped about, and another had the jaw all broken up and an old spear-head thrust through the skull (Hutton 2002, 4–5; see also Hutton 1922b, 113–114).

This vivid account illustrates Hutton's eagerness to get the heads and his expertise in estimating the ferocity of the combat. It explains how he played out a role reversal from an administrator to a raider. By the use of the word "we", Hutton aligned himself with the scouts and porters (of the so-called 'primitive culture') in collecting the skulls, while his assertive description of the skull by giving minute details of the condition of the head implied that Hutton was demonstrating his capacity to recognize the differences and to grant distinction to the skulls.

Thus the Naga raids allowed colonial officers' punitive expeditions to be turned into an exercise for collecting Naga trophies. This meant that the colonial officers in some ways became eager participants in headhunting. By skilfully

using the Naga system of raiding and punishment, colonial officers like Hutton inserted into these existing practices the act of collecting heads and trophies which otherwise would not have been possible to get from the villages. Raids and punishment enabled administrators to rummage through and 'loot' artefacts of interest as proof of their exotic adventure and, by virtue of their authority, justify their collections even through violent means as an accepted norm. Thus such 'loot' becomes part of their collection of native things and represents tales of encounters.

## **Conclusion**

Hutton's collection of objects clearly represented a medley of various factors that included the collector's personal interests, the kind of communities he encountered as well as the specific period of collecting. While the phenomenon of collecting has been linked to colonialism and the anthropological discourse of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, collecting in the Naga Hills cannot be seen as an isolated case. In fact, the Naga collection in the Pitt Rivers Museum reflects a colonial situation that provided the general framework through which collectors like Hutton operated.

There is no doubt about the profound impact that Balfour had on Hutton's collecting; it also determined the way in which collected Naga objects would fit into the classificatory tradition of the Pitt Rivers Museum. However, in the matter of how and what was collected, I bring out the subtle yet significant differences in the two collectors – one a colonial officer and the other a museum curator. Hutton's colonial duties took him to different villages and gave him the opportunity to collect directly from the people, or even acquire artefacts according to the museum's needs. Operating within the colonial machinery, Hutton's collecting was built on relationships with the local people and the artefacts he collected assumed significance as they reminded him of shared encounters and lived experiences in the Naga Hills. Balfour on the other hand had a specific agenda in collecting artefacts from the Naga Hills. He knew what he wanted and his collecting was guided by his intellectual interests and by the museum he represented. For Balfour, therefore, his natural science training and approach played a key role in what he collected. While Balfour gave importance to the physical evidence of an artefact to make it more rigorous and scientific, Hutton's concern was more for the cultural meanings and symbolism that attached to the artefact, i.e. that they defined as a Naga tribe.

Despite the differences in approach, Balfour had grasped Hutton's sensitivity to local artefacts. When Balfour had shown particular interest in certain artefacts,

for example Naga crossbows, Hutton gave a comprehensive analysis of the crossbow in the Naga Hills, thus providing the material details that would enable Balfour to build up a complete picture of the manufacture and use of crossbows throughout the world. As such Hutton's collecting cannot be seen as an activity aloof from the global and local conditions but one that is intersected with the discipline of anthropology and the needs of the Pitt Rivers Museum. In collecting Naga artefacts, Hutton thus documented the lives of the people with whom he worked with, his shared experiences and shared memories as an officer and collector in the frontier.

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## Sources of illustrations

Figure 2 – Data: Title 60 from Pitt Rivers Museum History, 1884–1945. The Relational Museum. [http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/page\\_60.html](http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/page_60.html) [accessed 31 May 2013].

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Nagas live in the eastern corner of the north-east region of India. The Naga Hills were under colonial administration until India gained independence: the area became the sixteenth state of the Indian territory in 1963.

2 S. E. Peal was a tea planter in Assam and a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society who explored, collected objects and wrote articles on the Nagas. His statement of urgency to record the Nagas was taken up by later colonial officers like Hutton.

3 Here and below the texts of Balfour and Hutton are quoted as they appear in the original sources (ed).

4 Anna was a currency unit formerly used (until 1957) in India, equal to 1/16 rupee (ed).

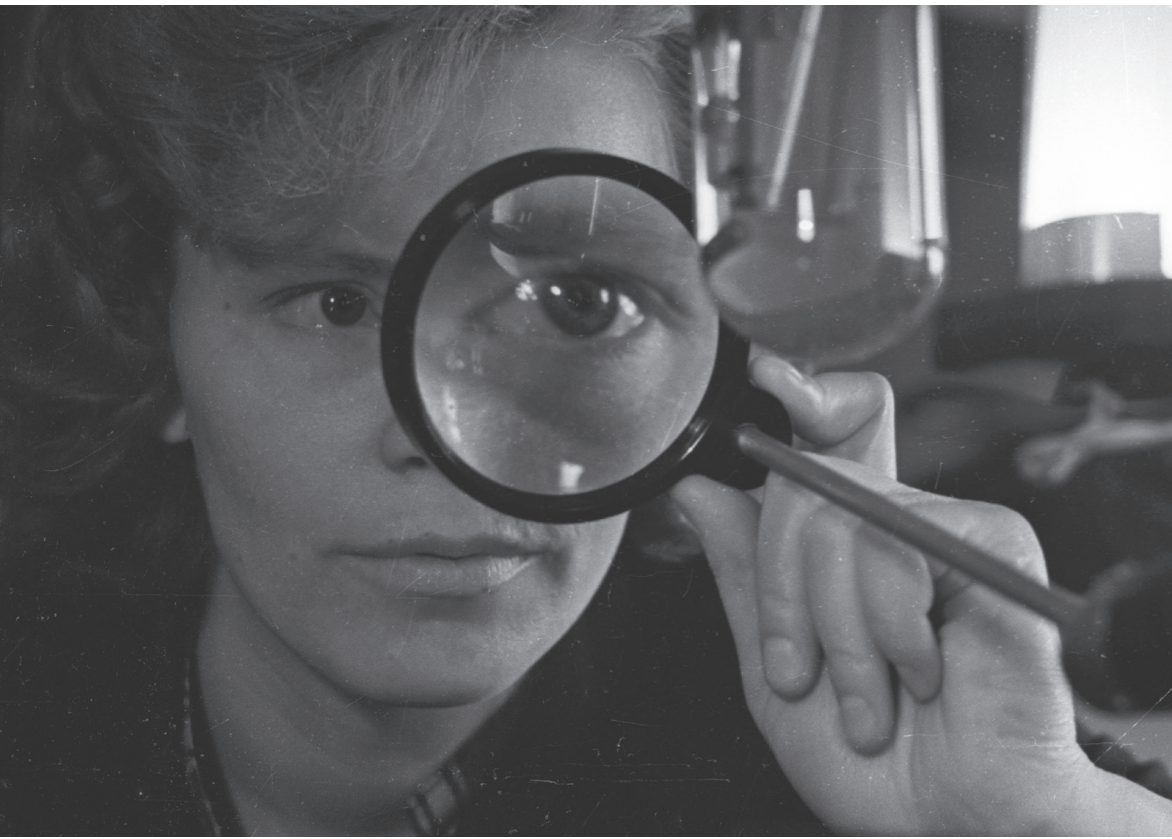
5 See also Balfour 1897 and Balfour 1909. On Prof. Henry Balfour see R.G.S. 1939.

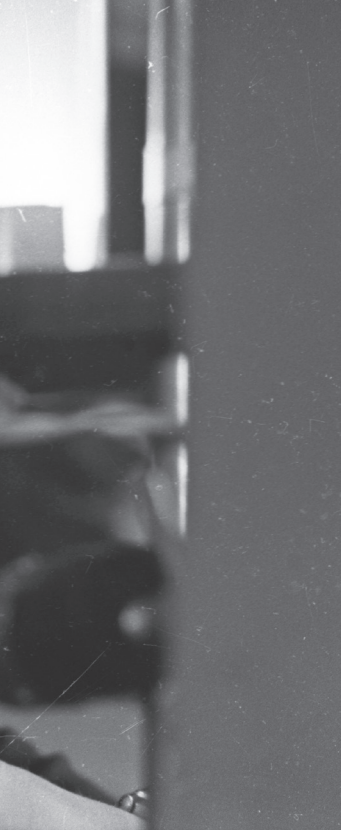
6 *Naga People – Jewelry and Ashes* (2012) in Weltmuseum Wien (ed).

7 The colonial administration in the Naga Hills was divided into three zones: (a) administered areas, (b) areas under political control, and (c) areas beyond political control. The unadministered Naga villages came under the third zone unit. It was the reason why the Government followed a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the Nagas, although it had the discretion to punish the villages when there were raids of a serious nature (Reid 1983, 101–177).

8 Robert Reid (1983) has given graphic illustrations of the various expeditions carried out by the British administration to check the Naga raids and also details of the British relations with the Nagas from 1881 to 1941.

9 Prior to Hutton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam in his letter to Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills (dated 11 April 1900) had laid down that the general policy of the British government regarding raids on the borders was to discourage interference beyond the Dikhu village, except when aggressions were committed on the people on the British side. This policy was continued by Hutton (Reid 1983, 129).





# **Waste and technologies**

# Waste and alterity in 'speculative fiction': an assessment of the de- and re-evaluation of material objects in selected dystopian novels

Brigitte Glaser

## Introduction

With his novel *A Scientific Romance* (1997), Ronald Wright revisits H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and has his protagonist David Lambert, a "historian of Victorian technology" (McGlamery 2005, 93), launch himself forward by this means into the year 2500, only to find London and the surrounding area a 'wasteland' devoid of human beings and turned into a massive rainforest area. Margaret Atwood projects a similar 'last man' scenario in her novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), set in an indeterminate location in North America in the not so distant future of the 2020s. There she has her main character Jimmy pass in review the events that led up to the demise of the human species and his own stranding in a dramatically changed world. Both texts describe an environment destroyed by human intervention, through ecological and genetic interference as well as social divisions. This environment is now populated by altered or new, technologically 'enhanced' organisms, and thus invites new forms of cross-species affiliation.

Scholarly evaluations of the two novels have emphasized their 'science fiction' layer, that is, the authors' representation of technological progress achieved through the crossing of biological and ethical boundaries, their use of the 'mad scientist' *topos* and its implied criticism of human hubris, and their depiction of environmental destruction. In my own analysis of this "speculative fiction"<sup>1</sup>, as Atwood prefers to call such works, I will place the focus on two rather different, yet interconnected themes, which have so far been neglected, the representation of what is left behind, that is, objects once denoting civilization but which have turned into rubbish or waste, as well as the authors' projection of a new form of alterity, the recognition of which is required of the protagonists in the process of their adjustment to the dystopian surrounding.

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 244–255. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

In the selected novels the two writers depart from the kind of work they had hitherto presented: Ronald Wright, a trained archaeologist and historian, is known as an author of (non-fiction) books of travel and history, especially accounts of journeys in Latin America, while Margaret Atwood stands out for her feminist approaches in fiction and poetry.<sup>2</sup> In the texts to be discussed, however, they appear to tread ground conventionally associated with science fiction and to be encountered also in popular forms of entertainment such as films and television series. Some of the issues addressed in the two novels, which will also be the focus of the present investigation, figure prominently especially in film productions like *Blade Runner*, *Gattaca* or *The Matrix*. Ridley Scott's 1982 classic *Blade Runner*, for example, takes up the aspect of Otherness in the form of man's creation of a post-human species, here genetically engineered robots called 'replicants' which are used for dangerous or menial work and assigned a limited life span. The film's plot revolves around the threat these androids pose when they infiltrate human society. Andrew Niccol's 1997 science fiction film *Gattaca* features a future in which pre-implantation genetic diagnosis is employed in the service of selecting 'valid' from 'in-valid' children and thus engineering and directing the course of the society along the lines of a supposedly liberal eugenics. *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowski brothers, in turn, projects a dystopian future in which human beings are deluded into perceiving a computer-simulated world as reality, while they are at the same time enslaved and parasitically exploited by intelligent machines.

Yet, while the three films are firmly positioned in the field of science fiction, since they depict worlds which seem to be technologically out of reach at this point of time, the works chosen for the present comparative analysis, while containing evident science-fiction elements, also intriguingly conjure up predominantly recognizable worlds, alternative versions, as it were, of the life as we know it. Both authors imply that first steps in the direction of the depicted dystopian realities have already been taken and both speculate about the end of the human species. In the novels as well as the films a philosophical dimension of enquiry is projected when the protagonists find themselves negotiating their position in the face of new, technologically enhanced species. The issues considered in the various 'works' include the consequences of human beings' reengineering of their environment and the human makeup, the destruction of the environment as the result of technological progress, questions of what it means to be human as well as fears that mankind may make itself obsolete by the technology it has developed and begun to use.

However, while in the films these issues, which lend themselves to philosophical speculation, are only alluded to due to the fast-paced development of filmic

plots, they are given more space in the novels, to the extent that the protagonists reflect on them or even address them. The objective of this paper's comparison of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Wright's *A Scientific Romance* is therefore to explore these novels as speculative fictions which contribute in their own way – here through establishing interconnections between waste, alterity and the post-human – to the discussion of the consequences of our technological progress. They ought to be read as transitional texts positioned between science fiction and 'mainstream' literature, as intriguing narratives which display a striking focus on material products transformed from daily used consumer items to waste objects whose original functions have been forgotten. As the following reading of these texts will show, the representation of material objects in the two novels points ahead to what is to happen to the human species which made and treasured them.

## Theory

In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) Arjun Appadurai suggests a re-assessment of the value of commodities as well as a shift of attention to the social biographies of things. An aspect he neglects in his approach, i.e. the value of waste and the associated logic of devaluation, is taken up by Michael Thompson in his study *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979) and in his article *Time's Square: Deriving Cultural Theory from Rubbish Theory* (2003). Both scholars draw attention to the lifecycles of things, that is, their natural process of aging and, in particular, the period between their commodity phase and their eventual disintegration. Thompson emphasizes as the central problem in the analysis of things the "disjunction between economic decay and physical decay" (Straw 1999) and the fact that objects continue to exist long after they have lost their value:

In an ideal world an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then disappear to dust. But, in reality, it usually does not do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where, at some later date it has a chance of being discovered (Thompson 1979, 9).

In the selected novels which describe post-apocalyptic settings, it is possible to detect an overlapping of this "ideal world" and the reality of the "timeless and valueless limbo" Thompson describes here as well as a re-evaluation of things, depending on the position and positioning of their beholder or user. The self-destruction of the human species is followed by the shift towards a state of obsolescence or uselessness of the things men left behind, which in turn induces

members of the new species to wonder about the roles and functions these things once had. This transition from valued objects to waste also affects the 'last man' in each of the novels. The recognition of the sudden loss of meaning or the sight of the decomposition of the objects his civilization had produced provokes moments of crisis in the respective protagonist of *A Scientific Romance* and *Oryx and Crake*, and even prompts an identification of this man and the objects he is familiar with and thus an awareness of his own impending demise.

In various texts which constitute what scholars have referred to as his 'ethics of deconstruction',<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas presents alterity as a kind of 'radical, absolute otherness' which resists the totalising violence of what he calls 'adequation'<sup>4</sup>, that is, the process by which the Other is rendered intelligible (cf Meffan & Worthington 2001, 135). Rather, the experience of alterity constitutes for Lévinas a subjective acknowledgement of the limits of the percipient's ability to know and invites self-critique: "[...] ethics occurs as the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness" (Critchley 2003, 5). 'Adequation', in contrast, would mean to reduce the Other to that which is the opposite of what is known and would therefore entail its re-inscription within binary logic. This distinction between 'radical otherness' and a kind of comparative Otherness emerges implicitly in both novels when the protagonists, each of them seemingly the 'last man' in each of the worlds described, are torn between, on the one hand, the natural ethical reaction of a sense of responsibility for what is left and, on the other hand, the acceptance of the utter difference of the new world and thus their own eventual exit from the same. In the process of the protagonists confronting the Other from a position of superiority and considering the possibility of extending support and guidance to him/her/it, a subversion of opposites and the subsequent deconstruction of the same are initiated when it becomes clear that the new or genetically enhanced species will be the only survivors. The deterioration or re-evaluation of objects accompanies this process. The shift from the human to the post-human and thus the outcome of the stories are therefore determined by the protagonists' confrontation of both waste and radical otherness and are prepared for through the process of (self-)reflection.

### **Narrative perspective**

Both Atwood and Wright locate this focus on the self in the narrative perspectives they use. *Oryx and Crake* is a seemingly linear, third-person narrative which is, however, rendered more complex through the juxtaposition of two time layers and its focalization through the protagonist. It is through different memories, presented in a roughly chronological manner, that is, memories of his childhood,



his friendship with the subsequently mad scientist Crake and his affection for the exotic beauty Oryx, that the distraught Jimmy tries to reconstruct the course of events that have led up to the catastrophe. Doing so, he ponders his own involvement and possible guilt. In *A Scientific Romance*, a first-person narrative, Wright uses a mixture of a retrospective autobiographical account, letters and entries in a travel journal to characterize the protagonist David Lambert as a spectator-archaeologist who similarly tries to make sense of the past, his own and that of his community. Through their alternation between the dystopian present and various past events that are retrospectively interpreted as foreshadowing the destruction of the human species both authors reinforce the impact which the discovery of a dramatically altered environment and the sudden dominance of a different species has on their protagonists' self-understanding.

## Things

Both novels project a dystopian setting in which very few people are left of a once flourishing civilization but in which remnants of these societies are still extant in the form of objects. At one time denoting ownership, signifying social status and familial affiliation, or reflecting leisure activities, these objects (which would normally have been handed on from one owner to another or would have been gradually forgotten or deteriorated) have been subjected to a sudden change in function when their owners disappeared. Implicitly, the two texts raise the question of what happens when no one is there any more to deal with what is left behind and when thus all formerly signifying objects suddenly become waste.

Ironically, both novels pay little attention to what we may consider the truly great achievements of humankind (e.g. architecture, painting, literature, music, etc.) but rather dwell on things which denote the dailiness of human life. Thus, on his visit to the future, David Lambert nostalgically reflects on items of an ordinary life which he has left behind: "Things that made up the sum of the world, which we had to keep on making and buying to keep ourselves diverted and employed – were just garbage-to-be" (Wright 1997, 185). One of the few rather extraordinary remnants of the past in *A Scientific Romance*, the motorway up north made of "ecolawn" or "ecoturf" – a "zero-maintenance lawn. No fertilizer, no weed killer, no pesticide, no watering, no mowing" (op cit, 163) – is seen by the archaeologist Lambert as "something horrible [...] living beyond its time like a zombie, defying a nature that has taken her revenge on its creatures" (op cit, 200). This re-evaluation or inversion of the value of objects is also taken up in *Oryx and Crake* when Jimmy remembers an argument he had had with Crake

on a subject which retrospectively seems to provide the meta-level of the rubbish topic in the text:

“When any civilization is dust and ashes,” [Jimmy] said, “art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that.”

“That’s not quite all that’s left over,” said Crake. “The archaeologists are just as interested in gnawed bones and old bricks and ossified shit these days. Sometimes more interested. They think human meaning is defined by those things too.” (Atwood 2003, 204).

Crake’s response suggests that the eventual assessment of humankind will indeed be based on what is left behind and on the interpretation of these remnants. That there is likely very little to remain is indicated early on in the narrative through repeated reference to the humidity-induced deterioration of objects, which, for example, produces, within only a short time, layers of mould covering most of what remains after all human beings have gone.

Owing to the process of disintegration, very few things are left from the long-distant past in Wright’s *A Scientific Romance*. Items still extant from the pre-disaster time several centuries ago are no longer usable because of the lack of the supporting technology (e.g. CDs) or because their former use is no longer known. Instead, this apparent rubbish is shown as having been re-defined and taken on new functions: for example, non-decomposable pieces of plastic such as former bottle caps have been re-appropriated as precious items suggesting wealth, status and beauty; car bodies from the 21st century are arranged to create a defensive line (Wright 1997, 234) or a triumphal gate (op cit, 235), thus giving new meaning to a place and denoting authority; and objects whose former function is no longer known, are arranged almost like an art work: “On the south wall was a bicycle seat with a handle bar above it, a traffic light, a kitchen clock (upside down), and a sconce-type porcelain urinal. The assemblage was disorienting, at once too odd and too familiar” (op cit, 236). Even though the few ‘things’ left from the past initially assist Lambert in his attempts to reconstruct the cause of the disaster, they are eventually non-conclusive because of their small number. Rather, the few familiar objects he comes across among the strange people in Scotland intensify his sense of alienation.

## Relating to the Other

Alterity takes on a new dimension in situations in which there is seemingly only one human being left of what was once a highly developed civilization. The quick spread of greatly contagious, deadly diseases leads in both texts to a world virtually deprived of human beings. The 'last man' of *Oryx and Crake*, who refers to himself as the abject "abominable Snowman" (a term also in use for 'Yeti', the humanlike monster said to haunt the mountainous Tibetan regions), finds himself left with a group of docile post-human beings and surrounded by increasingly hostile laboratory-spliced hyper-animals, while David Lambert in *A Scientific Romance* establishes his closest contact with an animal and responds to the tribe of surviving but presumably genetically altered black people in the Scottish highlands with alienation. Taking advantage of the animal's inexperience with regard to human beings – "That puma told me one thing as clearly as if it spoke English: it had never seen a human being in its life" (Wright 1997, 119) – Lambert nevertheless allows a closeness that bridges the species divide, probably because of his own need for companionship:

Graham ate slowly, crunching, shaking his head, shooting me glances as if to ask whether I meant him to have it all. I said: "You're a panther with manners." He got up, moved closer, flopped down with a sigh, his back almost touching my leg. Without thinking I reached out and stroked his flank, and he turned his head to me and closed his eyes. I worked my hand over the bony shoulder blades and powerful muscles, up the loose skin of the neck, my nails deep in the thick fur (Wright 1997, 153).

Similarly, he is later able to transcend temporarily the huge cultural gap between himself and the members of the Clan of Macbeth, again because of his growing need to belong to a community: "[...] the present was burying the past. [...] It crossed my mind that I might fit in here: marry Mailie, become the laird's tutor, stay on as a bringer of change and renaissance" (op cit, 267). His eventual realization, however, that he would never be able to truly connect with the Other induces him to leave behind this to him increasingly incomprehensible future world and its inhabitants.

'Radical, absolute otherness' is clearly indicated by Atwood in her projection of the Crakers, those post-human beings who are the result of species-crossing experimentation, as they combine the outward appearance of humans with features which are either artificial or taken from animals. Their extraordinary beauty and variety in skin colouring, their luminous green eyes, smell of citrus fruit,

their self-healing mechanism (through purring over wounds), their enhanced growth rate, scent-marking activities and neurological restructuring, and above all their digestive system which is modelled on the *Leporidae* (i.e. hares and rabbits), mark them as utterly different.

On his first visits they'd thought – judging from his appearance – that he must be hungry, and they'd offered him food – a couple of handfuls of choice leaves and roots and grass, and several caecotrophs<sup>5</sup> they'd kept especially for him – and he'd had to explain carefully that their food was not his food (Atwood 2003, 193).

Remembering his various encounters with the Crakers, he dwells on the ironies connected with their Otherness, as the latter does not fit any of the known categories, especially those developed within the context of colonialism and the exploration of faraway countries:

*When dealing with indigenous peoples, says the book in his head – a more modern book this time, late twentieth century, the voice a confident female's – you must attempt to respect their traditions and confine your explanations to simple concepts that can be understood within the contexts of their belief systems.* Some earnest aid worker in a khaki jungle outfit, with netting under the arms and a hundred pockets. Condescending self-righteous cow, thinks she's got all the answers. He'd known girls like that at college. If she were here she'd need a whole new take on *indigenous* (Atwood 2003, 118).

Developed in a laboratory and without any knowledge of the world, the Crakers are meant to replace human beings and embark on a more successful existence. Jimmy enables them to do so when, in an early paternalistic phase, he leads them out of the building where they had been kept to a safe and meadowy area near the ocean where they can peacefully graze and follow their inherent natural needs. He subsequently interprets his paternalism less as an act of altruism than as his own need for companionship:

I could leave them behind, he thought. Just leave them. Let them fend for themselves. They aren't my business.

But he couldn't do that, because although the Crakers weren't his business, they were now his responsibility. Who else did they have?

Who else did he have, for that matter? (Atwood 2003, 416).

Succumbing to an inclination towards 'adequation' (Lévinas 1987), he begins teaching them about the world he has known. He abandons his efforts, however, after questioning his own status and acknowledging their alterity.

The strategy of 'adequation' is similarly employed by David Lambert in the ways in which he relates to the members of the Clan of Macbeth, whom he regards as filthy, illiterate and irredeemably backward. Yet after extending to them his curiosity, a sense of guardianship and, more than anything, his scholarly interest, he leaves them to their foreseeable fate (of becoming extinct) and decides to return to his own time, en route meeting again with Graham, the puma, whose radical difference he has never put in question, despite the closeness between them, with both of them seemingly being the last of their kind.

### **Waste and alterity combined**

Especially in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* the two aspects of waste and alterity are shown to overlap in several ways. Lacking any knowledge of the use of objects, the Crakers nevertheless collect items of waste on the beach and bring them to Jimmy for identification. He briefly comments on them with "These are things from before," (Atwood 2003, 9) but does not explain what they are, thus leaving the creatures in the subhuman state assigned to them by Crake. The new post-human world is presented as being also a post-materialist and post-consumerist world. The fact that the Crakers, as the only surviving beings of a higher intelligence, are projected as grass- and root-eating and as feeding on caecotrophs, reinforces this situation. In fact, from a human perspective, they may even be regarded as creatures thriving on waste products (i.e. the multiply digested caecotrophs).

Along similar lines, Jimmy, after the disaster a dirty and alcohol-prone scavenger, who searches abandoned homes for edibles and usable items,<sup>6</sup> has become a useless leftover product of the (self-)destroyed 'civilization' which had spawned him. He feels deformed when he compares himself to the Crakers (Atwood 2003, 50), describes his appearance in the mirror as that of a "stranger" (op cit, 279) and eventually comes to see himself as radically other: "He's humanoid, he's hominid, he's an aberration, he's abominable" (op cit, 369). Jimmy in fact seems to undergo a gradual transformation during which he voluntarily abandons his humanity: adapting to the post-human environment marked by excessive heat, humidity, and thunderstorms, he regards clothing as "weird bondage gear" (op cit, 401) and is inclined to imitate animals in their behaviour. Burdened by the immense heat, "[h]e wishes he could cool himself by hanging out his tongue" (op cit, 46), and, when on a scavenging trip to one of the compound homes, he uses the toilet in an unusual way: rather than flushing it, "[...] he sticks his head down [the toilet

tank] and drinks like a dog" (op cit, 327). Ironically, rubbish in the form of a piece of glass lying on the ground turns out to be the cause of a serious infection which will likely lead to his death.

## Conclusion

In the post-apocalyptic phase, there is a destabilization of the value of things, since human beings, as value-giving authority, have had to make way for post-human forms of existence. These life forms which, from a human perspective, are identified as Other, have become the dominant species. Both protagonists are eventually confronted with the choice of whether to assert their own humanity or resignedly accept the demise of their kind. Jimmy, when faced with the possibility of explaining the technological and cultural achievements of the human race to the Crakers and of even shaping their future development according to his own preferences, opts against it:

Maybe I could do some social interaction, thought Jimmy. Help them invent the wheel. Leave a legacy of knowledge. Pass on all my words.

No, he couldn't. No hope there (Atwood 2003, 404).

Since the depletion of the planet's coal and fossil fuel stores renders a repetition of the previous economic and cultural development unlikely, both protagonists, already afflicted by deadly diseases, leave the surviving species to fend for themselves.<sup>7</sup> All that remains of humankind are material objects turned to rubbish and ignored by the other species, or things whose functions have been re-defined and which have been adapted in use to new needs and preferences. Through their setting up of a connection between reconfigured material objects and alterity, the authors of the two novels force their readers to face the possibility of an almost unthinkable future, an utterly dystopian world characterised by the demise of life as known to them. At the same time, readers are invited to explore the notion of alterity and, by implication, arrive at a self-critical attitude, not only towards their actions and perceived values but also towards the material surroundings humankind have created and must maintain.

Although the two novels raise the spectre of bleakly dystopian worlds, these representations are at the same time recognizable as alternative versions of our own world, with both the protagonists and the material objects they are familiar with or encounter again in the projected future representing the connecting points between the fictions and the readers. Similar to the science fiction films mentioned in the introduction but in much more pronounced ways, the two

novels raise philosophical questions about man's unique position in the world, his ability to relate to other species and his emotional investment in material objects which, in their transition towards obsolescence and ultimately waste, foreshadow his own demise. In both texts, objects such as glass bottles, car parts, books or pieces of electronic devices, which are reflective of the dailiness of human life, are shown to have become signifiers of the shift from the human to the post-human. Since the objects' previous functions as well as the conditions under which they were produced are irretrievable, the novels point towards a critique of our market- and growth-oriented economy fed as it is by new scientific inventions and driven by a spirit of competitiveness. Implicitly, it is therefore the interplay of social, economic and ecological concerns that is problematized in these texts. It is depicted as having fallen out of balance, with economic concerns having gained the upper hand. The logical consequence, however, which Atwood and Wright ironically suggest for this development of increasingly neglecting social ties and ecological concerns in favour of economic considerations, is the obsolescence and ultimately disappearance of the human species as well as the destruction of objects which are part of its cultural production, and thereby also the complete removal of hitherto successful forms of economic exchange. All that eventually remains is the post-human, with regard to which no clear predictions are given.

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## Filmography

- Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott. The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Warner Bros.
- Gattaca* (1997), directed by Andrew Niccol. Columbia Pictures Corporation, Jersey Films.
- The Matrix* (1999), directed by Andy Wachowski & Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, Groncho II Film Partnership, Silver Pictures.

## Notes

1 "I said I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper – for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can't do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go – and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth." (Atwood 2004, 513). For a similar view on *A Scientific Romance*, see McGlamery 2005, 95.

2 Atwood had tried her hand successfully at dystopian literature once before when she published in 1985 the award-winning novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.

3 See in particular Lévinas's *The Trace of the Other* (1986) and *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity* (1987).

4 For details on his use of the term 'adequation', see Lévinas's preface to his lecture *Totality and Infinity* (1969).

5 Certain mammals, especially rabbits, eat pellets of food produced by them through digestion and expulsion through the anus. These pellets may be multiply eaten and digested.

6 Snowman is most delighted when he finds things that ironically are not much more than rubbish: "Chocolate in square. Real chocolate. A jar of instant coffee, ditto coffee whitener, ditto sugar. Shrimp paste for spreading on crackers, ersatz but edible. Cheese food in a tube, ditto mayo. Noodle soup with vegetables, chicken flavour. Crackers in plastic snap-top. A stash of Joltbars. What a bonanza." (Atwood 2003, 328).

7 These species are, in Wright's novel, a pre-modern clan with a seemingly 'non-progressive' tribal structure and a lack of offspring, and, in Atwood's novel, a biologically intricately structured and environmentally perfectly adapted form of life which, for all its human appearance, is in fact a product of species-crossing experimentation.



## Toilet cultures: boundaries, dirt and disgust

Remo Gramigna

A lot can be learned about a culture  
from looking at their bathrooms and their toilets.

Claire Loos (Opel 1985, 79)

We are born between excrement and urine.  
St. Augustine<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The modern contemporary toilet (both domestic and public) has an important role in the daily cleanliness liturgy in occidental societies. The toilet is “the icon of the twentieth century” (Morgan 2002, 2). Undoubtedly, as conceived in the West, the toilet is the first place outside of bed where one begins one’s day and the last place before bed when ending the evening (Kira 1976). Toilets display a multitude of meanings and involve different competences and practices. Loo culture is indeed a topic linked to a broad range of issues such as dirt and waste, cleanliness and hygiene, gender, sex and sexuality, embodiment and body excrements, human senses, social categories and divisions, spatial categorisations, socialisation and communication, language and symbols, personal privacy, the politics of waste management, obscenity, violence and taboo, art and graffiti, just to mention a few. One may ask why toilets ought to be a focus of academic enquiry. Why are restrooms of high relevance for cultural analysis? For some, the current topic represents a sheer scatological waste of time. The present account dwells on the opposite side of the fence, so to say, in as much as it claims that it is licit, fruitful and challenging to find a place within academia for an enquiry about lavatories. Thus, the current paper is written starting from the premise that toilets should be regarded as crucially important objects of research for semiotics and, in general, for disciplines that are concerned with culture and society. The toilet, I hold, is a rich and meaningful microcosm inasmuch as it provides clues for understanding the relationship between nature and culture, the perception of the human body and bodily waste in a given society, the collective representations

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Kannike, A. & Lavoilette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 256–279. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

of dirt and cleanliness embedded in urban and domestic landscapes and, last but not least, competences and practices of people who in diverse socio-cultural settings use (or do not use) such facilities. In a nutshell, the toilet is culture (Greed 2003, VII).

It is my intention to demonstrate the importance of the present topic by showing how toilet shapes the nature-culture relationship: how this connection contributes to enlightening conventional assumptions and perceptions of the human body and its excreta, and how it entails a particular relationship with socio-cultural representations of dirt and cleanliness, inscribed through design and urban landscape. As Olga Gershenson and Barbara Penner pointed out in the introduction to the recently published volume *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*: "Toilets become windows onto the processes by which cultures define, separate, and manage dirt, and thus they contribute to the maintenance or violation of ideal order" (Gershenson & Penner 2009, 13).

The first section of this article gives an overview of the state of the art by reviewing the most relevant studies on toilets and other related aspects of material culture. The second section formulates the main theoretical starting point and research question, namely the observation that one primary need that is common to all human beings – the elimination of bodily waste – is 'channelled' differently in diverse cultural settings. In other words, I will focus on the fact that, as Julia Kristeva among others has pointed out, "excremental abjection is the most striking example of the interference of the organic with the social" (Kristeva 1982, 75). This is followed by an overview of theoretical attempts to provide taxonomic categorisation of world toilets and European lavatories. The article proceeds to set forth a theoretical framework for the study of toilets that combines three concepts: the notion of *dirt* as elaborated by Mary Douglas (2002), Juri Lotman's concept of *boundary* (Lotman 1990; 2005) and William Ian Miller's theory on *disgust* (Miller 1997).

### **The toilet as an object of research**

There is an ample spectrum of approaches that tackle the issue at hand from different theoretical perspectives. Accounts on the evolution of the toilet as technology in different geographical settings and historical contexts are based on the civilising process with special regard to the development of the city, history of hygiene and the history of the bathroom as a social institution. The latter is sometimes treated together with the issue of bathing and body cleansing with a special focus on English and French societies (Corbin 1986; Dobell 1996; Lambton 1997; Miller 1997; Horan 1996; Kilroy 1984; Wright 1960). Accounts of

nineteenth-century European cities with specific attention to London and Paris and urban filth are abundant (Barnes 2006; Cohen & Johnson 2005). Dominique Laporte has provided an outstanding historical account informed by a psychoanalytic route in his *History of Shit* (1993 [1978]) in which he investigates the correlation between money and bodily waste. In his seminal work entitled *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (2000 [1939]), Norbert Elias has remarked that the rise of civilisation occurred by the increasing control over body excrements. In recent years lavatories have been the focus of sociological studies (Inglis 2001), and in particular public facilities have been analysed as sites for homosexual encounters<sup>2</sup> (Humphreys 1975) and from a feminist viewpoint as places of segregation and gender discrimination (Benhabib 1996; Butler 1993; Gershenson & Penner 2009). Within feminist and queer theory framework, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection has often been used, obtaining popularity and a vast range of applications (Mills 2006; Schweder 2009). In addition to these perspectives, toilets have been linked to the issue of power relations with special attention to the social construction of space (Foucault 1977; Lefebvre 1974). Particular accounts on toilets in non-Western societies deal with India, Japan and Africa (Chun 2002; Mitchell 2009; Srinivas 2002; Yamaguchi 1988). A study of the bathroom, its internal design and functionality that is still considered to be a classic in the field of architecture has been made by Alexander Kira (1976), while the two most recent and accurate sociological histories of excretory experience were published in the last decade (Inglis 2001; Molotch & Norén 2010), and at least since Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), the *pissoir* entered the realms of art and art criticism (Persels & Ganim 2004; Lydenberg 2009). It is also worth mentioning that there have been studies of toilet signs (Sensemaya 2008) and toilet graffiti (Butler 2006) as well as accounts on Estonian outhouse culture (Jürgen 2004).

From a strictly semiotic viewpoint, toilets have received less attention. Only a few exceptions may be listed, namely the ethno-semiotic analysis of the bathroom by Francesco Marsciani (2007) and a recent account on the travelling body which includes an elaboration of the semiotics of "excrementitious cultures" by Massimo Leone (2012a; 2012b). Other theoretical contributions rather focus on cognate issues such as the semiotics of 'trash' and 'pollution' (Anderson & Adams 1994<sup>3</sup>; Keskaik 2001; 2004; Posner 2000; Yamaguchi 1988).

Structural anthropology, with particular reference to the works of Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) and Edmund Leach (1964), represents a good starting point for the study of toilets, providing a useful conceptual framework through the category of dirt defined as "matter out of place" (Douglas 2002, 44). Before introducing the concept of dirt, as it has been conceptualised within the frame

of structural anthropology, an exposition on the biological ground of primary needs is in order.

### **When nature meets culture**

Anatomy is destiny, said Freud (1976, 320). Yet, biological processes are not limited to the sheer physiological aspect of human existence but intermingle with cultural and social aspects of life. Elimination of bodily waste reminds human beings of their inescapable and irreversible embodied condition as well as their 'animality'. Paul Rozin and his colleagues have argued that excrements are a cause of anxiety for man inasmuch as they are reminders of the close connection with animals (Rozin & Fallon 1987). Notably, bodily excrements are one of the most primitive and primordial indices in the evolutionary typology of signs. Signs are often related to the physiological processes of animals, such as metabolism. Each excrement is a 'natural sign' signalling the presence of that animal in a given environment – they are literally traces of their presence. For Lacan the disposal of body excreta is one of the features that marks the difference between humans and other animals.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as Elisabeth Shove pointed out, the body is “a reliably constant source of pollution” (Shove 2003, 148). The issue at stake may be stated in the following terms. The embodied condition of man is culturally, socially and semiotically mediated by means of sign systems. Bodily functions are human 'levellers', so to say, regardless of sex, gender, ethnicity and social status, and toilets are the places where such bodily democracy emerges. The toilet is “a great equalizer”<sup>5</sup>; or, as William Ian Miller remarked: “The anus as endpoint of the reductive digestive process is a democratizer” (Miller 1997, 99). Yet, biological aspects are strongly related, linked, intermingled and shaped by cultural connotations and social differences.

Let us recall at full length Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man* (1985 [1949]) in which the issue we are dealing with is pointed out with crystalline clarity in several passages:

Some sorts of behaviour will be manifested by all human beings regardless of how they have been trained. There is an organic 'push' in each different individual toward certain kinds of acts. But to each biologically given characteristics is imputed a cultural meaning (Kluckhohn 1985, 203).

There is thus no 'either-or' between nature and that special form of nurture called culture. Culture determinism is as one-sided as biological determinism. The two factors are interdependent. Culture arises out of human

nature, and its forms are restricted both by man's biology and by natural laws. It is equally true that culture channels biological processes – vomiting, weeping, fainting, sneezing, the daily habits of food intake and waste elimination (Kluckhohn 1985, 21).

Solving primary needs, biological and physical, constitutes the common denominator for each human being while coping with the environment. Following this line of thought, it may be argued that the way in which people cope with their biological need of getting rid of bodily waste, namely, people's excrementitious practices, may fall under Kluckhohn's rubric of culture conceived as the "total way of life of a people" (Kluckhohn 1985, 17).

It is sufficient to look back at history in order to notice how the reciprocal influences between nature and culture with respect to excretory practices and scatological manners have changed over time. Romans, for instance, developed an efficient system of sewers, and bath and body cleansing were part of social life (Hobson 2009). In contrast, in the Middle Ages biological excesses were tossed out of the windows. As many commentators have pointed out:

In medieval European cities, defecation was a problem. Both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie defecated in chamber pots set in the bedrooms and parlours that were emptied onto the streets by maids and footmen. In fact, until the 19th century, one of the many hazards of the European city was excrement falling on one from the sky as one walked down the streets (Srinivas 2002, 379–380).

Flush toilet, thought of as a contemporary technology present in Western societies, is a relatively recent discovery. Historically, shared public latrines have been a common feature of most communities, and are still the main facilities accessible in many parts of the world.

Private, sex-gendered lavatories were a modern and Western European invention, bound up with urbanization, the rise of sanitary reform, the privatization of the bodily functions, and the gendered ideology of the separate spheres (Gershenson & Penner 2009, 4–5).

There is not enough room in the present paper to linger over the history of hygiene and of the toilet as a technological device. It suffices to notice, however, that toilets have assumed in the course of history an apparent typological differentiation. To such differences we now shall turn.

## Typology of toilets

Up to this point, the term ‘toilet’ has been used in a very generic fashion to indicate the place where one gets rid of one’s bodily wastes. In this section I shall give an overview of the main differences of lavatories in terms of culture, style and design. In order to fulfil such a task I draw on Massimo Leone’s account of taxonomic attempts in the study of toilets (Leone 2012b, 249–250).

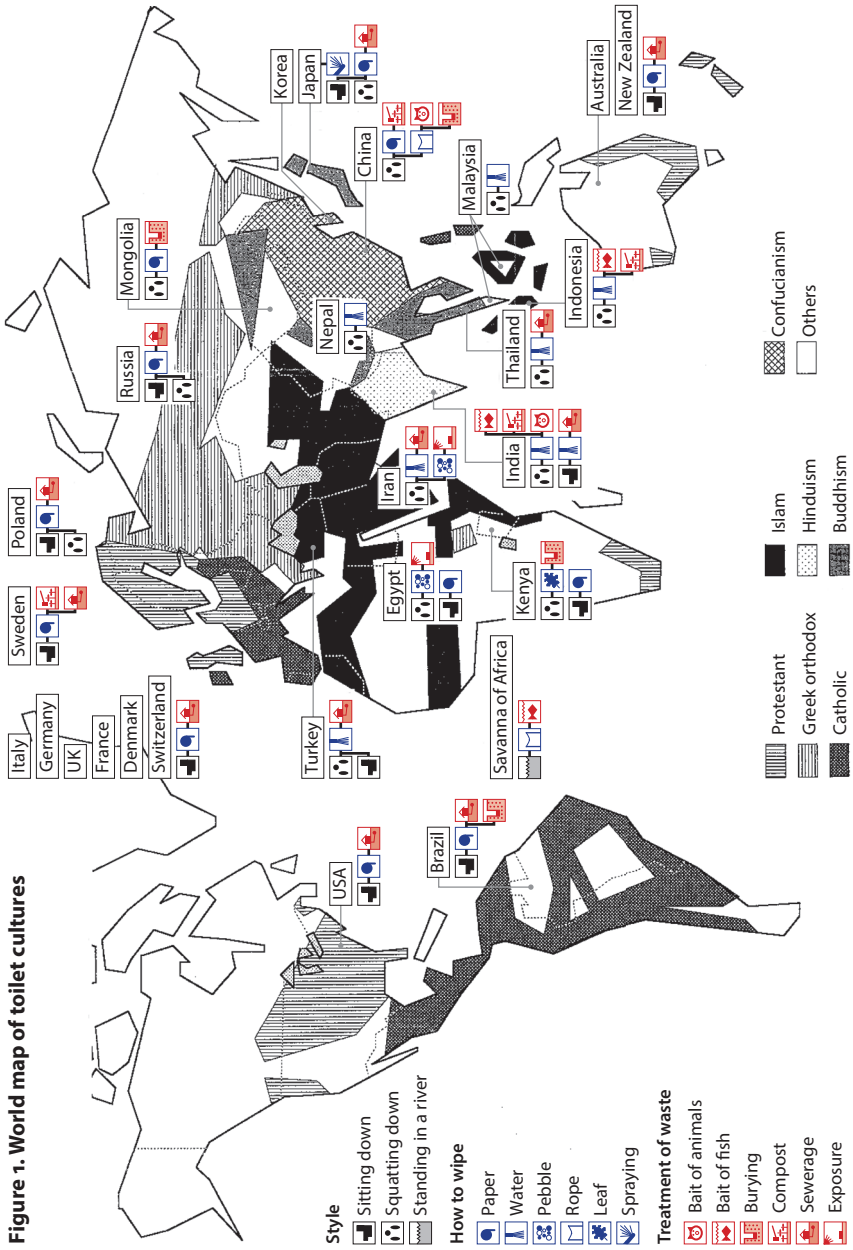
Let us start with the world map of toilets<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1), which was originally designed by the Toto Ltd group, a leading company in toilet manufacturing based in Japan. The map is reproduced by Allen Chun in his analysis of Japanese toilet culture (Chun 2002), discussed by Leone (2012a; 2012b) and employed by the anthropologist Francesca Bray who, on her website, explores the history of flush toilets (Bray n.d.). The Toto world map of toilets displays a thorough typology of toilets and includes three elements:

1. “Style”: the posture the body assumes in order to perform the eliminating process;
2. “How to wipe”: the ways of body cleansing that follow the elimination of bodily wastes;
3. “Treatment of waste”: the disposal of bodily excess.

Each of these elements includes various possibilities. The first one, “style”, bifurcates into three options, namely “sitting down”, “squatting down” and “standing in a river”. The second element, that is, “how to wipe”, includes the following six options: “paper”, “water”, “pebble”, “rope”, “leaf” and “spraying”. The third and last element, “treatment of waste”, includes six possibilities, that is, “bait of animals”, “bait of fish”, “burying”, “compost”, “sewerage”, and “exposure”. As Massimo Leone has noticed, such a map offers the possibility to articulate, for each geographical area, the “excrementitious syntagm” by choosing between the paradigmatic options offered by the map (Leone 2012b, 249–250).

It can also be noted, along with Leone, that in Figure 1 the world is mapped according to religious distinctions that are present in each area of the globe, and this seems to suggest a possible correlation between toiletry patterns and religions, which has, however, not yet been explored in contemporary anthropological research (Leone 2012b, 250).

It is worth mentioning that the Toto map of toilet cultures does not include, under the rubric “treatment of waste”, the ‘flying toilets’, that is, a common widespread practice in Kenyan slums that consists of ‘going’ inside a plastic bag, tying a knot and throwing it as far as possible. To be more accurate, perhaps such a taxonomy of toiletry around the globe ought to include “wrap and throw” as well under the rubric of excreta disposal. If we consider data regarding the access



people have to 'proper' sanitation around the world, it can be stated that Western European flush toilets constitute only a relatively small part when compared to ways in which people get rid of their bodily wastes in other areas of the world. According to the World Health Organization and UNICEF monitoring report, in 2011 one billion people did not have access to a toilet and defecated in the open or in unsanitary places (WHO & UNICEF 2013).

With specific reference to the European context, an attempt to provide a taxonomy of toilets has been made by Slavoj Žižek who proposed a comparative analysis of German, French and British lavatories. Žižek started from the presupposition that toilets cannot be regarded only in terms of functional design. On the contrary, as he pointed out, looking at lavatories "a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement which comes from within our body is clearly discernable" (Žižek 1997, 3). Drawing on Hegel's interpretation of the geographical triangle Germany-France-England in terms of different "existential attitudes" (e.g. German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian pragmatism) and quoting a famous scene of Luis Buñuel's *Le fantôme de la liberté* (1974), which plays with culinary and scatological conventions by displaying an inversion of the habits of eating and excreting<sup>7</sup>, the Slovenian philosopher proposed a threefold typology of toilets that "form[s] a kind of excremental correlative-counterpoint to the Lévi-Straussian triangle of cooking" (op cit). As he has put it:

In a traditional German lavatory, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way in front, so that the shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of some illness; in the typical French lavatory, on the contrary, the whole is in the back – that is, the shit is supposed to disappear as soon as possible; finally, the Anglo-Saxon (English or American) lavatory presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles – the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it – visible, but not to be inspected (Žižek 1997, 3).

Žižek concludes that by looking at the abovementioned types of lavatories three different attitudes towards excremental excess can be discerned, namely "ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way" (Žižek 1997, 4). In his analysis, Žižek briefly recalls Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) in which the writer indulges in an excursion of personal thoughts about toilets, describing the British, German, Italian, French and Japanese lavatories. Jong envisages the German



toilet as the most “unique”, so to say, inasmuch it has the strongest smell of them all (Jong 1973, 29).<sup>8</sup>

As Massimo Leone pointed out in his thorough discussion of Žižek’s analysis, despite the “thoughtless reference to its philosophical-psychoanalytical background, conspicuous propensity for stereotypes, and taste for boutades” Žižek’s comparative analysis shows that “excrementitious places and practices are elements that a semiotics of culture can put into a series” (Leone 2012b, 248). To the aforementioned remark, it can be added that such an analysis triggers the interrogation towards some other important issues. First and foremost, one ought to ask what matter toilets try to handle. In other words, before any analysis is put forward one should quest the nature of bodily excess or waste as such. What is *it*? Is it an object? Is it a thing? If so, what sort of ‘thing’ are we dealing with? How can it be described and classified? Another corollary that follows from these considerations, and is embedded in this kind of analysis as the one proposed by Žižek, is the investigation of the relationship between subject and object, that is to say, how human beings relate with their own (and others’) bodily excess. The focal question may be stated in the following terms: how do men handle this relationship and, most importantly, how is it mediated through the toilet? The rest of the paper shall attempt to dig into those issues by conceptualising bodily excess as belonging to the general category of ‘dirt’.

### **Human waste: what is it?**

A thorough investigation of toilets, whatever type of toilet one has in mind, cannot avoid tackling the problem of conceptualising human waste. What is human waste? How does it differ from other kind of waste, such as ‘junk’, ‘rubbish’, ‘garbage’, ‘trash’?

Waste as such is a pretty loose category and may refer to a very different range of phenomena. First and foremost, it must be distinguished between two types of material discard: “that which is common to all (living) systems, and that which is specific to humans” (Keskpaik 2004, 48). The latter comprises what goes under the rubric of ‘trash’, ‘garbage’, ‘rubbish’, ‘junk’ and other such waste. Among material discard that is specific to humans, two general categories in which cultural objects may be placed can be singled out, namely ‘transient’ and ‘durable’ objects. Objects placed in the former category are thought of as having finite life spans and their value decreases over time, whereas durable objects are thought of as having infinite life spans and their value increases over time (Thompson 1979, 7). In his *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and the Destruction of Value* (1979),

Michael Thompson identifies ‘rubbish’ as something that falls in between the two abovementioned categories of objects. As the author pointed out:

The two overt categories which I have isolated, the durable and the transient, do not exhaust the universe of objects. There are some objects (those of zero and unchanging value) which do not fall into either of these categories, and these constitute a third covert category: rubbish (Thompson 1979, 9).

Thompson’s concern is to explain how transfer from one category into another takes place in a system of objects. His hypothesis is that “this covert rubbish category is not subject to the control mechanism (which is concerned primarily with the overt part of the system, the valuable and socially significant objects) and so is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability” (Thompson 1979, 9). Thus, it is apparent that bodily waste is not the same as rubbish. However, one may wonder whether there is anything that these two types of waste share. At a closer look, some similarities may arise.

At first glance, it seems that everything that is lacking economic value falls under the rubric of waste or rubbish. Rubbish is “undifferentiated” and “it has no use value, nor any value in an economic system of exchange” (Culler 1985, 6). Similarly, human excreta are considered to be matter without value. Therefore, both rubbish and (bodily) waste enjoy a similar lack of value. This is what the English word ‘shit’ suggests. As Harry Frankfurt pointed out: “Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case not *wrought*” (Frankfurt 2005, 22; italics in original). Bodily excess is therefore something carelessly made, never finely crafted. Thus, it has apparently no intrinsic value. It goes without saying that this observation, although it may be true, does not exhaust the concept of human bodily waste, otherwise one could not make difference between say faecal matter and sheer junk or rubbish. What is it that makes the difference?

Before considering differences, let us first consider another similarity between rubbish and bodily waste. As pointed out above, ‘rubbish’ as conceived by Michael Thompson, is an in-between category. This view echoes Edmund Leach’s anthropological account on taboo. In his famous essay entitled “Anthropological aspects of language: animal categories and verbal abuse” (1964) the British anthropologist distinguished “things” and “non-things”, placing faecal matter in the latter category together with other kinds of “exudation of the human body” such as “urine, semen, menstrual blood, hair clippings, nail parings, body dirt, spittle, mother’s milk” (Leach 1964, 38). Similarly, Julia Kristeva grouped that

which is “neither subject nor object” and displays a high polluting potential as “abjection”. With specific respect to excrements and menstrual blood, Kristeva pointed out that:

While they always relate to corporal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body’s territory, polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death (Kristeva 1982, 71).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned similarities, namely the inherent lack of exchange value and the condition of ‘inbetweenness’, there are striking differences that separate rubbish from bodily waste. As Jonathan Culler pointed out, “ordinary old junk and rubbish – stuff that does not pollute or defile” normally does not have any relation with taboo (Culler 1985, 4). On the contrary, bodily waste is something threatening and repelling which possesses a high potential of contamination and pollution. Here lies perhaps the sharpest difference between ordinary junk and bodily waste. The simple fact that body excrements were, before the act of elimination, part of the body is an object of taboo. In this case waste comes from within. Whereas in the case of ordinary junk such as relicts, remnants, mementos and souvenirs there is a drive towards collection – “[t]here is, at least, a feeling that if we throw out this junk we are being disrespectful to the past it memorializes [...]” says Culler (op cit, 5). In the case of bodily waste there is instead a push towards elimination and the feeling towards it is generally repulsion and disgust.

Some authors take ‘filth’ as an umbrella term that embraces both categories discussed above. This claim is apparent in the following passage:

As it breaches subject/object distinction in these ways, filth, in both its literal and figurative sense covers two radically different imaginary categories, which I designate *polluting* and *reusable*. The former – filth proper – is wholly unregenerate, contaminating, even toxic, and demands to be rejected and denied. But when polluting or filthy objects are thought of as trash, waste, junk, or refuse, they become conceivably *productive*, the discarded sources in which riches may lie, and therefore fecund and fertile in their potential. [...] Yet distinct as these two modes of conceptualizing filth are, they are not strictly

opposed, for an object can easily move from one to the other (Cohen 2005, X; italics in original).

It goes without saying that, seen under this light, human excrement can be conceived in a double perspective. What we extrude from our bodies – vomit, excreta, spit, urine, blood, dandruff – is thought of as ‘filthy’ for it appears useless in terms of intrinsic value. It is a stark reminder of our corporeality. Needless to say, bodily waste assumes value only if we choose to see it as such. For instance, chemically treated human sewage can be used as compost or to generate natural methane gas. In other words, “while filthy objects initially seem utterly repulsive and alien, then, they also paradoxically bear potential value” (Cohen 2005, X). In a nutshell, filth or dirt exists in a system of relations.

From what has been said so far, it may be concluded that, in conducting an analysis on toilet as place for the disposal of human excrements, it is at the human body as the centre and producer of such filth that we have to take a look, if we are to understand the role that restrooms play in everyday life. The following section will explore the implications stemming from such a claim, first considering the crucial role played by boundaries in the discussion of the notion of dirt.

### **Boundaries, dirt and disgust**

The notion of boundary plays a significant role both in Juri Lotman’s semiotics of culture (2005 [1984]; 1990) as well as in Mary Douglas’ anthropology of pollution (2002 [1966]). In this section I shall first review the ideas of these thinkers as they concern two main issues: the concepts of ‘boundary’ and ‘dirt’. Following this line of thought, I then seek to elaborate a theoretical synthesis of these concepts that allows conception of toilets as boundary places.

A boundless world is unimaginable. Boundaries delimit, demarcate, contain, and mediate. In so far as markers of semiotic differentiation, boundaries are at the heart of each culture as well as of each existence. At the macro-level of culture, boundaries distinguish the internal semiotic space from the extra-semiotic or non-semiotic space. A culture creates its own boundaries in order to differentiate identity and alterity, the inner from the outer space, life from death, the sacred from the profane, black from white, purity from dirt, text from extra-text, culture from non-culture.

Every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space. How this binary division is interpreted depends on the

typology of the culture. But the actual division is one of the human cultural universals (Lotman 1990, 131).

At the micro-level of the individual the limit of the self is defined by the absolute presence of the other. An existence without the co-existence of the 'other' is inconceivable. As Mihhail Lotman has pointed out: "[...] for its *own* existence every semiotic entity (sign, text, mind, or culture as a whole) needs *the other*" (Lotman 2002, 35; italics in original). At a biological level the skin operates as a borderline between the body and the outer surroundings. Jesper Hoffmeyer writes: "On the one hand, the skin thus serves as a kind of topological boundary; while, on the other hand, its semiotic capacity opens up the world to us" (Hoffmeyer 2008, 25).

In Juri Lotman's theory, the concept of boundary goes hand in hand with that of semiosphere, thought of as, by analogy with Vernadsky's concept of biosphere, "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages" (Lotman 1990, 123). Outside this semiotic space no form of semiosis is conceivable (Lotman 2002, 208). For Lotman, the boundary is a necessary part of the semiosphere and is described as follows:

The function of any boundary or filter (from the membrane of the living cell, to the biosphere which according to Vernadsky is like a membrane covering our planet, and to the boundary of the semiosphere) is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal (Lotman 1990, 42).

Furthermore, the boundary is the locus of continuous translations and "the hottest spot for semioticizing processes" (Lotman 1990, 136):

The border of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces (Lotman 2005, 210).

Juri Lotman stressed the ambivalent character of the boundary for it both separates and unites (Lotman 1990, 136). On the one hand, a boundary can be seen as division and demarcation; on the other hand, it can be seen as a transgressible and semi-permeable membrane, a filter through which communication and

dialogue happen between different domains. Needless to say, one viewpoint does not exclude the other. They are rather compatible, interdependent and complementary. As Peeter Torop has said: “Borders separate and thus create identities, but borders also connect and construe these identities by juxtaposing the own and the alien” (Torop 2005, 164). The description of borders as “the sum of bilingual translatability filters” (Lotman 2005, 218) provides us with the idea of a sort of dynamism for it takes into account the movements across the semi-permeable borders of the semiosphere. This move from the outer to the inner space, from the periphery to the core and vice versa is seen as a process of translation. Thus, one of the main functions of semiotic boundaries is to be the doors of translatability.

Lotman argues that boundaries also have another function in the semiosphere, being “[...] the area of accelerated semiotic processes, which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view of displacing them” (Lotman 2005, 212).

The periphery is therefore the place of catalysis and change. Continuous irruptions constantly undermine the inner equilibrium of the semiosphere. New meanings are generated via “semiotic invasions” from the outer, extra-semiotic, space (Lotman 2005, 215). The idea of dynamism across boundaries is a concern that Lotman further develops in his later writings:

The boundary [...] is constantly transgressed via intrusions from the extra-semiotic sphere which, when bursting in, introduce a new dynamic, transforming the bounded space and simultaneously transforming themselves according to its laws (Lotman 2009, 115).

It is worth noting that, for Lotman, the boundary may also be a spatial marker of differentiation. As he pointed out:

When the semiosphere involves real territorial features as well, the boundary is spatial in the literal sense. [...] Hence the appeal of the centre for the most important cultic and administrative buildings. Less valued social groups are settled in the periphery. Those who are below any social value are settled on the frontier of the outskirts [...], by the city gate, in the suburbs. If we think of this on a vertical scale then these ‘outskirts’ will be lofts and cellars, and in modern city the metro. If the centre for ‘normal’ life is the flat, then the boundary space between *home* and *non-home* is the staircase and entrance. [...] Other boundary places are public places such as stadia and cemeteries. There is a significant change in the accepted norms of behaviour when moving from the boundary to center (Lotman 1990, 140; italics in original).

It is apparent then, that seen through such a perspective, Lotman's insights may well be applied in order to describe the toilet as a boundary place. Although it may seem a truism, cultures delimit a specific space in which it is culturally acceptable to deal with one's excreta and at the same time control its potentially threatening power.

Having said that, I will now turn to Mary Douglas' account on the notion of boundary and the conception of dirt.<sup>9</sup> Douglas proposed her well-known anthropology of pollution in the seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). According to such a view, the distinctiveness of 'dirt' lies in the fact that it does not fit into a given system of classification. In other words, ambiguity and in-betweenness are what characterise dirt. It is an anomaly for a given cultural system. Viewed through this prism, dirt is something that blurs categorisations. For Douglas dirt encompasses many things inasmuch as it is a comprehensive category for that which is 'out of place', an "omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems" (Douglas 2002, 44). As the British anthropologist pointed out:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table. Food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing, similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing leaving on chairs; out-door things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where overclothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is in the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications (Douglas 2002, 44–45).

The underlying theoretical assumption is that by studying what is marginal in a given system one can get sense of the whole. Dirt, as a marginal category, entails a special relationship with the symbolic system it is part of, a relationship of exclusion that leads to the investigation of the underlying semiotic system. This is a classical structural theoretical claim: that is, the attempt to reconstruct a given code by means of that which is excluded, un-coded, and marginal. As Douglas clearly pointed out:

Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas 2002, 44).

From what has been said so far it could be inferred that the contemporary Western obsession with hygiene and cleanliness is related to symbolic pollution. Dirt is a contextual factor. Thus, it may assume different meanings according to what viewpoints one decides to take. For Douglas, dirt is common to all cultures in so far as it enables us to distinguish between pure and impure, which is a feature of both 'primitive' and modern societies.

This paper draws on Douglas' theory of pollution for two main reasons. The first is that it sheds light on the impact that such categorisation, e.g. what is considered to be dirt in a given culture and what is not, has on the surroundings, in terms of material culture. This is apparent in the following passage:

Dirt offends against order. Eliminating is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. [...] In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively reordering our environment, making it conform to an idea (Douglas 2002, 2–3).

Drawing on Douglas' insights, in their recent collection of works entitled *Dirt: New Geographies of Dirt and Contamination* Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox express a similar idea. The authors are correct in noting that "in eliminating dirt of all kinds we are involved in a perpetual spatial and visual process of arranging and rearranging the environment" (Campkin & Cox 2007, 69–70). In other words, this constant process of arranging the surroundings may be thought of as an instance of semioticization. As Lotman pointed out: "The outside world, in which a human being is immersed in order to become culturally significant, is subject to semioticization, i.e. it is divided into the domain of objects which signify, symbolize, indicate something (have meaning), and objects which simply are themselves" (Lotman 1990, 133). For Lotman the human body represents the basis for its semioticization, that is to say, the universal oppositions right-left, top-bottom are grounded on the body's asymmetry (op cit).

Similarly, Mary Douglas takes into consideration the body as locus where boundaries are marked. As she put it:

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers



and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas 2002, 142).

The human body is certainly a powerful metaphor in conceptualising boundaries. There is an immense literature that explores the nature of embodiment and focuses on the role played by the human body in relation to filth, dirt and disgust. It is not my intention to elaborate a fully fledged theory on embodiment and disgust. Rather, what this section seeks to point out is the simple fact that if we are to study the toilet we should look at the relationship between the human body and its own excrement.

As pointed out above, the body is the locus of polluting liquids, substances and matters. Body orifices not only provide access to the world being the portals by which living organisms perceive their *umwelt*, but they are also the doors through which body excesses are tossed out. Excrement, blood, spit, vomit, saliva, hairs, pus, sperm, and other substances and fluids that the body produces and expels are in most cultures considered taboo and regarded as dirty. There is a vast literature devoted to the ritual and magical use of such matters (Bourke 1891; Greenblatt 1982; Leach 1964; Passariello 1994). What is important for the present discussion is that those excrements have a capacity to repel and trigger disgust.

Charles Darwin was one of the first authors who theorised disgust as one of the basic emotions. He provided an example from his own experience in which he described it in terms of sense of taste and rejection of food:

The term 'disgust', in its simple sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food. In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty (Darwin 1965, 256–257).

Let us put aside Darwin's ethnocentric impressions and focus on the description he provided about disgust. It can be noted, along with William Ian Miller, that "disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves – not just by extension but at its core – smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing" (Miller 1997, 2). Miller thus presents a wider definition of disgust that encompasses all body senses. In his view it is an emotion that centres on "a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion" (op cit). It goes without saying

that body excreta are objects of disgust. According to some, faeces is a universal disgusting matter. For Andras Angyal “disgust is a specific reaction towards the waste products of the human and animal body” (Angyal 1941, 395).

A taste-based conception of disgust like the one set forth by Darwin cannot account for the complex semiosis of senses that goes on between a toilet user and such highly polluted space. Many other senses are indeed involved in the perception of the toilet as a contagious or contaminated place. The feeling of disgust towards body excrements opens up a new vista on toilets as containers of filthy ‘things’ inasmuch as it entails an analysis of sensory perception in such places. In other words, the consideration of disgust as the basis for the relationship with excrement pushes towards a sensory semiotics that takes into account sight, odour, smell, touch and sound in channelling disgusting things. Let us consider, for instance, what Miller writes about public lavatories:

We will sit on a public toilet seat with less upset when it is cold than when we discern that it is warm from the warmth of a prior user. Body heat is in some way as polluting as more material pollutants in that setting (Miller 1997, 64).

In this example of a public toilet, it is the presence of ‘the other’ and its traces that human senses perceive which triggers the feeling of revulsion. It is exactly such a presence that the toilet ultimately seeks to erase. Absence, void, deletion, blankness, water and fluids, all that characterises modern flush toilets as facilities for the disposal of excreta, aim towards erasing the presence of the object of disgust. Detachment, separation and deletion (of one’s bodily excrement as well as of the presence of an unknown ‘other’) are processes at stake here. Controlling dirt entails a politics of concealment and deletion. Absence of smell, of touch and eventually of sight – all aim to delete what is meant to be present in the environment. A good example is given by the colour of modern Western toilets. The internal design of the toilet is usually dominated by white tints. As Baudrillard has noticed: “Anything that is bound up with the body and its immediate extensions has for generations been the domain of white, a surgical, virginal colour which distances the body from the dangers of intimacy and tends to neutralize the drives” (Baudrillard 1996 [1968], 33).

## **Conclusion**

The present study has explored toilet cultures with the intention to point out the relevance that such places may have for cultural analysis. The paper has provided an account of the main theories and authors that have dealt with topics such as

dirt, filth, body excrement and waste. Drawing mainly on Mary Douglas' concept of dirt and Juri Lotman's notion of boundary, this study has sought to provide theoretical insights for understanding toilets as spaces that mediate between culture and nature, in which dirt plays a crucial role as marker of difference in a given cultural setting. Following this line of thought, and anchoring such perspectives to the feeling of disgust triggered by bodily waste, the toilet can be thought of as a boundary place in between nature and culture. The restroom is seen as the locus where culture establishes a set of meaningful differences by relegating all that is thought of as 'filthy' to the peripheral zones of culture. Toilets transcode exterior space into interior space, public into private.

By considering toilets as boundary places, many different classes of binary opposition may be drawn. Masao Yamagushi, for instance, suggested a similar approach and applied concepts of centre/periphery to the Japanese material culture. He states:

By building a house, man cuts out a culturally controlled 'inside', he wants to assimilate a space, in contrast to the outside. Then the model of in and out is brought into a house where the dichotomy between in and out is found. At present, houses try to wipe out what is dirty. But, in a house there is both a front and a back. The front is dignified (i.e. the living room), while the back is vulgar (i.e. the WC). In the back there is the notion of putrefaction (Yamagushi 1988, 215).

A similar approach renders a long list of binary oppositions when applied to toilets: culture/non-culture, culture/nature, internal/external, body/spirit, male/female, ladies/gentlemen, clean/dirty, clean/decent, sit/squat, pure/impure, private/public. Obviously this list can be expanded (see Greed 2003, 28–29).

In this respect, toilets can be conceived as "technologies of concealment" (Barcan 2005, 10), containers of the unclean. Restrooms are boundary places where dirt is controlled and where the management of bodily waste becomes a private business: "Shit is the most personal and private thing we have. Anyone can get to know the rest – your facial expression, your gaze, your gestures. Even your naked body: at the beach, at the doctor's, making love" (Eco 2006, 86). Hence, the paradoxes of public toilets, places of ambiguity, at the same time public and private, open and closed, places where dirt is controlled and erased. Physical traces of the presence of the other, the markers of the body in terms of smell, sight, touch and hearing are concealed whereas the consciousness of the body – one's own body as a toilet user – and its biological processes remain present.

This perspective matches well with a consideration of toilets, and in particular public restrooms, as “backstage regions” in the sense that Erving Goffman gave to this term (Goffman 1959). Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgical stance in sociology, Spencer E. Cahill and colleagues proposed an account of toilets that envisages these spaces as “private yet public settings” (Cahill et al 1985). Drawing on Goffman’s term “stall”, defined as “well-bounded space to which individuals lay temporary claim, possession being on an all-or-nothing basis” (Goffman 1971, 32), the authors pointed out that the physical space of public restrooms is divided into two different parts: one open region publicly accessible and a closed space, the cubicle or ‘stall’, in which one can find the needed privacy to empty one’s bowels. Viewed from such a perspective, the authors defined “toilet stalls in public bathroom” as being “publicly accessible yet private backstage regions” (Cahill et al 1985, 33).

From what has been said so far, it may be argued that the toilet functions as a boundary place between nature and culture for the user who lives, accesses and perceives his or her surroundings, inasmuch as it renders culturally acceptable what is considered ‘dirty’. To wit, the toilet makes the dirt clean, purifies the human body via concealment, occlusion, ablution, daily tasks, processes and routines that translate what is meant to be ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ into cultural. Dirt cleans, so to say. As we have seen above, along with Lotman, “there is a significant change in the accepted norms of behaviour when moving from boundary to centre” (Lotman 1990, 140) and vice versa. What is allowed inside the premises of toilets would not be tolerable outside. The toilet, therefore, works as a boundary between outer and inner space, a boundary that contains and deletes, which renders clean, decent and acceptable that which is considered to be filthy or profane.

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## Filmography

*Ferry Tales* (2003), directed by Katja Esson. Lifestyle International Production Service, Penelope Pictures, Schenk Productions.

*Le fantôme de la liberté* (*Phantom of Liberty*) (1974), directed by Luis Buñuel. Euro International Film, Greenwich Film Productions.

## Sources of illustrations

Figure 1 – Data: Toto world map of toilets (n.d.): <http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/faculty/bray/toilet/worldtoiletary.html> [accessed 1 June 2013].

## Notes

1 “*Inter faeces et urinam nascimus*”. This Latin locution is usually attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), although it probably derives from a homily by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).

2 Practices of what the British call ‘cottaging’ and the North Americans call ‘cruising’.

3 Special issue of *The American Journal of Semiotics* on the topics of trash and pollution.

4 “The characteristic of a human being is that – and this is very much in contrast with other animals – he doesn’t know what to do with his shit. He is encumbered by his shit. Why is he so encumbered while these things are so discreet in nature? Of course it is true that we are always coming across cat shit, but a cat counts as a civilized animal. But if you take elephants, it is striking how little space their leavings take up in nature, whereas when you think of it, elephant turds could be enormous. The discretion of the elephant is a curious thing. Civilization means shit, *cloaca maxima*.” (Lacan in Turkle 1992, 231).

5 *Ferry Tales* (2003).

6 I owe knowledge of this map to Massimo Leone, and I thank Francesca Bray for providing me with further information about its origin. Here it is given in a slightly modified version.

7 For a semiotic analysis of Buñuel’s film see Grimm 1997.

8 The German toilet, also known as ‘washout toilet’, is a particular type of flush toilet. “Many German toilet bowls have a ledge on which to inspect the outcome before flushing it away” (Greed 2003, 81). This is why the German toilet’s design is sometimes referred to as ‘lay and display’.

9 A similar attempt to link Juri Lotman’s model of the semiosphere with the Douglasian category of ‘dirt’ has been put forward by Riste Keskaik who envisages dirt as a “category at the boundary of the semiosphere” (Keskaik 2004, 23).



# The social childhood of new ambivalent objects: emerging social representations of new biotechnologies

Maaris Raudsepp, Andu Rämmer

## Introduction

This paper departs from the anthropologist's (Appadurai 1986) viewpoint that the social life of things is formed by various societal forces in multiple contexts. Drawing on Kopytoff's idea on the analogy between the way societies construct individuals and the way they construct things, we will try to analyse the initial stage or 'childhood' of objects and phenomena that are evoked by new biotechnologies in particular cultural contexts. "Every person has many biographies – psychological, professional, political, familial, economic and so forth. Biography of things cannot but be similarly partial" (Kopytoff 1986, 68).

Moscovici (1984) argues that the Industrial Revolution expanded authority of science in public. Scientific innovations give a basis for public debates, while technological innovations become important sources of new ideas. Social biographies of innovations as cultural phenomena can be traced back to their emergence in the expert sphere and to their dissemination in the public sphere where they undergo practical and symbolic 'acculturation'. Moscovici (1976) has described the diffusion of novel ideas and the trajectory of an ideological innovation in society via transformation of scientific ideas into consensual explanations. Such processes of social representing lead to the formation of group-specific social representations, which 'domesticate' the novelty and enable us to communicate about it. Technological innovations that enter into public use evoke similar representational activity. Processes of collective symbolic coping consist of four stages: 1. the creation of awareness of a new challenging phenomenon, 2. production of divergent images of it, 3. convergence upon a couple of dominant images in the public sphere, and 4. normalization (Wagner et al 2002).

Biotechnology produces new challenging phenomena. Biotechnologies entail the modification of living organisms according to human purposes and include various emerging technologies (nanotechnology applications, biofuels, synthetic biology), biotechnologies for food production (genetically modified food, animal

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Kannike, A. & Laviolette, P. (eds) (2013) *Things in Culture, Culture in Things*. Approaches to Culture Theory 3, 280–303. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

cloning for food production, genetically modified crops), regenerative medicine (stem cell research, gene therapy, xenotransplantation) and socially controversial phenomena like biobanks. These rapidly developing biotechnologies produce new objects with hidden and partly unknown properties that are socially constructed ambivalently as benefits and risks. Cloned animals, genetically modified crops and other application of sensitive technologies are good examples of new phenomena that evoke a public response (Bauer 2002). Gaskell and Bauer (2001) predict that biotechnology will offer much more innovative applications than other technologies and its applications will affect our everyday lives significantly in the coming decades. However, these emerging technologies can be conceived as sensitive technologies because they evoke public concerns.

The focus of our paper is on the reception and 'domestication' of scientific innovations among the Estonian public. We start with the analysis of the process of the formation of social representations of cloned mammals. Then we discuss different aspects of public perception of sensitive biotechnologies in comparison with other European Union countries. This more comprehensive view enables us to find some characteristic features of scientific and technological culture in Estonia, which forms the specific background for the appropriation of technological novelties.

Unfamiliar objects evoke the processes of collective interpretation and meaning generation, which try to relate the new phenomenon using familiar meaning complexes and interpretative schemes. Cultural elaboration involves simplification of complex information and the production of vivid images. In this way the new phenomenon becomes more familiar and domesticated. Cultural context also shapes the form of public response to novelty. Possible public responses to technological innovations may vary from uncritical acceptance to total resistance (Gaskell & Bauer 2006), depending on the pattern of collective socio-cultural elaboration. For example, there may be psychological and cultural barriers against accepting biological hybrids as unproblematic sources for food – these products are perceived as unnatural, weird and even monstrous, provoking public resistance (Wagner et al 2006). Processes of social representation occur in particular socio-cultural contexts, which holistically influence the representational outcomes. Durant and his colleagues (Durant et al 2000) distinguished in Europe both industrial and post-industrial scientific and technological cultures. Our approach tries to contextualize the 'domestication' of novel technological phenomena into a more general pattern of public attitudes to science and technology that can be characterized as public scientific culture in Estonia.

## **The process of social representation**

Moscovici (1984) distinguished between reified and consensual categories of knowledge. Scientific concepts and ideas represent the universe of thought while common sense and lay thinking characterize the latter. Through the process of social representation unfamiliar objects are transformed into familiar categories. The analysis of the content of these social representations reveals how people may make sense of novel scientific invention, i.e. how they integrate and simplify intricate scientific ideas into dominant common knowledge. After encountering a cultural novelty, processes of interpretation and generation of new meanings are initiated which try to relate the new phenomenon with the existing complexes of meaning and schemes of interpretation, formed in the context of concrete ideological, political, religious ideas and business interests. Evidence-based expert knowledge is simplified and 'domesticated'; it becomes fixed to certain figurative images. In this way the new phenomenon can be made understandable, and existing cultural forms strongly shape the 'domestication' of novelty.

Social representations can be defined as a socially shared and interactively produced means of understanding the social world and a way of communicating about it with others (Moscovici 1976). These representations are part of a more general social process of constructing realities through knowledge and social practices. The result of this process is a system of everyday knowledge, a collection of widespread beliefs that form a set of collective definitions of social reality in a specific social context (Doise 1986). A social representation consists of shared images, ideas, opinions, attitudes, etc., forming an integrated whole, a kind of naive theory of reality. They are not simple reflections of reality but active (re)constructions of it (Flick 1995). Social representations are generated, exchanged and transformed by social groups in the process of communication and action, and they reflect the interests of these groups. On the individual level, social representations reflect private manifestations of social phenomena. On the collective level they can be found in language, art, man-made environment, rituals, habits, media messages, everyday conversations, etc.

The main social function of social representations is to enable communication and to regulate social activity. The main cognitive function of social representation is to make sense of the world, to integrate something unfamiliar into the familiar symbolic system of community (Moscovici 1976) and to defend the integrity of the community against threatening ideas (Bauer 1995). These functions are accomplished by two mutually connected semiotic processes: anchoring and objectification.

*Anchoring* reduces strangeness to ordinary categories and images, placing it in a familiar context (Moscovici 1976), integrating new phenomena – objects, experiences, relations, practices, etc. – into the existing worldviews (Flick 1995). Moscovici has tried to describe anchoring as a social process, proceeding in the context of intergroup relations. He distinguishes the following steps of anchoring: 1. classifying – finding categories and prototypes with which new phenomena are compared; 2. naming – including the new phenomenon in a category, thus acquiring certain characteristics and tendencies of that category; 3. conventionalization – the categorized phenomenon becomes the object of a convention in those groups which adopt and share the same convention. Thus anchoring draws an individual into the cultural tradition of the group; 4. meaning ascription; 5. modification and enlargement of the existing systems of categories and stocks of knowledge, making them fit the new objects (Flick 1995).

The second major process in making the unfamiliar familiar is *objectification* – transforming something abstract into something concrete, forming images of externalized objects. According to Moscovici (1984) this process proceeds through the following steps: 1. the iconic quality of an imprecise idea or object is discovered, a concept is converted into an image; 2. those concepts, which could be converted into images, become integrated into a “figurative nucleus”, i.e. a complex of images symbolizing a complex of ideas. These “image beliefs” become cultural tools well suited for thinking and communicating.

Moscovici (1984) has stressed the necessity of studying the emergence and development of social representations, especially the process of anchoring, from the very moment a new phenomenon or idea enters into the public sphere. The mass media is the main channel through which new phenomena enter into the public sphere and are integrated into common sense knowledge and imagination. The media is also the main arena for exchange and competition or negotiation of different versions of reality.

The following two examples illustrate cultural ‘initiation’ of technological innovations. First we will analyse initial conceptualization of the topic of mammal cloning in the Estonian media, and secondly discuss recent survey results of the public perception of sensitive technologies that shed light on the dynamics of the reception of technological innovations in the Estonian public sphere.

### **Introduction of technological novelty: the case of human cloning**

Bauer (2000, 159–160) states that symbolic construction of science and technology is an essential part of culture. He notes that patterns of symbols and images shape people’s attitudes, evoke interests in new developments and influence

people's choices. The dissemination of popular science through the media constitutes a growing segment of the culture industry. Thus analysis of the development of media stories about mammal cloning helps to shed light on mechanisms of cultural construction.

The case of cloning is an excellent example of the emergence and evolution of a new social representation. We will try to illustrate some of its typical features by analysing early messages on cloning in Estonian daily newspapers.

On 27 February 1997 *Nature* published the results of the first successful cloning of adult mammal (Wilmut et al 1997). By the end of March, i.e. in one month, 20 articles were published on this topic in the 3 main Estonian dailies (incl. 5 translations and 15 original articles). Among them were articles giving overviews of sheep cloning technology and debates around it in Europe, providing information on legal regulations of genetic technologies, but also interviews with Estonian geneticists and lawyers, general comments and readers' letters.

The topics in cloning-related articles covered technical details of the cloning technology, legal regulation of research and cloning practices, and fantasies and predictions concerning the consequences of human cloning. In 7 cases these topics were handled as abstract possibilities or as happening at a distance; in 13 cases the topic was dealt as directly relating to Estonia. In the texts, cloning was related to different levels of social reality: at the universalistic level of the human species, or society in the abstract sense; at the level of a society (Estonia), or special groups who may be involved in this issue more directly; and finally at the individual level. Information explaining the cloning process was presented simultaneously with fantasies about possible social consequences, moral concerns and legal considerations.

Among the groups mentioned as possibly involved in the issue of cloning were scientists, legislators, politicians, the intelligence service, military personnel, medical professions, environmentalists, journalists, sexual minorities and women. Cloning was analysed from different viewpoints: on the bases of thoroughness and scientific expertise we can distinguish the position of 'inside experts' (geneticists doing research), 'outside experts' (lawyers, doctors) and 'non-experts'. Each of these groups expressed specific viewpoints or representations of cloning. In the vein of Moscovici (1984) we can characterize them as polemic representations.

1. Geneticists expressed a unanimously pro-cloning orientation. They wished to carry out their research without external interference and perceived any social regulations as a hindrance. Cloning was characterized as a technical issue. Estonian geneticists claimed that they have an advantage compared to their Western colleagues in as far as Estonia has not ratified international conventions that restrict research on cloning. Representations of cloning by 'inside experts' were

characterized by technological optimism, moderate enthusiasm and excitement, an anti-regulative attitude and reassurance to outsiders that everything was under control (“Don’t be afraid, cloning is a very complicated process, we cannot make an A-bomb in a bathroom”). From their viewpoint the preferred dominant values are academic freedom (rational value-free science) and technological progress. In their understanding scientists’ main concern is to ensure further research opportunities.

2. The role of ‘outside experts’ has been performed so far only by lawyers and doctors, who have unanimously expressed an anti-cloning orientation. Their representation was characterized by a cautious attitude and appeals to regulation or the banning of cloning. Cloning was evaluated as unethical, referring to such values as human rights, human dignity, privacy and legality. Central topics of concern for them are legal regulations, medical and religious issues.

3. Non-specialists (outsiders) expressed a mixed, ambivalent orientation towards cloning. They pronounced feelings ranging from excitement to fear and horror. Different values, like privacy (protection from government interference), social equality, and quality of life were recorded. Potential implications of cloning on the wider scale (both to society and the human species) were revealed and scepticism towards the possibility of regulation of cloning was expressed (“Dogs may bark, but the caravan will go on”).

Three main images or scenarios concerning the possible consequences of human cloning emerged:

First, an optimistic and idealistic image of cloning as a possibility for genetic therapy (medical benefits) and biotechnology (producing transgenic animals) in order to duplicate severely ill people, or one’s deceased relatives. Cloning could be used to copy outstanding artists and scientists, multiplying brighter, stronger and more beautiful people in order to improve the human race (selection of the best) – producing ‘super-soldiers, super-sportsmen, super-beauties, super-politicians’. An image of the utility of the progress of science and technology, of positive omnipotence of human beings is behind this scenario.

Second, a pessimistic and apocalyptic image – for example, multiplication or self-replication of dictators (in order to be eternally in power) and their obedient slaves or mad scientists that will end up with the construction of *Frankenstein*-like monsters. Gloomy scenarios of clones cloning clones and producing infertile generations were presented. Cloning was seen as cultivating a strict and impersonal social order or a police state as well as producing a threat to biodiversity.

And last, an ambivalent and controversial image: reproduction by cloning could lead to an ideal feminist world in which men would become superfluous in the reproductive sense; cloning would possibly enable the resurrection of the

dead with unpredictable outcomes for the society; the revitalization of the eugenic ideas of selection of certain models of people who are worth cloning on one hand, and selection of people who are prevented from self-reproduction, on the other, would establish a genetic class order and thus shatter the basic principles of liberal democratic societies.

The main dilemmas related to human cloning were presented as the necessity of decision-making on a societal level: should society (government) regulate research and practical cloning or not? Should we (if yes, then how) apply societal control over cloning? The emphasis was on the practical implications of cloning or on the criteria of selecting donors for cloning, as well as on power relations that could be reflected in certain cloning practices. That issue was perceived as controversial: cloning will bring an awful future but its banning will be equally dreadful.

On the one hand, cloning was imagined as offering undeniable positive consequences such as curing diseases or the possibility of biological reproduction for infertile people. But also many negative consequences were simultaneously forecast: the danger of the emergence of total government control of reproduction, a threat to academic freedom of research and to human privacy, a threat to natural diversity, unpredictable consequences of systematic genetic manipulations for the human race, unpredictable consequences for personal identity and selfhood, increased determinism (a clone can foresee his biological future), creation of a society of orphans. Similar deep ambivalence in the attitudes to new biotechnologies has been revealed in the Western press by using various popularization images and metaphors which can be classified as oppositions between promise and fear, the 'miraculous' versus 'unnatural' (Liakopoulos 2002).

These examples demonstrate how the emerging social representations are attuned with the dominant interpretative frames and how they are anchored to familiar images. On the basis of our data we can already envisage simultaneous multiple modes of anchoring of the new social representations:

1. mechanical – copying, living beings are conceived as objects of manipulation;
2. biological – vegetative reproduction in plants or potatoes, creation of identical human twins;
3. medical – surrogate mothers, tackling bioethics issues;
4. social – deviance from the consensual norms of parenthood;
5. historical – emergence and development of the ideas about eugenics, sensitivity of Germans to genetic manipulations due to their historical experience;
6. military – national security, A-bomb and Hiroshima, international efforts at controlling the use of nuclear weapons, supposed existence of genetic weapons;

7. scientific-technological – impossibility of stopping their progress by ethical arguments (“If something is possible, it will be realized sooner or later”);
8. fictional – creation of *Frankensteinian* monsters.

Other possible anchors – racism; social Darwinism; human rights of the cloned people; the image of cloned people as ‘other’, alien, dangerous or less valuable and socially inferior people situated outside our moral universe; human reproductive freedom; threats to human selfhood and uniqueness; bases of human equality; feminist discourse about women’s power or women’s reproductive exploitation by cloning – which were already salient topics of discussion in the West, had not entered into public discussion in Estonia by that time.

Objectification of cloning can be characterized by using symbols and personifications (“poor little lamb Dolly”; the endless row of marching multiplied Hitlers or an army of cloned slaves) and simplifying the cloning process (imagined as mechanical copying of living beings). Abstract and complicated scientific knowledge about cloning which has no reference to everyday life was transformed into easily understandable simplifying images, depicting well-known extreme but socially meaningful symbols (Hitler, Lenin). The main concern was with the multiplication of uncontrollable power. Thus the new emerging representation was linked with the existing stereotypes and consensual attitudes.

Analysis of the elaboration of representations of human cloning in the Estonian media reveals the emergence of controversial (polemic) representations that are accompanied by ambivalent feelings in groups that have different levels of knowledge and encounters with biotechnology. These groups construct new representations under the influence of different implicit and explicit cultural, economic and political pressures on certain social practices (e.g. research).

Following the process of the emergence of a new representation we see how a new object, entering into the cultural space, catalyses semiotic activity. Juri Lotman (2007, 87) has stressed that “new objects which exist outside tradition, have a heightened level of symbolicity”. The emergence of a new social representation is accompanied by the introduction of wide spectrum of different topics and ideas, activation of collective archetypes and images, which highlight all possible, even most hypothetical aspects of the new phenomenon. Further development of representation proceeds through the selection of a narrower set of images and ideas and to the fixation of more stable social representations. This is accompanied by the normalization of the novelty (Wagner et al 2002). Human cloning is apparently a polemic representation that evokes controversial feelings in different groups. Analysis of social representations of mammal cloning reveals that the symbolic boundary between mammals and humans is thin, if not non-existent: manipulations with Dolly were transferred immediately to human beings without



reservations. We can draw here on Kopytoff (1986) who has discussed a similar permeability of the boundary between the world of things and that of people.

### **Anticipation of new biotechnologies from a comparative European perspective**

In order to characterize Estonian public scientific culture in general, we will try to figure out if it differs from European views toward science and technology. We will analyse different indices of public interest in science and will compare knowledge and support of different technologies among Estonians and the European average.

Public attitudes and beliefs about new technologies have been studied regularly by Eurobarometer surveys on biotechnology and the life sciences since the beginning of 1990s in the European Union<sup>1</sup>. Structured questionnaire studies have been carried out on national representative samples of European states simultaneously to focus group interviews of selected population groups. Since 2002 comparative data was also collected in 13 East and Central Europe candidate countries, including Estonia. In 2005 and 2010 those countries participated in the surveys as the members of the EU.

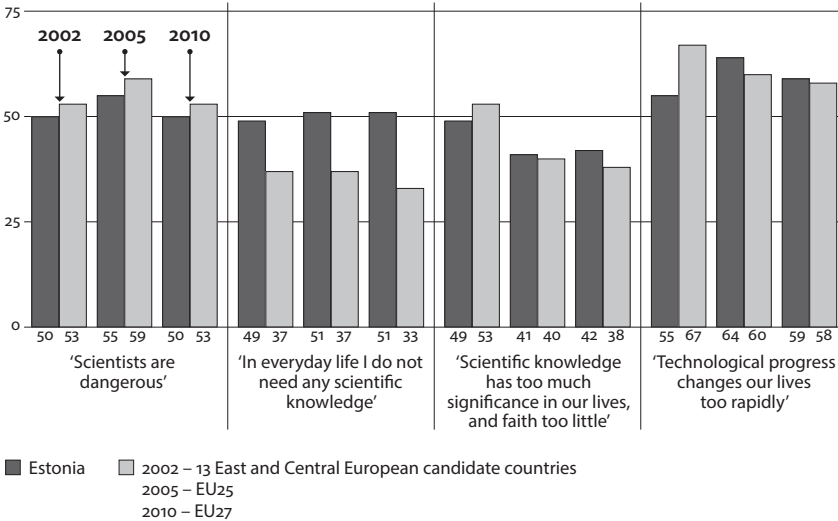
Eurobarometer surveys are an important source of empirical insights into European scientific and technological culture. Longitudinal results of those studies (Gaskell et al 2011) reveal that the character of the public perception of biotechnology is related to culture-specific values, norms and anticipation of a positive or negative future brought by socially sensitive new technology. Long-lasting rejection of genetically modified (GM) food by Western Europeans in the 1990s can be considered an example of strong negative public reaction to new technologies (Bauer 1995). In Western Europe sensitive technologies like animal cloning, growing GM crops, stem cell research and other biotechnological applications have evoked wide-spread discussions which are first of all concentrated on ethical questions (e.g. Bauer 2002; Collavin 2007). However, the Estonian public has missed much of these debates then as it was focused on the restoration of independence and building up institutions of state.

First we observe the general Estonian sentiments towards science, then analyse the adherence to concrete technologies in detail and glance at the preferred principles of governance of science and trust in key biotechnology actors. 2005 Eurobarometer results (Gaskell et al 2007) portrayed Estonians alongside Czechs as eager adherents to technological optimism among new member states. In the all-European rank they shared third place after Sweden and Belgium. The technological optimism index is based on respondents' support for eight

**Figure 1. Public perception of scientific and technological development in Estonia and Europe, 2002–2010**

Results of Eurobarometer surveys.

Support of the statement in percentages (totally agree + tend to agree).



technologies: computers and information technology, solar energy, wind energy, mobile phones, biotechnology and genetic engineering, space exploration, nanotechnology, and nuclear energy. Country rankings reflect respondents' belief that these technologies will improve their way of life in the future. In the 2010 Eurobarometer study the comparative technological optimism index was calculated in the same way, but instead of support for mobile phones, adherence to brain and cognitive enhancement was measured. The results of Eurobarometer surveys (Gaskell et al 2010) show that Estonian citizens consistently have a high level of technological optimism and belief in scientific progress, and great interest in technology, although their subjective sense of being informed about technological development is below the European average.

Figure 1 shows the comparative intensity of views on science from 2002 to 2010. During the past decade about half Estonians and European Union citizens have expressed nostalgia towards the pre-technology world. They are similarly concerned about the possible dangers of science (illustrated by the image of Dr. Frankenstein as a scientist who is able and willing to create monsters). Figure 1 presents comparative attitudes of Estonians and average responses throughout

**Figure 2. Public perception of scientific and technological development in Estonia and the European Union, 2005 and 2010**

Results of Eurobarometer surveys.

Support of the statement in percentages (totally agree + tend to agree).

	2005		2010	
	Estonia	EU25	Estonia	EU27
'Interested in new discoveries'	75	78	80	79
'Technological progress can solve any problem'	23	21	20	22
'Technological progress will make our lives healthier, easier and more comfortable'	85	78	72	66
'Technological progress will improve the life quality of the next generations'	92	77	87	73
'The positive effects of science will outweigh any of its negative effects'	58	52	50	46
'Science and technology will make resources unlimited'	30	23	25	21
'New technology will make human work more interesting'	87	69	76	61

Europe in relation to the development of science and technology in the years 2002, 2005 and 2010.

We see from Figure 2 that both more than three-quarters of Estonians and Europeans are very supportive of technological innovation. Estonians tend to trust science and scientific progress somewhat more than the majority of Europeans. In 2002 Estonians were less concerned than citizens of other CEE countries that technological progress could change their lives too rapidly. After joining the EU those differences diminished and since 2005 Estonian attitudes are no longer different from average European perceptions (Figure 1).

Results of Eurobarometer surveys reveal Estonians' predominantly secular mentality. Therefore religious arguments against biotechnologies are less pronounced here compared to some other EU countries. According to the 2011 World Values Survey<sup>2</sup>, Estonian participation in religious services is consistently low. Independently of whether they attend religious services or not, only 31% of whole population declared themselves religious. There are remarkable differences in this matter between the Estonian majority (25%) and the Russian-speaking minority (44%). Similarly to other Europeans, Estonians are not worried that their lives are overly guided by scientific knowledge rather than faith. However, compared to the pre-recession period, belief in scientific progress and its capacity to improve living standards has decreased moderately. Estonian understanding of technological development can be characterized as an unconditional future-oriented technological optimism: a vast majority of Estonians endorse the view that technological development will improve the life quality of the next generations. They also

tend to think more than other Europeans that technological progress will make their lives healthier, easier and more comfortable. Estonian views on the role of science are most similar to those of Europeans. Half of all respondents believe that the positive effects of technology outweigh the negative effects. Much more than other Europeans, Estonians expect that technological development will enrich human work and make it more interesting and exciting. In comparison with Europeans they are somewhat less pessimistic about technology's ability to make resources unlimited. Thus, in summary, we can say that Estonians are in the vanguard of optimism about technological progress in Europe (see Figure 2).

However, Estonians like Europeans in general are sceptical towards the capacity of technical progress to solve worldwide problems. Longitudinal survey data reveals that in the last decade Estonians have become more similar to Europeans in their attitude to the reasonable speed of technological progress. In spite of high optimism, the majority of Estonians do not see a clear personal link with science and technology: half of Estonians believe that they do not need scientific knowledge in their everyday lives. Among Europeans such disinterest or indifference was expressed only by a third of respondents. Technological development also outweighs environmental concerns for Estonians. Eurobarometer 2010 results (Gaskell et al 2010) show that Estonians, like their Baltic neighbours, tend to believe – similarly to other new EU member states – that technology will stop global warming so that people will maintain their way of life. Two thirds of Europeans, but only 52% of Estonians, mentioned that to halt climate change people have to rethink ways of living even if it means slower economic growth. Thus Estonians tend to favour economic growth and the ways of living that opened new consumption possibilities for them after the collapse of the socialist system. As the level of economic well-being is still below the European average (in 2006–2011 Estonian gross domestic product (GDP; by purchasing power parity) was 66–70% of average European GDP<sup>3</sup>), Estonians tend to prefer materialistic and security values to the post-materialistic self-expression objectives that are favoured in Western welfare societies (Inglehart 2006).

### **Attitudes towards new biotechnologies**

Next we look at Estonian attitudes towards particular applications of different biotechnologies in detail. Analogously to high technology optimism and attitudes towards technology in general, Estonians are consistently optimistic about new biotechnologies. Biofuels and medical applications of biotechnology evoke the greatest hopes.

**Figure 3. Awareness of and support for new biotechnologies in Estonia and the European Union, 2005 and 2010**

Results of Eurobarometer surveys.

Support of the statement in percentages (totally agree + tend to agree); readiness in percentages (definitely yes + probably yes).

	2005		2010	
	Estonia	EU25	Estonia	EU27
Informed about nanotechnology	36	44	47	46
Support for nanotechnology	48	55	65	61
Informed about GM food	63	80	79	84
Support for GM food	25	27	28	27
Support for human stem cell research	50	69	75	67
Informed about biobanks	..	..	68	34
Readiness to participate as a biobank donor	61	58	59	46

A Eurobarometer report (Gaskell et al 2010) points out that 78% of European Union citizens have positive attitudes to traditional first generation *biofuels* that are made from seed, and support for the newer technologies that make fuels from plant leaves and stems is much higher (89%). Estonians are above the European average when it comes to being supportive of both first generation and sustainable biofuels (86% and 92% respectively). As Estonia depends on imported fuels, Estonians tend to think in terms of availability and pricing. In the situation of a sharp world energy shortage, the search for alternative sources has gained paramount importance in the public sphere.

*Synthetic biology* is a new field of research bringing together genetics, chemistry and engineering. The aim of synthetic biology is to construct completely new organisms to make new life forms that are not found in nature. Synthetic biology differs from genetic engineering in that it involves a much more fundamental redesign of an organism so that it can carry out completely new functions. Eurobarometer 2010 findings (Gaskell et al 2010) show that, across Europe, the numbers of those approving and not approving synthetic biology are roughly equal – an indication that the field may potentially become a controversial issue. In Estonia the majority of respondents expressed support and approval of that technology as well. However, Estonians tend to be more curious than Europeans – 40% of Estonians, but slightly less than one third of Europeans wants to know what the scientific processes and techniques are in synthetic biology. At the same time only one third of Estonians, but half of Europeans, worried about the claimed benefits. Estonians, as other Europeans, consider synthetic biology a sensitive technology that demands caution and special laws and regulations.

However, these Estonian attitudes hint that they tend to be more subject to that technology than other Europeans.

Concerns about emerging technologies also indicate some characteristic aspects of Estonian technological optimism.

*Nanotechnology* is a collective term for the family of different technologies intended for engineering matter on the atomic and/or molecular level. Its many uses cover medicines, medical processes, consumer goods and food. It is undoubtedly socially sensitive technology that has initiated debates on social, ethical and legal aspects of molecular engineering. Sensitive aspects of nanotechnology were taken into account in Eurobarometer surveys and respondents were given the possibility to express their opinions about different aspects. Figure 3 shows that Estonian knowledge about nanotechnology equalized with other Europeans for 2010. Eurobarometer results also reveal different levels of presumed benefit, safety, inequity, and anxiety about the unnaturalness of molecular engineering. Estonians tend to see nanotechnology clearly in terms of safety while other Europeans expressed their worries in terms of unnaturalness. Divisions in regard to benefits and distributional equity are not so clear. However, Estonians tend to believe more than average Europeans that nanotechnology is good for their national economy and that it helps people in developing countries. We suggest that these attitudes relate to the comparison of domestic living standard with richer West-European welfare countries.

Despite renewed controversy over stem cell research regulation in the USA, two thirds of Europeans consistently supported *stem cell research* in the past decade. Compared to 2005 the greatest increase in supporters of human stem cell research (25%) across all EU countries has been in Estonia. That is not surprising as human embryonic stem cell research is well developed in Estonia due to intensive international cooperation and networking that became familiar to the Estonian public through successful science communication. Respective attitudes also reflect the Estonian public's concerns about other stem cell research and gene therapy. Nearly two thirds of Europeans support *gene therapy*. Gene transplantation, a technology that has been banned in many countries, is supported now by slightly more than half of respondents both in Estonia and across Europe. Attitudes to *regenerative medicine* reflect wider concerns towards ethical issues. Regenerative medicine is the process of replacing or regenerating living human cells, tissues or organs to restore or establish normal function lost due to age, disease, damage, or congenital defects. 2010 Eurobarometer results (Gaskell et al 2010) reveal these worries – an overwhelming majority of respondents claim not to support these lines of research if they only benefit the rich. However,

Estonians tend to worry less than average Europeans about the fairness of the distribution of benefits.

*Biobanks* collect data on biological and environmental/lifestyle characteristics. They do so on a very large scale, with the aim of tearing apart genetic and lifestyle factors in the pursuit of eradicating disease and the maintenance of health. There are large differences between European countries in attitudes towards biobanks, which can be explained largely on the basis of citizens' knowledge. As there has been a gene bank in Estonia since 2001, Estonians are familiar with such an institution, which mainly has a good reputation with the Estonian public and in the media. The most outstanding biotechnological project is the Estonian Genome project, launched in 1999 at the University of Tartu. At the beginning it was planned as a commercial gene bank. Its aim was to collect gene specimens from all of Estonia's 1.3 million population. Problems with investors forced it to change from a business model to a non-profit model and since 2007 the project has been financed by the state. By 2012 the cohort size was 51,515 gene donors (Estonian Genome Center). Estonians are better informed about biobanks compared to the majority of Europeans, something that is reflected in comparative indices. On average, two thirds of Europeans, but only one third of Estonians, have not heard about biobanks. Around half of those who have heard about biobanks talked about them with others or searched for information. In Estonia there was one third of such respondents, but in Europe less than 20%. Nearly half of Europeans and 59% of Estonians are ready to become gene donors. Eurobarometer 2010 survey revealed that in the European context the best informed are citizens of the Nordic countries and Estonia. In those countries there are more possible donors.

Estonians tend to favour pro-biobank attitudes; they are less worried about the safety of bioinformation: only one quarter of Estonians compared to one third of European Union citizens are worried about the possible misuse of biological specimens. In general, Europeans seem to be less concerned about depositing information about their lifestyles (what they eat, how much exercise they take, etc.) to biobanks. Estonians tend to be slightly more precautionary in giving information about all possible deposits – blood samples, tissue collected during medical operations, their personal genetic profile, medical records from their doctor and their lifestyle (e.g. diet, exercise habits etc.) – than European Union citizens. Estonian attitudes towards regulations covering biobank research resemble the viewpoints of other Europeans: two thirds of them favour strict interpretation of informed consent – they are convinced that researchers should require permission for every deposit. Like the majority of European Union citizens Estonians would entrust the responsibility of protecting the public interest in biobanks to

medical doctors and researchers first. However, Estonians tend to delegate it more than the majority of Europeans to national data protection authorities and less to international organisations like the European Union or World Health Organisation and especially public institutions (different universities and hospitals).

Support for *medical biotechnologies* has always been stronger among Europeans than for agricultural biotechnologies, and this difference has become more pronounced in recent years. That discrepancy can be explained by perceived naturalness. Agriculture is perceived as part of nature, where crops grow in natural conditions and human intervention (fertilization, weed killing) should be minimal. Modern medicine by its nature is already the correction of the human body, so additional innovative interventions are accepted more easily. A contrast between attitudes to 'red' (medical) and 'green' (agricultural) biotechnologies (Bauer 2002) is noticeable in Europe as well as in Estonia. In general, biomedical research has enjoyed more public support among Europeans than agricultural applications of biotechnology (Bauer 2005). However, reactions to medical biotechnology attracted longstanding criticism. Figure 3 presents comparative aspects of attitudes towards nanotechnology and to applications of some medical and agricultural biotechnologies.

Anxieties, fears and caution dominate in the attitudes to *food-related biotechnologies* across Europe. Genetic modification of plants and cloning agricultural animals are considered unnatural in public perception and evoke resistance in the majority of people. European public support to GM food is constantly low and has decreased in many countries in the recent years – on average there are three opponents to one supporter and in no country are there more supporters than opponents. Results from longitudinal opinion surveys 1996–2010 (Gaskell et al 2011) point out that support for GM food has decreased in Western Europe. Eurobarometer survey results (Gaskell et al 2010) show that in 2010 Estonians' level of knowledge and support for GM food was similar to those of Europeans. Only one in four among both Estonians and EU citizens supports GM food.

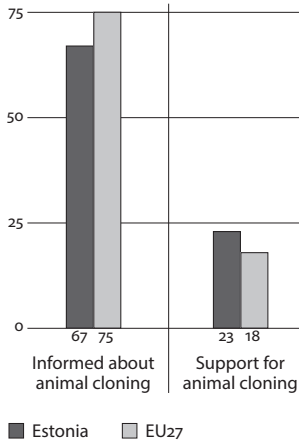
*Cloning of agricultural animals* for the food industry evokes similar public reactions in nearly all EU countries: this technology finds even less support than GM agricultural crops. Figure 4 shows that two thirds of Estonians and three quarters of Europeans have heard about this, but slightly less than one quarter of Estonians and less than one fifth of Europeans support this technology. Eurobarometer results (Gaskell et al 2010) concluded that European publics see animal cloning as not offering benefits, as unsafe, as inequitable and as worrying.

However, Estonians tend to see it as somewhat safer and more beneficial than average Europeans. 40% of Estonians, but only 30% of Europeans tend to think that animal cloning for food production helps people in developing countries.



**Figure 4. Awareness of and support for animal cloning for food in Estonia and the European Union, 2010**

Results of Eurobarometer surveys. Support in percentages (totally agree + tend to agree).



Similar differences in attitudes reflect lower Estonian levels of uncertainty. Animal cloning in food production makes 57% of Estonians feel uneasy compared to two thirds of Europeans. 17% of Europeans, but one third of Estonians are convinced that animal cloning in food production is safe for their own and their family's health.

At the same time, as *genetic manipulation* is perceived to be more 'natural', it receives more public support. Attitudes toward the 'unnaturalness' of biotechnologists' interventions illustrate ways in which the public gradually accepts genetic modifications. In a 2010 Eurobarometer study, respondents were asked to express their attitudes to genetically manipulated apples. Transgenic apples are artificially improved with a resistance

gene from another species such as a bacterium or animal. Cisgenic apples are also artificially improved, but by a nearer originating gene that exists naturally in wild apple. Eurobarometer results (Gaskell et al 2010) indicate that cisgenic apples are more positively accepted in all countries. 55% of Europeans encourage cisgenic apples and one third of them support transgenic apples that are perceived to be more natural and safe. Those discrepancies are much larger among Estonians. On one hand Estonians tend to be more precautious than Europeans toward conventional genetic modification: only 27% of them approve of transgenic apples. But on the other hand they tend to be more supportive of 'technolite' solutions – two thirds of them approved of cisgenic apples. This suggests that there is strong resentment against the use of pesticides, and so people tend to expect that pesticide residues on the apples would be minimal both to the environment and to food safety. Natural gardening is of the utmost value among many people in Estonia after the end of Soviet-period extensive agricultural production (which ended two decades ago). Cisgenic agricultural crops with additional genes only from plants of the same species evoke different reactions compared to transgenic plants which have genes from more remote plant species. Cisgenic plants can be considered second-generation GM crops in which genetic modification has

been achieved by minimal interference together with maximal effectiveness that manifests in decreased necessity for pesticides. Therefore this process is evaluated higher in terms of utility, safety, sustainability and naturalness.

### **Patterns of trust**

Finally we will look at the preferred principles of governance and patterns of trust in biotechnology actors. Results of Eurobarometer survey (Gaskell et al 2010) demonstrate that Estonians tend to share similar views with other Europeans on the governance of science. They tend to prefer scientific delegation (decisions based on expert opinion and on the grounds of scientific evidence) as the dominant science and technology regulatory principle to moral delegation (decisions based on the moral and ethical issues involved and on the advice of ethics committees), scientific deliberation (decisions based on scientific evidence and reflecting the views of average citizens) or moral deliberation (prioritisation of moral and ethical arguments over scientific considerations, favouring the views of the general public over those of the experts).

Trust in key biotechnology actors reveals public worries and concerns. Eurobarometer results portray the attitudes of Estonians and other Europeans as quite overlapping, although in some important aspects somewhat different patterns of trust emerge among Europeans and Estonians. 70% to 80% of Europeans have confidence in doctors, university scientists, and consumer organisations as efficient agents in the pursuit of good governance and effective policy making. However, only 59% of Estonians trust consumer organisations as testers of biotechnological products.

Slightly less than two thirds of Europeans and half of Estonians tend to believe that newspapers, magazines and television that report on biotechnology are doing a good job for society. The largest discrepancies emerged in attitudes to trust of national governments and retailers, in which there was lower confidence among other Europeans as well. More than half of them but only one third of Estonians trusted their national government to pass laws on biotechnology. In a similar vein 60% of Europeans but 40% of Estonians think that retailers who ensure that food is safe are doing a good job for society. These discrepancies can be explained by Soviet-period established mistrust of public institutions.

Trust and confidence in the biotechnology industry decreased remarkably between the last two Eurobarometer surveys (2005–2010) in Estonia, while in other states the changes were relatively modest. However, support is not very different from the EU average. Estonians tend to be more trustful of scientific expertise rather than various agencies dealing indirectly with biotechnological

innovation. Industries that develop new products with biotechnology are mostly small biotechnological firms, and as a rule most of them function under the umbrella of research institutions. For instance the Estonian Union of Biotechnology (2003) joins enterprises and research institutions that are engaged in biotechnology. This union has compiled the Estonian Biotechnology Strategy 2008–2013 (Kukk & Truve 2008); one of their aims is to turn biotechnology into the most rapidly developing branch of industry in Estonia.

## Conclusion

New technologies enter into the public sphere through media communication. Different cultural forms are used to introduce novelty to the public. This is done through figurative images and various idea complexes, which in a particular cultural context may evoke hope or fear. Two recent technological innovations with huge imaginative and affective impact widely covered by the media are the cloning of mammals and the creation of genetically modified organisms. Analysis of initial media coverage of mammal cloning in Estonia showed that images and metaphors taken over from the Western media are adaptive and function efficiently in our cultural context (cf Liakopoulos 2002). The stage of formation of a new social representation was characterized by the introduction of a wide set of different topics and ideas, activation of collective images and archetypes which illuminate different aspects of the new phenomenon and which are negotiated in the public sphere. With the explication of a new technology, a full spectrum of supposed opportunities and risks came to the foreground. Feelings of fear and disgust on the one hand, and optimistic hopes on the other, were evoked and contrasted in public debate. This was an initial stage of collective symbolic coping (Wagner et al 2002) with a particular technological novelty – diverse image construction in order to make sense of the new phenomenon. Now, sixteen years after the Dolly the sheep story, mammal cloning has become more normal and no longer evokes public emotion. Ambivalence has been resolved and an optimistic direction in talking about animal cloning prevails.

On a wider scale we can characterize some peculiarities of Estonian public scientific culture, which functions as a general context for the ‘domestication’ of technological novelties. Comparative survey data on the European level show that Estonia is among the technophile nations of Europe. Estonians are very interested in and supportive of the development of technology and express optimistic attitudes towards scientific progress. If they have to choose between ethical and scientific viewpoints on science government then they tend to prefer the scientific viewpoint. Their familiarity with GM food and animal cloning is slightly lower

than other Europeans and familiarity with synthetic biology is similar to the European average, although knowledge of biobanks is much higher due to the Estonian Genome project.

Religion barely delimits Estonian public debates on new technology. The Protestant cultural legacy and experience of living under Communist rule contributed to the secularization of Estonia, as in other post-socialist societies (Inglehart 2006). Estonians lag behind in their willingness to undertake changes in lifestyle in response to climate change; instead they tend to favour economic growth as the solution to all problems. Estonians are satisfied with the ways of living that became available to them after the collapse of socialism, which made previously inaccessible commodities and lifestyles available to them.

Another specific feature of post-communist scientific culture is the relative scarcity of public discussion. Similarly to many former socialist countries, instead of active membership in voluntary organizations Estonia can be considered as having a weak civil society that is characterized by a scarcity of influential organized interest groups. 'Organized pluralism' in Estonia leaves a lot to be desired. Citizen activity was controlled and partly suppressed under the Soviet system, and as a consequence social participation and voluntary social activities developed negative connotations, becoming relatively infrequent in post-socialist countries (Howard 2003; Rämmer 2008), indicating a certain deficit in democracy. This is why discussions on sensitive technologies are quite rare and apathetic. Many political decisions are made without substantial public input and discussion. Obviously collective decision-making should combine expert and public opinion for corresponding policies. Major conflicts and controversies over new sensitive technologies seem to be imported and are not yet perceived as 'domestic'. Therefore one would expect more intensive and closer cooperation between science and politics to foster and implement the practical benefits of new technologies.

Giddens (1990) has described faith in modern technology and human rationality as one of the basic adaptive reactions to the risks of modernity. In Eastern Europe an additional factor – the specific legacy of the previous socialist regimes – may be relevant. Under communist rule science education and the scientific worldview were highly valued, trust in science was propagated, and scientific and technological progress was a consensual value not subject to public discussion. Specific post-socialist public scientific culture has provided a cultural context for the 'domestication' of technological innovations in Estonia. Formation of positive social representations of new technologies may be explained partly by earlier belief in progress and optimistic visions of the future, propagated during the Soviet period, but also by the traditional ideology-free reputation of the natural

sciences and high levels of trust in scientists. Estonians are open to novelty, and technological innovations do not evoke resistance. A pragmatic and materialistic worldview dominates in Estonia; there are no strong ethical or religious barriers to the introduction of new technologies. New technologies evoke among the lay public hopes and fears that are related to the direct and unplanned effects of these technologies. Attitudes of the great majority of Estonians towards new technologies can be characterized as optimism or indifference.

The “drama of personal biography” of things lies in the uncertainties of valuation and identity (Kopytoff 1986, 89). In the case of some new technologies the uncertainty can be characterized as a culturally constructed blurred boundary between the ‘natural’ and the ‘unnatural’, as in the case of the perception of genetic hybrids noted by Wagner and his colleagues (Wagner et al 2006) or the differentiation of ‘red’ and ‘green’ biotechnologies.

The general background of technological optimism and scarcity of critical public discussion in Estonia provides a basis for the appropriation of scientific and technological innovation where promise outweighs reservation and fear. The specifics of post-socialist scientific culture and its development require further analysis.

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## Notes

1 Participating countries reflect the expanding membership of the EU; thus, 1991 and 1993 scores are for the original 12 member states, 1996–2002 for EU15, 2005 for EU25 and 2010 for EU27.

2 Data is not yet available, but see the World Values Survey 2010–2012 questionnaire.

3 See Statistics Estonia.

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