

The Socialness of Things



Approaches to Semiotics

115

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The Socialness of Things

Essays on the Socio-Semiotics of Objects

Edited by

Stephen Harold Riggins

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Dedicated to

Paul Bouissac

who saw the theoretical potential
of the socialness of things

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Introduction

Stephen Harold Riggins

The term “socialness” is a neologism that is used in this volume to call attention to the integration of objects in the social fabric of everyday life. Specialists in material culture studies have understood for some time — unlike many sociologists — that societies consist of both people and artifacts. It is not only with people and animals that we interact but also with objects. Objects are a cause, a medium, and a consequence of social relationships. Truly the only context in which artifacts can be observed is in their relation to humans. We practically always perceive other people in situations in which they interact with objects and are surrounded by them. Even during our most socially isolated experiences we are never alone in that sense. Hence the quality of socialness which is legitimately imputed to things by the contributors to this volume.

Recent research in material culture studies (Appadurai 1986; Bronner 1986; Csikszentmihalyi — Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas — Isherwood 1979; Hodder 1989; McCracken 1988; Miller 1987; Pocius 1991; Riggins 1990a; Schlereth 1982; Stocking 1985) tends to contradict two of the basic assumptions about objects that characterize commonsense thought in North America. First, in commonsense thought objects are generally conceptualized in opposition to people, a perception which imputes a strong semantic contrast to the differences between things and organisms, matter and life. From this perspective people are assumed to be active agents who determine the physical configurations and meanings of objects; objects are apparently nothing but the passive embodiment of human intentions. It is characteristic of this rigid distinction between matter and life that the term “objectivity” is used to represent knowledge endowed with unquestionable and universal validity irrespective of an observer, while the term “subjectivity” is used to represent attitudes or judgments characterized by changeability, relativity, and unreliability. Material stability thus seems to guarantee a certain invariability to artifacts while social structures are seen as being in constant flux. The second feature of commonsense knowledge about artifacts is the relative insen-

sitivity to the complexities of deciphering the rich symbolic meanings inherent in or imposed upon objects. Consequently, interpreted meanings appear to be relatively simple and straightforward, essentially timeless, and largely identical for any observer within the same culture.

In material culture studies the consideration of objects as features of social transactions has resulted in a conceptualization of artifacts as agencies or quasi-agencies. Thus, the vocabulary which would normally be reserved for humans is applied to objects. Researchers are writing about the "cultural biography" of artifacts (Kopytoff 1986), artifacts as "agents of socialization" (Csikszentmihalyi — Rochberg-Halton 1981: 50—52), "socially entangled objects" (Thomas 1991), and about the way people "interact intellectually" with objects (Prown 1991: 148). Consistent with this perspective, the first collection of articles in this volume has been titled the "dialogic object." One might speak of people being in dialogue with objects in the sense that it is difficult to construct one's self, and to present that self to others, in the absence of objects which symbolize achieved and desired statuses. Artifacts are consequently powerful in their own right and not just in the sense of physically constraining human action. Through objects we keep alive the collective memory of societies and families which would otherwise be forgotten.

This blurring of the human-object boundary is most obvious, on the one hand, in the concept of fetish and, on the other hand, in the literature about the way people are treated as if they were things. A fetish is an object endowed with exceptional power, a level of social influence greater than that possessed by ordinary people. In assuming that spiritual forces animate objects, the concept of fetish humanizes artifacts and negates the traditional notion of people as controllers of objects (Ellen 1988; 1990). The concept of fetish has been derived from the study of West African religions, but is seen as a characteristic of both traditional and modern societies, although not necessarily expressed in the same manner. One sees in the chapter by Danet and Katriel in this volume the extent to which goods take on fetishistic aspects for collectors who daydream about objects, talk to them, and exert exorbitant amounts of energy towards maintaining objects that may be as humble as used beer cans. Research in material culture studies which makes little or no explicit use of the concept of fetish nonetheless imputes a high degree of power to artifacts in defining social situations and in constraining social interaction (Gagliardi 1990; Vastokas, this volume). Conversely, Erving Goffman, among others, has written about the vulnerability of "non-persons," as he referred to people determined by powerful social structures, and compares

their inconsiderate treatment to that accorded objects. In mental asylums “there is always a danger that an inmate will appear human,” according to Goffman (1961: 81).

Just as language is polysemic, open to multiple interpretations, so are material artifacts. This reversal of commonsense is due to a thorough consideration of the complexities of the mental process through which artifacts are interpreted. Meanings read into artifacts are now thought to derive from at least four sources of information, only one of which is an artifact’s actual physical characteristics. The other three include: the information conveyed by objects (and space) which surround an artifact; the observer’s life-long experience with similar types of artifacts, few of which will be present in a given situation; and texts about artifacts (museum labels, advertisements, newspaper articles, etc.). Objects are “intertextual” in the sense that the meanings imputed to them are influenced by printed and broadcast statements (Hebdige 1988: 80-84). They are caught in a semiotic web with which they become consubstantial. These features of the interpretative process vastly expand — chronologically and synchronically — the range of potential meanings which can be read into artifacts. Imputed meanings may be as varied as the social positions of observers because this gives them different kinds of personal experience with objects and with texts about objects. Daniel Miller (1987: 108) thus refers to the “extreme visibility and invisibility” of objects. The materiality of objects gives the false impression of rendering their meanings more visible than those of linguistic statements. In fact, there may be no difference in the level of polysemy between language and artifacts or one might claim that language functions to limit potential interpretations (and consequently social confusion) more effectively than do the physical characteristics of objects.

This book is based on the proceedings of an international conference which took place at the University of Toronto in 1990¹. It comprises a selection of revised papers chosen in view of their diversity with respect to methodology and domains of application. The chapters in the first part of the volume deal with artifacts such as furniture, mementoes, and knickknacks, which can be manipulated as social “others” — acquired or adopted, desired or mourned — entities with which one can socialize or make a part in socialization processes such as establishing a bond, conveying a message, etc. The second section of articles concerns artifacts whose dimensions take such proportions that humans become dwarfed with respect to them, such as tourists travelling to visit them or shoppers being herded through their artifactual geography as though flowing within

an oversized organism. In the concluding section, the artifacts examined are by contrast so adjusted to the proportion of the human body, so close to it that they become an indissociable part of the social persona sticking to the skin, expressing better than any other means the socialness of people, their class, ethnicity, gender, age status, etc. and even betraying the secrets of the psyche that psychoanalysts tackle. The three parts of the book form a dialogic relationship in an almost dramaturgical sense.

Confronted with the richness and complexity of human-object interaction, it could be expected that all of the contributors would attempt to identify a methodology which is best adopted to their object of study. Not unexpectedly there is a certain unavoidable methodological eclecticism which characterizes this book as a whole. For instance, some authors look to linguistics for inspiration; others see linguistics as simply a distraction. Some authors extol a focus on the object itself; others prefer to give an equal amount of attention to texts. Some authors hypothesize an intimate link between self and objects; others, believing that artifactual messages are evocative and elusive, hypothesize no close link with the self.

The socio-semiotics of objects which has been slowly emerging since the 1980s from anthropology and material culture studies is still in a developing stage. Some academic specialties that in theory are highly relevant to an understanding of the social information of artifacts, most obviously the sociological perspectives known as symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and dramaturgical analysis (Brissett — Edgley 1990), have yet to make an impact (however, see, Davis 1992). Thus, the purpose of this book is to adumbrate the mapping of this immense field of research, surveying its main territories, and trying methods of analysis as they seem fit.

Note

1. Several papers in this volume were first presented at the conference "The Socio-semiotics of Objects: The Role of Artifacts in Social Symbolic Processes." Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Program of Aid to Occasional Scholarly Conferences in Canada, Program 443, Grant no. 443-90-0069) for its financial support for this conference.

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Part I

The dialogic object: Artifacts as agents and processes

The genuine article

Mary Douglas

Introduction

Roland Barthes once suggested that there should be a science of grades. The context was his discussion of Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and the question was whether metal or wooden coffee mills were better, and whether wood was the more noble material (Barthes 1984: 290–291).¹ He was calling for more attention to the grading of objects in everyday life. Standardized grading is associated with centralization and expanding political and market networks across ancient boundaries. More universalistic measures of space and time are achieved in every decade. Whereas an inch was the length of a thumb, and a yard the length of an arm, the foot of a foot, a metric system detached from the human body has superseded most local systems of measurement. Time used to be measured by the movements of shadows recording the place of the sun in the sky. Cooking instructions used to measure time by the length of prayers, telling the cook to stir for the length of two *aves* or to boil for the length of time it takes to recite the *pater noster* five times. But now, industrialism and the factory system have given us clocks. Europe is looking for a single monetary system. All these shifts to universal measures give us new vocabulary, and though one may have a folklorist's regret for the hourglass and the sundial, there are now possibilities of co-ordination one would not wish to be without. By implication, Barthes was suggesting that to deepen our understanding of types and grades of objects we need to go beyond anecdote and description and to supersede local provincial vocabularies. In being gathered here we are taking up his challenge to think about the semiotics of objects.

Context

As the first speaker, I have the privilege of being the first to ask the obvious questions. For example, some of the time we are going to be

setting objects back into context, and some of the time taking them out of context for theoretical purposes. But what puzzles me is how are we to know what is object and what is context? For example, does the teapot provide the context of a teapot lid? Should we treat the set of silver teapot and milk jug as one object? If so, are the tray and the sugar bowl context or object? How does one define an automobile? Is it a wheeled vehicle? In which case, are the wheels an intrinsic part of the object? Or are they four parts related by complementarity in use to the chassis? The antiques auctioneer would say that a teapot and its lid are one object, since he cannot sell one without the other. But a friend of mine who lives in a dangerous district of London used to park his car in the road outside his house. Naturally the car was insured against theft. One day, to his consternation, he came out and found the car there, but all four wheels removed. He checked his insurance which covered theft of the car but not accessories and, since there is no way that the wheels can be thought of as accessories on a par with the radio and cigarette lighter, he put in his claim. It was rejected. The reply from the insurance company directed his attention to the small print which said that accessories are movable parts, and since his wheels had been moved, there was no arguing with them. So on this accounting the wheels are one kind of object, and the car has to be the context of the wheels. I cannot help wondering what the insurance company would have said if the wheels had been left in the road, and the car removed. The moral is that the idea of context is adapted to the needs of the inquiry and we will need to make our own technical decisions about how we use the idea of context for the semiotics of objects.

The question is far from trivial. We do not want to impose arbitrary classifications upon the streams of objects that flow around us. All the problems that we can have with metaphor (Davidson 1979) raise their heads in new guise when we identify objects. We do not escape from the predicaments that language prepares for us by turning away from the semiotics of words to the semiotics of objects. It would be illusory to hope that objects present us with a more solid, unambiguous world. There is no end to finding metaphors and there is no end to finding objects. The problem is how to control our imagination, how not to be arbitrary in the connections we make. Or to put it another way, how to secure our categories by theoretical schemes that work. In given contexts some protection against arbitrariness may be sought in human usage, but not very much, for the social usages change. For example, I am glad to notice that Arum Lilies have come into fashion as garden plants. As a child, I

once asked my father why he did not grow Arum Lilies in our garden. He replied that they were so closely associated with the graveyard and death and mourning that they were unsuitable for gardens. Something has changed. How to explain it? A semiotician from Mars might conclude that our culture has narrowed the distance between life and death, and that we have reached a kind of civilization which does not mind about dying. Discarding this suggestion at once, we could ask if it is due to our tendency to send cheques for charity instead of wreaths or to our tendency not to attend funerals as assiduously as our parents did? If lilies and roses are no longer linked as opposites in a contrast set of dying and living, the explanation has to be traced back to the system of formal presentations between persons at lifecycle events. Some events have become more prominent since the eighteenth century, such as weddings which were casual, family occasions if novelists are to be relied on. Other events have receded into the background, such as deaths of very old persons who have not been credited with enough personality to warrant attendance at their funeral. In a small community everybody's and anybody's death might have been significant; in our present culture the significance depends on whose death. The context for the meanings of the flowers is the context of persons. Reflection on objects leads us back to persons.

The fact is that there are many objects which we never see in context. I once stayed in an elegant apartment in Toronto filled with exquisite objects each of which created a context for the others, and which filled me with delight. One morning, wanting a change from Twinings' tea bags, and perhaps wanting my life to be a little more in tune with the furnishings, I raided my hostess's tea caddy and helped myself to her China tea. When I emptied the pot after breakfast I found a whole tea leaf in the sink. Whole leaves! Macrobiotic tea! In London the tea comes chopped or even minced into fine dust which we call "tea leaves." Never having beheld an unmutated tea leaf I was unexpectedly moved to find in my hand a sample of the original context of the tea dust. I mention these incidents out of respect for our subject. As we shall see, there are reasons why the topic calls forth humor, irony and pathos.

Autographic/allographic

The concept of the genuine article has the advantage that a major philosopher has paid attention to it. According to Nelson Goodman, one

would not ask “is this the genuine, authentic thing?,” if you knew and could be sure of its history. You would start to ask that question if it turned out that some part of the history of the object were missing. If you are asking such questions, it will be about a kind of object whose identity is anchored only by its history. Is it authentic? The answer has to provide the missing information, and to dispel doubt by giving evidence. The question calls for a unique history, continuously vouched for. There is another kind of object which may pose the question of authenticity, but requires a quite different answer. Confronted by the police and charged with speeding, you may doubt that they are testing your state of sobriety with the right apparatus. So you might be rash enough to ask, “is this a genuine breathalyser? It looks like a vacuum cleaner to me.” In this case the authenticity of the instrument does not require uniqueness, nor guaranteed continuity from the time it issued from its maker’s hands. The answer can rely entirely on stylistic and material criteria. If you want information about the origin and history of objects of this kind, you can get it from the design, the kind of materials, and also from the signs of manufacturing methods. Nelson Goodman uses the word “autographic” for production whose value depends on historical continuity. The idea of possible forgery applies to autographic objects such as paintings and sculptures, because the idea of authenticity is somehow central to their value. Goodman uses “allographic” for the object whose value does not depend on its historic uniqueness. It will be better to give his own example which compares paintings with photographs:

Paintings belong to what I may call a *singular* symbol system. Each painting is unique; in the technical sense of replica, there are no replicas of pictures as there are of words... A photograph on the other hand is not unique. Photographic picturing is a multiple symbol system. The relation among several prints from a negative is to some extent comparable to the relation among several replicas of a word; but the two relations are not the same. In the first case, we have an autographic and in the second an allographic symbol system. That is, the relation among the prints consists in their having been produced from the same negative while the relation among the inscriptions consists in their being spelled the same way... (Goodman 1978: 48).

This example is a coda to his much fuller discussion of fakes and legitimate replicas in *Languages of Art* (Goodman 1976). Considering how much value is attached to the fact of some kinds of objects (paintings) being unique and so little to the uniqueness of other kinds of objects, he clearly has an important distinction. And a puzzle:

... we may be faced with the protest that the vast aesthetic difference thought to obtain between the Rembrandt and the forgery cannot be accounted for in terms of the search for, or even the discovery of, perceptual differences so slight that they can be made out, if at all, only after much experience and long practice (Goodman 1976: 108).

This objection, he says, can be dismissed at once, because “the slightest perceptual differences sometimes matter the most aesthetically; gross physical damage to a fresco may be less consequential than slight but smug retouching” (Goodman 1976: 108). He claims that, by contrast with painting, in music there is no such thing as a forgery of a known work. In the world of music the idea of the genuine object is quite different. Music produces objects whose authenticity is of another kind:

Hayden’s manuscript is no more genuine an instance of the score than is a printed copy off the press this morning, and last night’s performance no less genuine than the premiere. Copies of the score may vary in accuracy, but all accurate copies, even if forgeries of Hayden’s manuscript, are equally genuine instances of the score. Performances may vary in correctness and quality and even in “authenticity” of a more esoteric kind; but all correct performances are equally genuine instances of the work. In contrast, even the most exact copies of the Rembrandt painting are simply imitations or forgeries, not new instances of the work. Why this difference between the two arts? (Goodman 1976: 112–113).

Here he introduces his distinction between allographic and autographic, and uses it to develop his full aesthetic theory. I hope it does not do too much violence to the theory to say that some art is produced for reproduction, as music, which makes notation systems important. Other art not being produced for replication can display the subtle and complex symptoms of the aesthetic which defy notationality. Sometimes the method of production of the object is susceptible to notationality (in which case it is more apt for allographic production); sometimes it is not (in which case there is a presumption in favor of autographic recognition if only because a dispute about the authenticity cannot be settled by reference to something like a score or other notation system). Beyond recognizing an aptness for notationality, the anthropologist would be doubtful that there is anything intrinsic in the nature of painting or music that swings it to one or other of the two kinds. We can think of contrary instances, such as peoples among whom the unique history of a painting is not treated in the same way as among ourselves, or among whom the option of identifying a piece of music by the score is not available, or where no one but the composer has a right to utter his own composition and could be expected to challenge a player who used it to a duel. Though

we can recognize the two categories of object, something more like a collective decision about the kind of prestige and the amount of originality allowed to the various stages of production assigns art forms in these cases to the class of allographic or of autographic objects. I have tried to explain the distinction because in what follows I will pay attention to another aspect of it.

Allographic production can be anonymous, or at least the credit can go to a group of people, not to one person and the actual assigning of origins may not be important in evaluating it. Whether there is a score or not, something about the organization of our music world and the arrangements for paying royalties to the composer and fees to the musicians make it more important to know who composed the music than who performed it at all stages of its history. This is even more true for the organization of the world of painting and sculpture. The makers of canvas stretchers and the paint manufacturers and the other industries which service the painters get hardly any recognition beyond the discriminating choice of professionals who buy their products. On the other hand, Stradivarius is a great name in the making of violins: the violin itself is very much an autographic object. Are we to assume that because of the nature of painting there is nothing equivalent to a violin signed by a master instrument maker in the world of painting? Is the autographic possibility determined by the art form, or by the intentions of the artists and their public to elevate some parts of the process to a special distinction? We can go further by noting that the authentic signature on the violin carries authority. The readiness of the public to confer authority has to be considered. In short, we can recognize two different classes of objects, and also recognize that their difference rests on decision taking in the community of users about the distribution of prestige and reward. Sometimes the community wants authenticity, sometimes it wants inspiration.

Israel Scheffler (1986) has worked out an application of the distinction to religious ritual. He assimilates to Goodman's terms the distinction that separates efficacious ritual from simple ceremonial. In Catholic doctrine if the officiant is a priest in valid orders, his act and words transform bread and wine into the saving body and blood of Christ; their efficacy depends on the history of his ordination, and the unbroken continuity of the bishops conferring priesthood on him. That is an autographic ritual and there is much to be said about its implications for authority and control. The same applies to rival practitioners in healing cults: in some cults, every one and anyone can get up and lay on hands and it might work if there is enough faith; in others the gift of healing

has to be vouched for and the laying on of hands will not work unless they are the authentic hands of an accredited healer whose initiation or unique vision are part of the autograph. Control is at issue in both cases. Likewise, objects which have autographic quality are the locus of stronger claims on the part of their owners than allographic objects.

Genuine antiques

In our days the idea of the genuine and the fraudulent article belong in the context of the auction room. So the idea of the genuine article comes into our common speech with some irony. Entering a modern house and penetrating to the bathroom, we notice that the plumbing seems not to have changed since it was first installed. Admiring the huge porcelain bath with the clawed feet each grasping a ball, and hearing the rattling croak as the taps are turned on, we may exclaim: "Ah! Here is the genuine article!" But unless we are in the antiques business we are not likely to bother to look for the signature of the maker. The idea of its being a fake does not apply. If the host explained that he had commissioned it in exact replica of the bathroom in Buckingham Palace, that would neither add to nor take away its value in our eyes. The issue of forgery is irrelevant.

Two things sever an object decisively from its context, one is being thrown on the rubbish heap, and the other, turning up on the auctioneer's table. When he holds a genuine something or other, the auctioneer tries to give it a context by recalling bits of its pedigree: "This is a bronze casting of Princess Alexandria's foot when she was one year old. It was made by ... it weights ... and was given as a present to Queen Victoria ... and inherited on her death by... It remained in the X family until last year..." And he contrives to make a joke or two. To hear his artificial contextualizing of a sentimental object that has been so thoroughly decontextualized is a sad business. The saleroom has a voyeurist titillation. The antique shop is like a cocktail party in which no one knows anyone else except the host — and he does not even like them very much — an alienating, anonymizing evening for all. There is something faintly indecent about rummaging in the detritus of other people's lives. There is more to boast of in having inherited or having been given an ancient object of autographic value than to have paid cash for it. This is not just because inheritance implies the legitimacy of ancient lineage, or because the valuable gift implies good friends. It is because you have not only

got the thing, but you are its context. On seeing what looks like a genuine pot of blue woad among the knickknacks in a friend's house, you, being a connoisseur of Celtic antiquities, might say: "Hullo! This looks like a pot of blue woad! How did you get it?" If your friend explains that he dug it up in his garden or bought it for a song in the flea market, or paid a crazy price at Sotheby's, there is always the missing context, which no money can buy. But if he says that his maternal great-grandfather was descended from a long line of druids, and that it has been in his family every since, that his aunt used it for potpourri, the known pedigree supplies the continuous context. Of course it is still decontextualized, even if it were kept among other cosmetic jars in the bathroom. But its guaranteed history rescues it from the anonymous miscellany of the antique shop. The guaranteed continuous history turns it into an autographic product.

The contrast between allographic and autographic does not quite coincide with the well-known line between market commodities and other kinds of objects. That in itself makes it interesting. Objects which are not produced for sale are not necessarily allographic nor does being autographic mean that the object is not for sale. The guaranteed authentic painting can certainly be sold. But the distinction between gift and commodity comes under the same umbrella. The direction to which this distinction leads us is not to different kinds of objects, but to different kinds of relations between persons. For the essential distinction between allographic and autographic even applies to people as well as to objects. For example, in the days of domestic service, a hostess might be asked: "How did you get that wonderful cook?" She might say that she bought her services for a huge price, or for a song. Either way the cook would be without a context and likely to be cast as a sinister, unaccounted figure in an Agatha Christie mystery. It would have been better to be able to say that she cooked for Mrs. Jones for twenty years and was looking for a job when Mrs. Jones died. Or even better if she is an aunt and has always lived here, then she and her services are uniquely autographed, and every thing that she does is by way of gift exchange.

Distance

Talking about objects will inevitably lead us to prize them out of their context. We will try to recontextualize them, like the auctioneer. We will

find ourselves trying to annul the pervasive “rubbish effect” (Thompson 1978) which lingers around an object which has been in low esteem, relegated to the attic, and now refurbished for a new context, the Chippendale sofa on the wall-to-wall carpet, the Limoges chamber pot displaying an elaborate flower arrangement. Making a new kind of curiosity shop, we will surely engage pathos and humor to meet the occasion. But to neutralize the rubbish effect we need to do more than identify the contexts of the objects and describe the meanings they have in those contexts, though that is very necessary. The problem is to get theoretical distance.

To neutralize the rubbish effect there are several remedies: (a) We do not want to lose the association of objects with their contexts, yet we do not want context to suffocate us. We can get theoretical distance by a typification of contexts. (b) The other remedy is to accept the full challenge of semiotics. That means disengaging our talk from the authority of linguistics which too much dominates the analysis of the meaning of objects. (c) A third solution would be to take seriously the editor’s idea that objects and persons have to be studied together.

You may well ask how the allographic/autographic distinction is going to help. The examples I have given sound trivial. I suggest that it will help a lot in several ways. For one, it has already made a new theoretical distinction among contexts of objects. The autographic object cannot be separated entirely from people as can the other kind. A gift is always a gift from someone. A signed painting is always a painting by someone. For another, it will make a contribution to the theory of gift which has become fashionable. If you know that philanthropy has deservedly and at last become an academic subject of study, you may also know that the theory of gift has run out of ideas since Marcel Mauss (1954 [1922–24]). And above all, this approach will free the discussion of objects from the heavy hand of linguistics by providing another vocabulary for talking about meaning without invoking the relation between sign and signified.

Suppose we stop looking at individual objects. See them instead as participating in a long stream of events that unfold through time; chart their flow; then consider persons only as the points where flows of objects originate, congregate and from which they disperse. This long view takes both producers, distributors and recipient-users into account at once. Now think of a society in which all the objects produced are autographic, every one. A good example is David McKnight’s (1973) description of the kinship system of the Wik-Mungkan tribe in Australia. Any kinship

role is defined by obligations to give to various relations, and even more strictly defined by obligatory gifts are the relations of alliance by marriage. A father-in-law is a person who received from his son-in-law certain big fishes, so if the catch includes one, the man knows at once that it belongs to his father-in-law. The latter is a collection point, a resting place for the flow of these fishes through the community. All the other fishes in the catch are earmarked for specific relatives. The same for the hunter who kills a wallaby or cockatoo. All his products are destined to mark out the lines of his relationships. Ideally there are no free-floating objects in this system, which incidentally implies that here there is no such thing as a free gift in that system either.

The Wik-Mungkan system of distribution puts every object into the category of public goods which cannot be distrained for private or market purposes like London parks (Douglas 1989). It is not quite the socialist ideal of measuring out to everyone according to his needs, but it gives to all according to their role. In its practical effect the system provides a strong buffer of structure to protect against the jealousy which is apt to tear small groups apart. And these reflections would serve to remind sociologists that small communities that seem to run entirely on public spirited solidarity usually survive by implementing a lot of structure: contrary to the view of German and Chicago sociologists, *Gemeinschaft* is not just a warm, cosy feeling. Furthermore, the comparison on these lines would draw our attention to the person in the gift system who is not an assembly point for gift objects. For example, streams of flowers and hothouse grapes flow toward persons in the sick role; for some they pile up and create a nuisance at night when they have to be removed from the sick room; but not all sick persons draw these streams to themselves. The flow of gift objects is a marker for tracing marginality and centrality. Anthropologists routinely make this tracing in their studies (e.g., Marriott 1976), with important results, but the method also has much to tell us about our use of objects in modern industrial society.

You can turn the picture round and say that the roles of kin and affines are assembly points for all the objects that are produced. Because each object has a unique point of origin in the social system, it is autographic in Goodman's terms. Yet, the analogy does not quite work. Each object is doubly autographic since it has a unique destiny as well as a unique point of provenance. In this example there is no contrast with other objects which are allographic, and because the objects are classed as obvious natural kinds, there is no real question of fake or forgery: the fish is the fish, every one can recognize it. Suppose on the

way home the successful fisherman was waylaid by another whose big fish got away, and who robbed the first so as to present the fish to his own grandfather. That would be a case of the wrong kind of grandfather, not the wrong kind of object. In extending Goodman's idea to things perhaps very remote from his original concerns we notice that autographic in his sense only means being able to go back to the point of origin. It is a backward link of the object to its maker. A gift also has forward linkage, tracing the object to its point of destination. I have found it very illuminating to think about objects in this way, as streams issuing forth from known points, and arriving at expected points of assembly. In *The World of Goods* (Douglas 1980) I adopted the terminology of Albert Hirschman's (1958) analysis of international trade. He analyzed the forward and backward linkages of occupational sectors in the economy so as to get a measure of economic integration. I borrowed the idea to suggest using the flow of objects as a measure of social integration.

Signifying and exemplifying

Semiotics, trying to transcend its linguistic heritage, could do well to tidy up the language of signification. When anthropologists study a system of objects flowing to various collection points, we learn to read off from the movements of the objects who is who and what day it is and other information. We can rightly say that the flows of objects signify the pattern of roles. But if we want to take a further step back we can adopt another argument of Nelson Goodman's. Seeing objects as representing or standing for something else has an obscuring effect. The objects do end up denoting relationships, but it is instructive to notice how they first exemplify relationships. To be a father-in-law or grandfather or aunt in the Wik-Mungkan system of prescribed transfers is to *be* a recipient of the fishes and cockatoos, etc. Giving the objects *makes* the role; receiving the objects and redistributing them *is* to perform in the role; to fail to give them is likely to *end* the role. The streams of objects exemplify what it is to be that sort of person. They do not first signify the role, they are examples of what the role is. They are also functional for the role, since father-in-law and grandfather and aunt will also be roles defined by required redistributing of what has arrived at their doorstep. To be given a meal does not signify hospitality, it is actually, truly a sample of the hospitality (Douglas 1984). The many rich implications of

this for the study of objects are drawn out by Goodman (1976) in his chapters on exemplification and on samples and labels in *Languages of Art*. It is useful for us at this stage to try to remember that objects constitute social systems and would have no recognizability if they did not. We may often be on the wrong track trying to decide what they signify, since that question does not necessarily lead directly to the part the objects play in human transactions.

Conclusion

Along these lines we are ready to answer the question about where objects start and where they blur into their context. We can identify as many classes of objects as we please, to be tried along with the theories that imply them. The insurance agent is entitled to his definitions, so is the antique dealer. The challenge is only to have interesting theories and to make them explicit. The explicit theory protects the categories from the charge of arbitrariness. I have a theory about complexly organized objects. By complexity I mean the entailment of one object by another, a teapot by a teapot lid, four wheels by a car. The theory supposes that a complex system of mutual implication needs time to develop and so is a symptom of stability in social life. Making a complex system also means hard work, and submitting to a lot of constraints. For example, the complex rules of implication in French *cuisine haute bourgeoise* used to interlock the occasion with the persons present, turning the occasion of food and wine into an element in a tight, coherent logical system. To study the amount of coherence in the flows of objects around events would be rewarding for semiology (Douglas 1984). It would be a way of showing up the classes of persons who are not going to be awarded funerals with lilies or chrysanthemums. The person who is not getting the flowers and grapes at the hospital bedside will fall into the marginal niches which tracing the flows of goods can identify for us before their inhabitants become derelicts of the industrial system. The theory is that complexity in the social life of objects is a response to complexity in the social life of persons. A complex cuisine is too much work to be indulged regularly for its own sake. Though some husbands tell me that when their wives are away they rise to an even higher culinary standard than the household regularly achieves, I am still to be convinced that they would keep this up if they were long-term bachelors. The complexity of

a meal is a service to others, not a statement about a relationship, but an example of what the relationship is, and that is why it has to be a lot of work if the relationship is important. The amount of work, as well as the quality of objects, is relative to the statuses being created. Therefore a person who regularly has an extremely low level of complexity in use of objects is (other things being equal) likely to have an extremely low level of involvement with other people. In some cases, this isolation will mean vulnerability. The measure of complexity would also be an independent measure of atomization of social life. This line of investigation links semiology directly with social concerns and, I fondly hope, matches Roland Barthes' idea of a science of grades.

Note

1. Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826) was a French magistrate and famous epicurean who published several books, the most famous of which was the *Physiologie du goût* (1825). He is remembered in particular for his epigraph: "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es."

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Glorious obsessions, passionate lovers, and hidden treasures: Collecting, metaphor, and the Romantic ethic

Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel

Introduction

The sociologist Colin Campbell (1987) has developed the provocative thesis that the Romantic movement played a critical role in the birth and development of modern consumerism.¹ In an attempt to extend Max Weber's (1930) well known analysis of the rise of modern capitalism and the attendant drive toward rationalization in modern life, Campbell argues that just as a Puritan ethic promoted the spirit of capitalist production — Weber's famous thesis — so a competing Romantic ethic worked to promote a complementary spirit of consumerism.

While there has been endless debate over the essence of the Romantic movement and how it is to be defined, Campbell calls attention to the central theme of Romanticism as “an impulse toward chaos” (Campbell 1987: 179), and “a way of feeling, a state of mind in which *sensibilité* and imagination predominate over reason; it tends toward the new, towards individualism, revolt, escape, melancholy, and fantasy” (Gaudefroy-Demombynes 1966, cited in Campbell 1987: 181).² Campbell adds: “Other typical characteristics of this way of feeling would be: dissatisfaction with the contemporary world, a restless anxiety in the face of life, a preference for the strange and curious, a penchant for reverie and dreaming, a leaning to mysticism, and a *celebration of the irrational*” (Campbell 1987: 181; italics added).

Campbell links Romanticism and consumerism via a distinction between traditional and modern forms of hedonism. Modern and traditional forms alike are “pulled along by desire for the anticipated quality of pleasure which an experience promises to yield” (Campbell 1987: 77). However, in modern hedonism:

pleasure is sought via emotional and not merely sensory stimulation ... the images which fulfil this function are either imaginatively created or modified

by the individual for self-consumption... Modern hedonism tends to be covert and self-illusory ... individuals employ their imaginative and creative powers to construct mental images which they consume for the intrinsic pleasure they provide, a practice best described as day-dreaming or fantasizing (Campbell 1987: 77).

Thus, whereas the classical hedonist seeks to repeat experiences known to be pleasurable, the modern hedonist fills the hiatus between desire and consummation with the joys of day-dreaming about new experiences (Campbell 1987: 86). "The essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking..." (Campbell 1987: 89).

Campbell concludes that the spirit of modern consumerism is, paradoxically, anything but materialistic. The tension between illusion and reality creates a permanent longing in the individual, and an incessant search for novelty. He sees this dynamic of desire — acquisition — use — disillusionment — renewed desire — at work primarily in the arenas of fashion, advertising, Bohemianism, the avant-garde, and romantic love. In this paper we shall argue that collecting is yet another important contemporary cultural form in which the Romantic ethic is given powerful expression.

Our analysis of the phenomenology of collecting reveals it to contain strong tensions between elements associated with the Puritan ethic, on the one hand, and dialectically opposed elements associated with the Romantic ethic, on the other. In a previous paper (Danet — Katriel 1989), we developed the hypothesis that collecting is a means to strive toward a sense of closure, completion, or perfection. In elaborating this hypothesis, we inevitably highlighted the order-making aspects of collecting, and were able to give only passing attention to aspects of collecting which suggest, paradoxically, that collectors also experience, even invite chaos. An over-emphasis on order-making too easily reduces collectors to nothing but custodians of little bureaucracies of objects — of stamps, old milk bottles, or buttons — all neatly classified and displayed in their proper place. Indeed, some interpreters of collecting see it as only this.³

In the present paper we shall complement our previous analysis by focusing mainly on the Romantic elements in collecting. We shall demonstrate that contemporary collecting is very much permeated by Romantic conceptualizations of experience. Our evidence will be drawn from an analysis of the metaphors that occur in discourse about collecting — in autobiographies of collectors, in interviews we conducted with inform-

ants and in other interviews conducted by journalists, as well as in manuals for collectors and other popular literature on collecting.

While collecting, taken broadly, has probably existed as a distinctive cultural form for something like 3000 years, in important respects the Industrial Revolution has shaped the activities of collectors over the last 150 years.⁴ For one thing, it transformed and expanded the range of items treated as collectibles. The phenomenon of aestheticization of the obsolete was made possible by the Industrial Revolution.⁵ Second, social changes set off by the Industrial Revolution, notably, the rise of a newly prosperous bourgeoisie, led to a widespread new interest in objects for the home, and to the democratization of collecting, once primarily the province of kings, princes, and the Church.⁶

As a result of processes of industrialization and urbanization, three new social types of collectors came into being in the latter part of the nineteenth century. One was identified by Walter Benjamin (1973) as a *flâneur*. The *flâneur* was a new type of aesthetic observer, a casual loungeur who walked the streets and the arcades of Paris, and later of other European cities, in search of people, objects, sensations to arouse his curiosity and to give free play to his imagination. While the *flâneur* did not necessarily buy anything, he was a new kind of collector of experience.⁷

The second new type of collector was the industrialist art collector of plebeian origins. The economic success of the new industrialists was a testament to the efficacy of the Puritan ethic — of industriousness, rationality, and so on. Contrary to the view of Veblen (1979), the creation of great art collections by these industrialists, in the United States and in Europe, was motivated by far more than a desire to display one's status or to make a claim for respectability (Saisselin 1985).

Art came to be reserved for the private domain, the intimate interior, the private world of the bourgeois, so that it came to be associated with an imaginary universe at variance with and sometimes in conflict with the public world, values, and activities of the bourgeois. Hardheaded in business, the bourgeois might be softheaded in art. The bourgeois interior, in contrast to the spaces in which others worked for him, became the space of private fantasies (Saisselin 1985: 29).⁸

A third new type of collector also came into being in the latter half of the nineteenth century — the person of modest means who collected a specialized category of mundane objects not belonging to the world of fine art. The prototype of this kind of collector is perhaps the stamp collector. Although many mass-produced objects came into their own as

popular collectibles only in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, stamps came to be seen as collectibles within only a few years of their introduction in England in 1840.⁹

We suggest that for all these types of collectors, the experience of collecting is fruitfully viewed as an expression of the tension between the Puritan work ethic on the one hand, and the Romantic ethic, on the other. Campbell claims that while the Puritan ethic dominates the world of work, some occupations do give greater expression to the Romantic ethic, notably, the arts and the allied professions of those who teach them. Similarly, while the Romantic ethic probably informs all contemporary leisure more than most work, within this domain some forms are more strongly colored by Romanticism than others. We see collecting as one such form.

We move on now to our analysis of metaphors in collecting. The analysis will take us in three directions. First, we will offer some thoughts as to why metaphor is so common in discourse about collecting. Second, we will consider the inherently paradoxical elements inherent in collecting activities, whose recognition may have prompted one of our informants, a stamp collector and trader in Philadelphia, to define collecting as a "metaphor for life."¹⁰

Third, having explored the nature of collecting as enacted metaphor, we will turn to the metaphors collectors "live by" (Lakoff — Johnson 1980). We will examine the nature of the second-order metaphors which populate discourse on collecting. As we shall see, the essential tensions articulated in the structuring and texture of the collecting experience are verbally addressed in the metaphors of collecting.

Play, metaphor, and the inexpressible

A play perspective on the study of "serious leisure" activities, such as tourism (Cohen 1985), amateur chamber music (Stebbins 1979, 1980, 1982), or, in the present case, collecting, highlights their phenomenological quality as varieties of what Schutz has termed "finite provinces of meaning," as activities which are set apart from the "paramount reality of everyday life" (Schutz 1962). In this paper we further explore the theoretical and empirical implications of viewing collecting as a form of play. In particular, we respond to Schwartzman's (1982) call to "re-metaphorize play," i. e., to recognize the conceptual affinity between play and meta-

phor as forms of communication which “are both characterized, in varying degree, by *the production of paradoxical statements or images*” (Schwartzman 1982: 28; italics added).

As Fernandez (1972: 41) put it, “metaphor is one of the few devices we have for leaping beyond the essential privacy of the experiential process.” It is especially likely to be mobilized wherever and whenever people struggle to *express the inexpressible*. In a paper titled “Why Metaphors are Necessary and Not Just Nice,” Ortony (1975) developed three theses about the functions of metaphor. They are, first of all, a compact way of conveying a great deal of information. Second, they help to convey the inexpressible, or the more dynamic, continuous aspects of experience. Third, metaphor is more vivid than literal expression.¹¹

Fernandez (1972, 1974, 1977) distinguishes between metaphors in performance (verbal and non-verbal), and in persuasion. He argues that metaphors are not merely a matter of explicit linguistic use of figures of speech. Substituting the word “play” for “ritual,” we can paraphrase a passage from one of his papers with illuminating effect:

It is proposed here that metaphors provide organizing images which [play] action puts into effect. This [ludicalization] of metaphor enables the pronouns participating in [play] to undergo apt integrations and transformations in their experience. The study of [play] is the study of the structure of associations brought into play by metaphoric predications upon pronouns (Fernandez 1977: 101 – 102).

For Fernandez, then, metaphors may be enacted through whole sequences of activity, and not just expressed in figurative language.

In short, in play as in ritual, metaphors are mobilized to express the inexpressible at two distinct but complementary levels. Primary enacted metaphors “provide images in relation to which the organization of behavior can take place;” Fernandez also calls them “organizing or performative metaphors” (Fernandez 1972: 42). At another level, within the frame of play activity organized metaphorically, second-order metaphors may be mobilized to convey various ineffable aspects of that activity.

Collecting as metaphor

Collecting is a leisure activity playfully constructed out of a range of existential paradoxes, which ordinarily remain submerged in the ongoing

flow of our workaday lives. A closer look at the paradoxical elements and experiential tensions that ground collecting experiences leads to a better understanding of the world of collecting as a distinctive province of meaning which involves a specific form of self-experience, a specific form of sociality, a specific temporal perspective, and a prevalent form of engagement (or “spontaneity” in Schutz’s [1962] terms). At least some of these existential paradoxes may be universal, but in our view they are given their particular character in contemporary collecting by the cultural symbiosis of the Puritan and Romantic ethics. We now discuss, in turn, each of eight paradoxes which we have discerned as inherent in contemporary collecting.

Decontextualization/recontextualization

Like many artistic engagements, collecting is a “world-making” activity. Most commonly, it involves the recycling of materials ready-at-hand and their use in the construction of a collection. That is, it involves processes of decontextualization on the one hand and of recontextualization on the other. Objects are removed from their contexts of use and become incorporated into a new context, a world defined by the collection as an orderly system of subtly differentiated objects (Stewart 1984). A major experiential feature of collecting is thus the attitudinal shift from an orientation toward objects as forming a functional part of the paramount reality of everyday life to one involving an accent on their aesthetic, systemic dimensions (cf. Danet — Katriel 1989).

This contextual shift is also associated with a shift in temporal orientation. Removed from their contexts of use, collectible items are often classified with reference to their date of production, but their incorporation into the collection marks a new order of time, with the history of acquisition often overriding the history of production. Objects thus become temporally anchored in the collection rather than in their individual pre-collection histories. Production dates turn into a principle of classification, and temporally marked occasions of acquisition become the point of reference for a new kind of history, the history that tells of the growth of the collection as a whole.

Concrete/imaginary

The collectible item itself is classified and appreciated as a concrete, usually aesthetically pleasing object and as what we might call a springboard to fantasy.¹² In contemplating their collections, collectors often spend much time physically handling the items, and readily state that physical contact with them is inherently satisfying. They come to develop and savor an expert mode of touch that marks their privileged position vis-a-vis the collection. The importance of this aspect of the collecting experience is brought out by a subgenre of collectors' stories which thematize the danger non-experts (most notably, children and pets) pose for collections through their uncontrolled clumsiness. Decontextualization of the objects is an aid to reverie; removed from their original contexts, one can invent one's own stories surrounding them.¹³ Collecting, then, brings together a twofold interest in the world of objects — objects viewed in their distinctive concreteness and objects viewed as invitations to reverie and fantasy.

Collectors are often labelled "eccentric" by others because they talk to their objects, treating them like "family" or "children." The attribution of emotions to objects is one of the ways in which the concrete/imaginary dimension of collecting is realized. This tendency to attribute the features of living beings to inanimate objects is sometimes called fetishism.

In a useful overview of the anthropological, Marxist, and psychoanalytic traditions of the use of the term "fetishism," Ellen (1988) pointed to four cognitive processes underlying the concept: concretization, animation, conflation of signifier with signified, and an ambiguous tension between person and object in terms of control. In pre-literate societies:

Objects from widely separated cultures are frequently represented as if they were human, are involved in processes which are recognisably human, are treated in ways that humans are treated — and in particular are themselves subject to rites of passage, other rituals and attitudes, which are usually reserved for humans... Fetishes are given gifts, are named, massaged and talked to... Social interactions with them are as behaviour between persons, not that of persons toward objects (Ellen 1988: 225).

These phenomena do not disappear in modern societies; indeed, Ellen's comments are strikingly applicable to modern collectors' orientation toward their favored objects. Popular notions of collectors' eccentricity notwithstanding, it is only in rationalized modern societies that the personification of inanimate nature has been partially extinguished.

In Benjamin's (1969, 1973) terms, collectors seek in their objects the "aura" which mass production and commodification incessantly undermine in contemporary cultural products. In a 1939 essay in which he reworked some of his ideas on the notion of the "aura," first developed in the famous 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1969), he wrote, "experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common to human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. To perceive the aura of an object means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin 1973; cited in Wolin 1982: 237). Thus, it is in keeping with the Romantic ethic to "conceive of inanimate objects *fraternally* rather than manipulatively, to grant them the capacity to project signals and attributes which transcend their simple quality of being-there. ... It bespeaks of an earlier relation of man to nature which modern man has all but repressed from memory" (Wolin 1982: 237–238).¹⁴

Order/chaos

Collecting also embodies a dialectical movement between order and chaos. As noted earlier, in our previous paper (Danet — Katriel 1989) we emphasized the systemic organization and the striving for closure as order-producing elements of collecting activities. Collections vary in the extent to which they are constructed around ordering devices such as series.¹⁵ Collectors, however, often engage in re-ordering and re-arranging activities as they "take care" of their collections, thereby experiencing the possibility of alternative orders and the potential chaos that lurks behind this possibility. Hunting for collectibles in antique shops, flea markets, and garbage dumps, or chancing upon them in one's basement or attic, are clearly experiences that dramatize and mediate collectors' continuous movement between a disorderly "heap" of disparate objects and a systematically classified and thoughtfully arranged collection. Some collectors come to abandon a collection in which order-making is "too easy," for example, if stamp series are very easily obtained; others may find a particular challenge too great, and abandon the collections.¹⁶

Open-ended/highly directed

Collecting sets an agenda for collectors. It is a life-project that is at once open-ended and highly directed. On the one hand, collectors recognize that they are not likely to complete their collection (and would probably lose interest if it were easy to do so), but they make tremendous, well-regulated efforts to attain their subgoals within the larger, open-ended project.¹⁷ Paradoxically, then, collectors both cherish the open-ended nature of the collecting enterprise and at the same time, structure and constrain at least some of their life-activities in relation to it. Thus, involvement in collecting may structure individuals' spare time and channel some of their financial resources. It may guide their avocational engagements and constrain their affiliations, and so on. In short, it serves both to articulate and to reconcile competing possibilities for the conceptualization and structuration of human projects, as open-ended and unending on one level, and as carefully circumscribed, finite, on another.

Rationality/irrationality

Many aspects of the commitment to a collecting agenda are "irrational." The fixation on a given category of objects appears quite irrational, to spouses and friends, if not to collectors themselves — particularly when these objects are formerly functional, obsolete items like antique typewriters, collected in the era of computers. Collectors often take up collecting some item or other, purely on impulse. "Falling in love" with objects, treating them as if they were children or pets, spending large amounts of time, money, and energy in their pursuit can all be difficult to justify.

At the same time, many aspects of collectors' activities require even-headed calculation of moves designed to cultivate one's collection. Collectors sometimes make infinitely detailed assessments as to the value of a given item on the current market, and whether buying it would be opportune. In short, there are strong elements of both rationality and irrationality in collecting.

As we shall see, recognition of the boundless passion fuelling collecting activities gives rise to an anxiety with regard to one's ability to control them. The fear of "going overboard," or "overdoing it," is strongly

colored by collectors' awareness of the social disrepute attending unchecked, uninhibited involvements and expressions of subjectivity in our society. At the same time, collectors relish the free expression of passion, using the institutionalized context of collecting to celebrate the realm of irrational desire.

Interestingly, for a collector to be considered "serious," he or she must both manifest an appropriate degree of irrational passion and a commitment to the enterprise as indicated by an ongoing "object-hunting" agenda.¹⁸ The world of collecting thus enables individuals to play out irrational desire and rational calculation in a well integrated life-project.

Controlling/being controlled

Collecting is imbued with the theme of control, articulated both as striving toward controlling and as the fear of being controlled. A collector gains control over the objects that comprise his or her collection through the power of ownership, which is actualized in the right to handle, rearrange, and even sell items in the collection. As Stewart (1984) suggests, the fact that so many collections involve miniature objects — thimbles, Japanese *netsuke* and sword fittings, antique keys, stamps and coins — further dramatizes the control element in collecting, as does (in a more sinister way) the killing associated with the collecting of live things, e.g., butterflies.¹⁹

The drive toward control in collecting activities is accompanied by concern with loss of control, the aforementioned fear of "being carried away," devoting more time and resources to one's collection than one can afford, either materially or psychologically, or both. Thus, collectors often speak of the need to guard against the almost irresistible impulse to purchase new items for their collection, and, as noted, are often explicitly concerned about the rationality (i. e., controllability) of their endeavors. The experience of collecting thus combines a striving for control with a constant fear of losing it — a paradoxical position the metaphors of collecting make particularly clear, as will later be elaborated in greater detail.

The tendency to personalize objects, referred to earlier, in our discussion of the concrete/imaginary dimension of collecting, is, in fact, a two-edged sword: to attribute emotions to one's objects is to grant some powers of control to them. "The desire to control increases with the

intrinsic powers attributed to objects, but as these powers increase so they may counter the power which people have over them. This paradoxical tension is very characteristic of fetishes" (Ellen 1988: 229).

Isolation/affiliation

As a social activity, collecting institutionalizes and legitimizes the experience of privacy and isolation, creating contexts in which the self-absorbed individual can experience a sense of meditation-like "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1977). At the same time, it creates an institutionalized context in which the web of affiliations woven around shared collecting interests is given shape, whether in casual encounters or in various formalized associations, such as collectors' clubs. Both meditative isolation and intense social engagements are inherent possibilities in the world of collecting, and the movement between them articulates an essential tension that grounds collecting as a form of sociality.

Although the most common pattern is probably for collectors to work alone, there are also instances where couples, or even whole families collect together. We know, for example, of a Jerusalem couple who collect Judaica together. And a Jerusalem family with five children has long cultivated a collection of candles of all shapes, colors, and sizes. Joint collections obviously provide a focus for these relationships, encouraging the pursuit of common goals, activities, and sources of satisfaction.

Energizing/relaxing

A final paradox inherent to the world of collecting is that it is both a form of self-regulated energizing activity and, at the same time, a frame within which one can "rest" from, or diffuse, tensions experienced in the paramount reality of one's life. The views of Kreitler and Kreitler (1972) about the role of tension in art experience are equally applicable to the experience of collecting. They hypothesize that:

A major aspect of the art experience consists in the arousal and the relief of tension in the spectator by the work of art. The work of art is capable of producing tensions, which on the one hand are sufficiently variegated and multidimensional to enable the evoked tensions to absorb and combine

with the more and less diffuse residual tensions in the spectator; on the other hand, these tensions are specific enough to be resolved through some other aspects of the art input. Thus, the resolution of the specific tensions implies relief also for the diffuse tensions with which they have combined. The relief of these tensions is accompanied by pleasure (Kreitler — Kreitler 1972: 22).

It is not simply that accountability for one's actions is lowered in the frame of leisure. The acts of pursuing new acquisitions, working on the collection, e.g., cleaning, dusting, or mending, and most especially, simply contemplating the objects or handling them devotedly, are all often experienced as calming or restful. This dialectical relationship between the energizing and relaxing aspects of collecting may be associated with that of control/fear of being controlled. Perhaps control is equated with a state of calm, with forms of tension one initiates or is relatively capable of regulating, while a sense of lack of control creates negatively valued tension in the collector.

Paradoxes in collecting and the Romantic ethic

A brief review of the paradoxes inherent to collecting, as outlined above, shows that the Romantic elements are strikingly prevalent in at least five of them. Via objects, collectors can pursue the imaginary, allow themselves to experience chaos, take on the challenge of an open-ended agenda with many unknowns, surrender to irrational impulses, enjoy the thrilling risk of being out of control, and luxuriate in a deeply engrossing solo activity whose sensuous components are prominent, and which singularizes them as unique "interesting" individuals. What's more, they can indulge in all of these, while gaining social credit for cultivating good taste (Clifford 1988), for contributing to local history, for carrying on a family tradition, or for any number of other socially meritorious acts! Of course the tendency to emphasize the Romantic aspects of collecting will vary with the individual and with the type of collectible. Still, our analysis of the language of collecting will provide empirical support for the thesis that Romantic elements are indeed prominent in twentieth-century collecting.

Root metaphors collectors live by: An invocation of butterfly-collecting

One of the most evocative portrayals of the experience of collecting which we have encountered is that of the writer Vladimir Nabokov, who devoted an entire chapter of his autobiography, *Speak Memory* (Nabokov 1969), to his lifelong pursuit of butterflies. The invocation of his private world of butterfly-collecting is especially vivid because it is unusually rich in metaphors. Nabokov writes, "from the age of seven, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight (under the door of his bedroom) was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender..." (Nabokov 1969: 94). He describes his feelings as he observed the very first butterfly to enter his collection: "As it probed the inclined flower from which it hung, its powdery body slightly bent, it kept restlessly jerking its great wings, and my desire for it was one of the most intense I have ever experienced" (Nabokov 1969: 94).

Hunting is yet another motif threaded throughout the chapter, as in "I have hunted in various climes and disguises: as a pretty boy in knickerbockers and sailor cap; as a lanky cosmopolitan expatriate in flannel bags and beret; as a fat hatless old man in shorts... All my American captures from 1940 to 1960 ... are in [American museums]..." (Nabokov 1969: 99). For Nabokov, nature, like art, offers "a form of magic, ... a game of intricate enchantment and deception" (Nabokov 1969: 98). On moonless nights, he used to lay out a sheet on the ground, with a light shining on it, to attract moths. "Upon that magic sheet, ... I took a beautiful *Plusia*" (Nabokov 1969: 105). Here, he gives expression to the common elements in hunting and in erotic pursuits. To capture a butterfly is to move from desire to fulfilment and possession: full possession of a living creature in this case, paradoxically, also means killing the object of one's delight.

Nabokov writes that he preferred being alone, rather than playing with other children, because "any companion, no matter how quiet, interfered with the concentrated enjoyment of my mania" (Nabokov 1969: 99). Terms like mania indicate, at the least, ambivalence about the activity involved, or an awareness that others might think his preoccupation strange or excessive. Pursuing this theme of activity potentially out of control, he continues: "Let me look at my demon objectively. With the exception of my parents, no one really understood my

obsession, and it was many years before I met a fellow sufferer” (Nabokov 1969: 100).

In partial overlap with the notion of magic, Nabokov also invites the reader to think of his experiences in terms of religious transcendence:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another... And the highest enjoyment of timelessness ... is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with the sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern — to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal (Nabokov 1969: 109–110).

Five root metaphors

We have identified five sets of root metaphors which are prominent in discourse about collecting, most of which occur in Nabokov’s chapter. They are:

- (1) collecting is hunting.
- (2) collecting is therapy.
- (3) collecting is passion, desire.
- (4) collecting is a disease.
- (5) collecting is supernatural experience.

As we have just seen, the metaphors of hunting, passion and desire are all very prominent in Nabokov’s invocation of his experiences. That of disease, however, is not explicitly used, though other associated metaphors, notably obsession, mania, and source of suffering are all mobilized. And collecting is also portrayed as both positive and negative forms of supernatural experience. Positive spiritual transcendence is in evidence in the metaphors of magic, religious worship, and ecstasy. In Nabokov’s reference to his demon, there is a hint of the idea that, paradoxically, the collector can also be viewed as controlled by malevolent supernatural forces.

The fifth root metaphor we have identified, collecting as therapy, is the only one absent from Nabokov’s chapter. This may be attributed to the fact that he highlights the lived experience of butterfly-collecting as perceived from within. To speak of therapy, or even to imply it, would

be to view collecting from a distance, as offering a rest or respite from other activities. Thus, Nabokov has stressed the energizing capacities of collecting, rather than its potential for relaxation. We can now see why his chapter is so powerfully evocative. It is not just because he uses so many metaphors, or uses them with such consummate literary skill, but also because he evokes so many very different types of metaphors, which, as we shall show below, invite associations of very different, partially conflicting kinds.

Structural versus textual metaphors

Of the five root metaphors we have identified, only the first one focuses on the activity or activities of collecting; all the others deal in one way or another with the experience of collecting — how one feels about it. Fernandez (1974: 120) makes a distinction between structural and textual metaphors. As he puts it, structural metaphors “conform ... closely to the shape of experience,” while textual ones conform more closely to the feelings of experience.

In the case of structural or analogic metaphor, a metaphor is assigned to its subject on the basis of some isomorphic similar structure or pattern of relationships. Thus we say the *branch* of the stream...

By textual metaphor one means that metaphor in which the assimilation made is on the basis of similarity in feeling tone—glowering clouds, a brooding landscape, a dyspeptic bureaucracy (Fernandez 1977: 105).

It is evident that the hunting metaphor is primarily structural. It conveys something of how the objective features of the activity look to the observing eye. It points to the fact that some of the objective features of the pursuit of collectibles are isomorphic with the hunting of animals.

In contrast, metaphors of desire and longing, of madness and addiction, of magical enchantment or therapeutic catharsis all primarily convey something of how it feels to be involved in collecting; they attempt to convey subjective reports of subjective states. Thus, one can say, “collecting feels like madness,” or “there is a mad quality to collecting,” but collecting “looks like, or resembles hunting.”²⁰

Collecting as hunting

We begin with the metaphor which is most commonly used to characterize the activities associated with collecting. Images of hunting abound in autobiographical accounts and other talk about collecting. A manual for collectors of antiques is titled *The Joys of Hunting Antiques* (Salter 1971). Another is called *Treasure Hunting for All* (Fletcher 1975).²¹ Many kinds of texts are chock-full of hunting-related language:

It has been my fortune in the course of my career as a bibliographical huntsman to bring away spoils of the chase neither few or unimportant (Hazlitt 1897: 117).

It was Julie [his wife] who found the Swiss “Strad” [music box in the shape of a Stradivarius violin] for me... The box was the prize she bagged after a hunt which would have done credit to any big game expert in Africa. The chase began in a downtown Boston antique shop where she engaged in a little preliminary stalling just to see if she could stir up some interesting game ... the dealer answered [the door]; and, as the door opened, Julie spotted her quarry (Templeton 1958: 74–75).

I always found London to be the most likely hunting ground ... many [netsuke] still remain in private homes where they accompany other miniature objets d’art in display cabinets. An elusive prey adds zest to the chase, and I was delighted when by chance I ran to earth a fine wood dragon housed in this way. However, although I tried to persuade him, he refused to come home with me (Cohen 1974: 10).²²

There are many different reasons for collecting art. One is the thrill of the search — it is like having an Easter egg hunt 365 days of the year... We began to make collecting forays to the New York galleries in the late 1960’s (Center for African Art 1988: 6).

We hunt [beer] cans only when the spirit hits us (Beer Can Collectors of America 1976: 106).

The longer and harder the chase, the greater the satisfaction (Biddle 1983: 11).

It’s like a day in the hunting field — stalking great works of art. You are up against adversaries who are warding you off the game you are hunting (Balzac 1968[1848]: 52).

It is not surprising that hunting is such a prominent metaphor in discourse about collecting. In our opinion, it gives expression to all of the paradoxes and tensions we identified earlier in this paper. First, phrases like to “bag a prize,” or to “capture an elusive prey” embody the physical act of appropriating objects, removing them from their previous context, a

precondition for their eventual recontextualization within the collection. Second, this metaphor gives expression to the activity of actual pursuit of concrete entities in the physical world, as discussed in our juxtaposition of the concrete/imaginary dimension. Third, to pursue game, prey, prizes — especially if specific objects are sought, and not just the chance discovery at a flea market — is to attempt to incorporate desired items in the grand plan of one's collection, and thereby to pursue order, yet paradoxically, to expose oneself to the chaotic, unpredictable nature of the physical environment. Fourth, both collecting and hunting contain agonistic elements. Just as there is competition between collectors for the best items at a flea market or auction, so hunters compete for game.

This metaphor also gives clear expression to the tension between the openedness of the collection, on the one hand, and the directed nature of collecting activities, on the other. One can never know in advance on a given occasion for hunting if one will come home with anything at all. Even if one manages to bring home some trophies, more often than not, the agenda will remain uncompleted, or, as we have shown, if there is a "danger" of completing it, it may be redefined, so that there will always be a next occasion to go hunting.

Thus, this metaphor also embodies the future-oriented nature of collecting; it articulates the essence of a commitment to collecting as propelling one forward, toward future activity. Something of the restlessness of the collector, the tendency to live for what will happen next, are thereby conveyed. As for the close connection between hunting and control, this was clear, already, in the passage from Nabokov's autobiography cited earlier. To capture an object is to control it, most especially, of course, if one kills it! Yet, paradoxically, as has already been pointed out, on any given hunting occasion, the hunter cannot control all the contingencies in the environment, and therefore cannot know how the day will end.

Finally, this metaphor is clearly pertinent to the contrast we drew between energizing and relaxing activity. It obviously highlights the energizing quality of collectors' activities. Since a major source of tension is the inability to predict the outcome of a day's hunting expedition, the hunting metaphor also gives expression to the suspense collectors live with, even relish. In short, hunting is the metaphor which best expresses the quality of collecting as action in the sense discussed by Erving Goffman (1967) in his essay "Where the Action Is."²³ A passage from the conclusion to Goffman's essay nicely sums up this section of the paper:

Looking for where the action is, one arrives at a romantic division of the world. On one side are the safe and silent places, the home, the well-regulated role in business, industry, and the professions; on the other are all those activities that generate expression, requiring the individual to lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during a passing moment. It is from this contrast that we fashion nearly all our commercial fantasies. It is from this contrast that delinquents, criminals, hustlers ... sportsmen [and, we would add, collectors] draw their self-respect (Goffman 1967: 268).²⁴

Collecting as therapy

The motif of collecting as therapy is the least likely of the five root metaphors to find expression in discourse about collecting. Collectors are apparently much more likely to dwell on the energizing, even exciting aspects of their activities than the relaxing ones. At the same time, they are occasionally quite articulate about the latter aspects. They come to the forefront mainly in later stages of working on the collection at home – while dusting or mending objects, sorting stamps and placing them in the proper slots in an album, and so on. Most of all, the therapeutic aspects of collecting find expression during moments of quiet contemplation of the collection.

In an interview in a local Jerusalem newspaper, a collector of fountain pens, Miki Bavli, who is an official at the Israel Foreign Ministry, is quoted as saying, “when I am tense I present myself to my psychiatrist [a pen dealer] in Tel Aviv... Moshe Hacoheh [the dealer] ‘treats’ the community of pen collectors there.²⁵ You don’t open his door if you don’t have at least an hour or two free” (Mediskar 1990).

In answer to a question as to whether she spends time with her collection in a particular mood, one of our informants, a gallery-owner of about sixty from New York who herself collects both Judaica and jewelry, told us, “Oh sure. I’ll be very upset and I’ll get into bed with my nightgown and I’ll start putting jewelry on – like 30 pieces at a time. Just to play with it. Sure, the same as people have doll houses.”

Kenneth Brecher (1988), anthropologist and director of the Children’s Museum in Boston, published a charming memoir built around his postcard collection. The collection helped him to cope with grief when two dear friends died prematurely of cancer: “When I couldn’t sleep and felt too exhausted to read, I would take out my postcard collection.

Looking through it, I felt a lessening of my grief. The cards bore witness to my own life" (Brecher 1988: 2).

The theme of collecting and collection as therapy is also overtly expressed in some remarks by Tali, a sixteen-year-old girl, a resident of an Israeli kibbutz who has a collection of about 200 key chains. Unlike many collectors, her collection is not displayed; rather, it is kept in a cabinet in her parents' room.²⁶ As Tali revealed to one of our students, "When I need a moment to myself I open up the cabinet, look, and calm down. It's like nostalgia. When I see the collection, I think 'all this — you collected!' It's mine and nobody else's! I feel consoled and the mood I was in passes — I feel different." Katriel's eighteen-year-old stamp collector daughter expressed much the same idea when she queried, "how can anybody cope without a stamp collection and a guitar?" Apparently, the calming effects of the collection have to do with control: one retreats from a situation in which one has lost control to one in which the collector dominates — if possible, totally.

Collecting as passion

As we have seen, one of the most striking and most common sets of metaphors in discourse about collecting is the cluster surrounding the notion of passion.²⁷ This cluster includes related motifs of desire, passion, love, possession, giving the beloved attention, and even rivalry. The motif of passion appears explicitly in the titles of two recent trade books about collectors, *Collecting: The Passionate Pastime* (Johnston — Beddow 1986) and *The Passionate Collector* (Land-Webber 1980). As for examples from various texts, we cite here only a sampling from a much longer list we have culled. First, here is a selection from autobiographies:

Inevitably, if you fall in love with something, you want to possess it... There are many varieties of collectors, but the ones I trust most ... are the ones who just can't help it... They want to handle it ... feel it, if it is touchable. They have to go to bed near it ... and in the end 'marry it' by purchase (Price 1959: 214).

Drawings are my passion (Price 1959: 220).

Safely home with the [painting by] Diebenkorn we fell deeply in love with it (Price 1959: 231).

Books, as they were my father's only, and my uncle's chief paramours, were my first love (Hazlitt 1897: 5).

[I was] tempted by a milk jug with a silver hinge... (Hazlitt 1897: 204).

Finally, and above all, I love objects (Rheims 1980: 258).

I must confess I was actuated chiefly at first by the instinct of possession. I was beside myself with joy ... when for 18 francs I succeeded in purchasing a little china plaque of a girl with a broken pitcher (Vollard 1978: 14).

Among the irresistible members of the collection are the beautiful Swiss box on its own table (Templeton 1958: 73).

These metaphors are also prominent in other first-person accounts, such as collectors' introductions to catalogs of their collection, as in "since I am an artist who works in woodcuts, it is not surprising that I fell in love with the Japanese woodblock print" (Pins 1980: 9). Similarly, a snuff bottle collector wrote, "while visiting the art show [at his synagogue in Toronto, at the age of 12], I saw and fell in love with these miniature art works" (Silver 1987: 3).

Nineteenth and twentieth-century novels also abound in these metaphors:

No account whatever had been taken of her relation to her treasures, of the passion with which she had waited for them, worked for them, picked them over, made them worthy of each other and the house, watched them, loved them, lived with them (James 1987[1886]: 43).

He loved them as a man loves a beautiful mistress ... those who have it in them to admire great works have the sublime capacity of true lovers for feeling as much bliss today as they did yesterday (Balzac 1968[1848]: 27).

As a young child will reach out to handle the thing it names, so the passionate collector, his eye in harmony with his hand, restores to the object the life-giving touch of its maker (Chatwin 1988: 20).

Collectors may even come to constitute a rival of spouses, who sometimes express their jealousy quite openly. Here are two examples: "I realized that my wife was playing second fiddle to the beer can" (Beer Can Society of America 1976: 106). "He told us that he had sold most of his collection because his wife had declared 'either they go or I go'" (Templeton 1958: 35).

Some expressions carry erotic connotations; others are desexualized. Thus, Chatwin's (1988: 58) character gazes at "his miniature family." Hazlitt also invites the reader to think of his collections as a sort of family:

The man who possesses a miniature cabinet with a few hundred samples [of coins] is apt to wax tired of surveying his property, even if they are all favorites with little histories of their own... When the collection is very