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The Biography of Bric-a-Brac:

Investigating the process of
consumption in Brighton's
second-hand markets

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Contents

Introduction	3
The Life of Things and the Mobility of Meanings	8
Conclusion	22
References	26

Abstract

This paper provides empirical grounding for the theory of consumption as process by studying the car-boot sales and second hand markets of Brighton. Using the car-boot sale as a juncture at which objects emerge from their former lives to take up position in another's experience, the critical phase in the life, meanings and significance of objects is investigated in terms of their movement in and out of the commodity state. Secondly, the strength of meaning imbued in selling symbolically supercharged objects is discussed in terms of a possession/commodity paradox, in which the status of objects is repeatedly contested. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for the study of consumption in general.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF BRIC-A-BRAC: INVESTIGATING THE PROCESS OF CONSUMPTION IN BRIGHTON'S SECOND HAND MARKETS

Introduction

In the past decade consumption studies have become a major concern within the social sciences. From sociology, human geography, anthropology and, more recently, psychology, the sites of consumption and the act of purchase have been the source of considerable debate. Such work has tended to focus upon conventional retail establishments and to view the act of purchase as the most salient aspect of consumption.

They have also tended to view the act of purchase as the last link in the chain of commoditisation, ignoring transformations that may occur to the nature or meanings of an object beyond that point and have considered consumption only in relation to its role as a vehicle for social differentiation and identity construction rather than analysing the nature of commodities themselves. Thus both Veblen's notion (1899) of the conspicuous consumption of status symbols and, more recently, Bourdieu's theory (1984) of the struggle for class distinction through the expression of one's taste both view consumption as a means of communication that uses the acquisition of goods to articulate one's position in the social strata, whilst for Douglas and Isherwood (1996) material possessions serve to communicate cultural categories and maintain social relationships, enabling the individual to make sense of her social world.

Though these theories acknowledge the symbolic value of goods their fixed notion of the individual's relationship to their possessions maintains a relatively impersonal form of social expression, ignoring the often very personal meanings contained in possessions (Belk, 1988). At the same time, and even whilst stressing the role that the same good may play in the transmission of a range cultural meanings and for different individuals or social groups, such theories have proceeded in such a way as the significance of any individual good

remains relatively static. In fact, it may be important to consider the ways in which the quality of objects are somewhat fluid, so as to better understand the ways in which the status of an object at any particular point within the consumption process is itself highly mobile, constantly switching, for example, between its status as commodity and something else.

The most significant theory considering this aspect of the consumption process is that of Grant McCracken (1988) who stresses the need to "move beyond the limitations and banalities that now inhere in the 'goods as language' approach." (1988: 71). In contrast to this approach McCracken suggests that the meanings accrued to goods have a mobile quality and are perpetually in motion. Such meanings may originate in the 'culturally constituted world' and are mobilised by the consumer industries of advertising and product design. They may then be extracted from the commodity and conveyed to the consumer by the rituals of exchange, possession, grooming and divestment with such rituals transferring the meanings instilled in the object on to the individual. Yet these culturally constituted meanings are not invariable and discrete, but are used by the individual as tools to realise the "completion of the self" (McCracken, 1988: 88) As such, the individual is in control of the meanings they accrue from goods and not vice versa. In this way goods become personalised and are removed from the status of commodity to become personally meaningful possessions.

Extending this concept of the movement and transformation of meanings imbued in possessions, Kopytoff (1986) suggests that goods have a biography, constructed from their commoditisation, reclamation, redefinition and re-commodification. As an object moves in and out of the commodity state its meanings change. An item is not invariably a commodity that can be exchanged for anything of equal value at any time. When an item becomes a possession it is personalised and may become sacred to the individual, rendering it priceless and unexchangeable. With time the item may lose this sacrosanct quality and, as a result, be relinquished once again to the commodity sphere. The item is then exchangeable for something of equivalent value and may then be possessed by another individual who will transform its meanings, imbuing the object with their own personal qualities. In this way the object obtains a biography as it moves in and out of the commodity state, its meanings mutating with each repossession.

Such a theory is particularly valuable when studying the second-hand economy, in which personal possessions are re-commodified and sold on to become another's possession. Offering the first empirical examination of McCracken's (1988) and Kopytoff's (1986) theories, this paper therefore investigates the personal meanings of consumption to be found in the second-hand economy by studying the second-hand markets of Brighton. Though the context of the car-boot sale does not allow a thorough investigation into the process of consumption prior to initial commoditisation, it is considered that such sites can be viewed as tangible examples of the commoditisation process after the first cycle of consumption. Moreover, where in the context of the second hand market and car boot sale it is possible to consider this process because of the way in which an object is passed from an owner who then becomes a vendor to a new owner it may also be that a consideration of these rather different sites of consumption allows for a re-consideration of the traditional distinctions between 'consumers' and 'producers', those who buy and those who manipulate the relations of purchase still to be found in studies of both more traditional and these newer arenas of consumption (cf Gregson and Crewe, 1994, 1997).

Research was carried out every Sunday morning at the car boot sales located on the Brighton station site and at that held at BHASVIC (Brighton and Hove Sixth form College) over a seven week period. At the beginning of each morning an initial survey of the site was conducted in order to check out the layout of stalls, the type of vendors present and the possibility for interviews. Insight into the professional bric-a-brac community was obtained through a friend who is also a bric-a-brac shop owner. Though this community was deeply suspicious of the motives for research and were not open to meetings or interviews of any kind, 'hanging out' with the contact as stalls were set up and vans unloaded enabled detailed observation and limited familiarity. Time constraints limited more in depth access to this community. However, access to the private vendors involved much less mistrust. Acting as a buyer, introduction was made by perusing a vendor's stall, maybe buying an item if the vendor looked particularly interesting. This would generally initiate conversation and enable an explanation of the research intentions and a request for help with a few questions. During the interview a semi-structured/open interview technique proved most appropriate with conversation either being recorded on tape or in note form. This

less formal, contextualised interview technique was favoured because the atmosphere of the site and the tension of the activity proved essential when gaining the spontaneous, emotional reactions of the interviewees. Most vendors approached were extremely cooperative. Some buyers proved less approachable. Particularly uncooperative buyers were rarely pursued unless the issue was extremely interesting and valuable. More structured and extensive interviews were conducted with bric-a-brac shop owners.

Though studies have now begun to recognize the distinctive attributes of the car-boot sale for the area of consumption studies (i.e., Gregson and Crewe 1994, 1997) the majority of the work on the act of consumption has tended to concentrate on the corporate arenas of retail, namely the department stores of the late 19th/early 20th century (i.e., Blomley 1996; Domosh 1996; Laermans 1993; Leach 1984; Porter Benson 1986) and the malls of the late 20th century (Chaney 1990; Goss 1993; Hopkins 1991; Langman 1992; Sheilds 1992). Such emphasis on the conventional retail habitat has obscured the possibilities for study that are offered by alternative purchasing environments (Gregson & Crewe 1997). Jumble sales, antique shops, bric-a-brac shops, flea markets and car-boot sales are all part of the consumer landscape and present significant areas of study. Yet, in this case, the rationale for studying these localities is less concerned with their status as sites of alternative consumption, than with the unique opportunity they afford for investigating the theory of consumption as process, liberated from the formal restrictions of the conventional retail landscape. As such, Brighton's distinctive and flourishing second hand markets are an appropriate field from which to research.

The second hand markets of Brighton are a quintessential aspect of the town's culture. The many car-boot sales not only provide weekend opportunities to forage for bargains and unique objects, they are also an important supplier to the towns many bric-a-brac and antique shops that characterize Brighton's North Laines. As such, they are seen as a vital part of the identity of the town and are representative of its thriving opposition to the conventional retail establishment. So strong is Brighton's bric-a-brac culture that it's North Laines, Brighton's bric-a-brac district, attract tourists and dealers from around the world to its cornucopia of second hand stalls, clothes shops and bric-a-brac markets. For this reason, the car-boot sale is considered a cherished institution, and when

threatened can incite the town to protest, as in the case of the suggested take over bid by Sainsbury's of the Brighton station site, which is transformed into an intriguing mass of antiques, bric-a-brac and a wealth of other second-hand objects every Sunday morning. Indeed, it could be suggested that the move by Sainsbury's to build a supermarket on this site was perceived by both users of the site and the town more widely as an act of corporate hegemony, interpreted as a take over bid by one site of consumption over another, more equitable, site. For these reasons Brighton's car-boot sales and bric-a-brac shops can be seen as emotionally laden sites of consumption that offer the consumer opportunities to divest and consume in a manner not afforded by the traditional high street establishments. Accordingly, Brighton's second hand culture offers consumption studies the opportunity to investigate the process of consumption in microcosm. The car-boot sale can be seen as a junction for objects, into which they are placed temporarily, having been divested of their meanings by the previous owner, before they are taken up again by either a private buyer or bric-a-brac dealer, and hence onwards to be once again infused with emotional significance. As such, the mobile quality of the meaning of goods should be particularly visible (McCracken 1986) and the rituals of possession, particularly those of divestment, and the biography of objects that define the emotional connections involved in this most personal of retail environments, easy to trace.

This paper will be separated into two main sections. Section two will focus on the life of objects as they are passed from hand to hand. The meaning of objects prior to their re-commodification will be investigated. In order to do this the role of the purchaser and the vendor will be analysed. Previous research on conventional retail establishments has tended to focus on the role of the consumer, as either seduced dupe or retail resister, and the site managers as manipulators, who manoeuvre the process of consumption to suit their own capitalist ends. Because of this, and the focus on the act of purchase as the most salient area of study, the role of the purchaser is prioritised and exalted. The work of Gregson and Crewe (1994, 1997) is important in its investigation of the act of purchase and possession in relation to car-boot sales, but this work, too, has focused attention on the purchaser and neglected the role of the vendor. This paper suggests, however, that in the context of the second-hand market, and in particular the car-boot sale, the vendor is also a

significant and fertile subject of study. If we view the process of consumption as continuing after the act of purchase and the meanings imbued in an object as essential in its personalisation, then the vendor of personal, emotionally significant possessions can reveal much about this process and can represent important figures in the study of the biography and re-commoditisation of objects. The ways in which the emotional meanings imbued in objects are stripped away by previous owners and reinvested by new owners will also be discussed.

Those rituals that are used to avoid the transfer of meanings and, thus, contamination, from one owner to another, should be particularly important for the vendor and the purchaser of symbolically supercharged items (McCracken 1986). The sale and purchase of such emotionally significant objects and their subsequent divestment rituals will be the focus of section three which will examine the process of consumption and the roles of singularisation and sacrilisation (Kopytoff 1986) in relation to second-hand baby accessories and clothes. Whilst, in some respects, this research agrees with Gregson and Crewe's construal of the car-boot sale as offering scope for "performance, spectacle, theatre and laughter" and its subsequent resonances for the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque (1997: 104), we would also interpret the car-boot sale as a site of significant tension. Selling the symbolically supercharged can be an extremely emotive and, at times, frustrating venture. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings and their significance for consumption studies in general.

The Life of Things and the Mobility of Meanings

Sunday morning, and Brighton's main car-boot sale, on the Brighton station site, is already busy by 5 o'clock. The site buzzes as house clearers, bric-a-brac dealers and private vendors vie for pitches from which to unload their wares. The punters are here too, raiding cars for their contents before the vendor has had a chance to unload. It is here that goods are bought to be re-commoditised. On wall papering tables, blankets and boxes on the floor, the objects are placed, their previous lives over. The reasons for the removal of these objects from what Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf have termed the "experiential sphere of living" (1988: 465) are many and varied and the objects

histories are equally diverse. For this temporary site of consumption is unique compared to other car-boot sales. Its increasingly commercial orientation means that objects not only arrive from private vendors, but also from houses that have been stripped of their contents because of death of the owner or repossession due to changes in economic circumstances, from bric-a-brac dealers who accumulate their stock from a wide and diverse area and antique dealers who specialise in particular categories of articles. One vendor, who deals in heavy antique furniture, travelled from the Netherlands every week. Because of this diversity in the origins of the objects on sale, the emotional meanings attached to some items are more immediately apparent than others, as Pete, a bric-a-brac dealer expressed:

The saddest thing is when you see a whole life laid out in front of you. Like all their furniture, photographs of them and their family, pots and pans, clothes...the whole bloody lot...just laid out there and up for grabs, so someone can come and pick over their stuff while they're laying in a hole in the ground. (Pete, 40 something).

Such objects were once the cherished possessions of a person who now has no control over their re-commodification. Other items, however, are less saturated with meaning. Private vendors generally bring objects to sell that are no longer, or should no longer be, cherished. These items have usually been intentionally redefined as commodities and their potential exchange value realised. The need to dispose of these items may be due to changes in life-style, role transition, lack of space or geographic movement (Schiffer, Downing & McCarthy 1981; cited in Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf 1988). As such, their meanings are no longer salient to the owner as they move from the sacred to the profane (Belk et al 1988) and are thus less painful to sell:

I'm having a complete change of lifestyle and I'm selling everything that doesn't fit with my new one! It's all gotta go, I just want to get rid of it. If I don't sell it, it's going to charity...go on make me an offer, I don't want to take it home again. (Juliet, 30).

Juliet appeared to be selling just about everything, from potholders, tiebacks for curtains, a coffee maker, but mainly designer clothes. Some of her clothes had been bought only recently and

had barely been worn, but apparently no longer tallied with her present identity. Yet for other private vendors the re-commodification of possessions is more forced and, consequently, less light-hearted. Though still intentionally recommodified the process can be more than a little disconcerting. For Paul (aged 28), who was selling virtually his entire record collection to finance a case of unfair dismissal, and had intended to dispose of everything on his stall, the thought of selling particularly treasured articles was proving more difficult than he had anticipated:

P: *I'd boxed up nearly all my albums to sell and I'd sold a few, and that was alright and then this bloke pulled out a Kraftwerk album and asked how much, and I realised I just couldn't sell it. I had to tell him it was a mistake, you know, that it wasn't for sale. I don't know what the hell made me think I didn't want it anymore.*

I: *What went through your mind when you realised he wanted to buy it?*

P: *I don't know. I just remembered how much I loved it, and the times I'd played it and that and I couldn't let it go.*

Paul's experience suggests that the re-commodification of personal belongings can be tentative and problematic. It is not until the point of sale that the final decision regarding the status of his possessions is made. Some items are easily sold on as in the previous case of Juliet, who was eager to dispose of everything and demonstrated little problem when transferring her personal possessions into the commodity state. For her acquiring a new identity outweighed any emotional bond that may have existed between herself and her possessions. Yet for Paul, the redefinition of his Kraftwerk album as a commodity had not been easy and, ultimately, proved unacceptable. The object was obviously more valuable to Paul than the price it could fetch. Yet Paul's reasons for selling were very different from Juliet's. Rather than selling because certain possessions no longer suited a new lifestyle, Paul was forced to sell by economic circumstances. Understanding this we can see that when possessions no longer suit our image of the self we are happy to dispose of them, but in those cases where this is not the case or where sale is forced by some other change - in financial circumstances, for example - the process of disposal may be more difficult (Le Branche 1973; cited in Belk 1988). As such, in a car-

boot sale context, the processes of commoditisation and possession are often closely intertwined (Kopytoff 1986).

The vendors' difficulties with recommoditising their possessions supports those theories that suggest objects are imbued with emotional significance and subsequently become extensions of the self (Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1986; Belk 1988). This is why the loss of one's possessions, intentional or otherwise, can be so difficult. McCracken suggests that such emotional meanings, when transferred from hand to hand, can be considered "alienable" (1986: 81) and that if exchanged items are not emptied of their meanings before they are transferred, meaning contagion may be suspected. Such notions of contamination suggest that both vendor and purchaser have an inherent understanding of the possible transfer of meanings that may take place when a personal possession is sold on. McCracken's theory (1986) of the rituals of meaning movement: namely the rituals of exchange, possession, grooming and divestment, claims that cultural meanings must be manipulated and moved from items in order for them to be personalised. His notion of divestment rituals suggests that possessions that are being exchanged must be emptied of their previous meanings so that the personable qualities of the item are erased, making dispossession of the object possible but not the associated meanings. Similarly, once an object has been exchanged the new owner must carry out divestment rituals in order to erase the meanings created by the former owner and, thus, liberate the object in order to fill it with their own significance. Consequently, within the context of the car-boot sale, there should be evidence of a profusion of such rituals. Did Paul carry out any such rituals of divestment before bringing his possessions to the sale?

I washed most of the stuff that I could and gave my albums a wipe with a record cleaner. Some of the ones I hadn't heard for a while I played again, for the last time, you know. I kept a few of them back because of that though.

This extract suggests, once again, how for Paul the recommoditisation of his possessions is so often provisional. By attempting to erase the meanings his records held for him, he had seemingly uncovered long forgotten meanings that he was not prepared to relinquish. However, on the whole, the cleaning and

polishing rituals that vendors commonly perform on their possessions prior to sale appears to be an effective way of distancing themselves from the object, like a nostalgic preparation for the departure of the object from the vendor's own experience. Yet, for the house clearers, such rituals are rarely conducted. The objects are sold as they are found, adding to the air of displaced emotional meanings that their goods seem to radiate. The notion of distancing is not an issue to the house clearers, since the items are not their own personal possessions. But to the purchaser the emotional 'heat' of such articles can be almost palpable: -

I don't bother to look at those stalls (pointing to the house clearers vans). They always seem a bit dirty to me, do you know what I mean, you don't know where it's all been or where it's come from. Jean (50 something).

Thus, for Jean the notion of meaning contagion manifests itself as a fear of other people's dirt, which seems a common way of expressing distaste at those objects that remain possessed by the previous owner.

Yet for those whose livelihoods depend on the sale of other people's possessions, the articles for sale are merely commodities to be sold at the highest possible price. The emotional significance of certain objects is of little concern. Ephemera dealers trade mainly in old letters, newspaper cuttings and photographs. Such emotionally laden items with patently visible histories are riffled through with a seeming lack of concern for the meanings once endowed in them. Similarly, Gregson & Crewe (1997) cite the sale of an initialed suitcase that attracted the purchaser purely because of its personal qualities. Its perceptible biography and "layer's of meaning" (251) made the object especially desirable. We must ask then, why articles with such a noticeable history are less subject to the notion of meaning contagion than other items. Why does the obvious personalisation of some items not lead to disgust at the blatant recognisability of another's identity (Douglas 1966)? Gregson & Crewe (1997) suggest that the visible, accumulated history of such items are what established the purchase as unexpected, unusual and hence, particularly desirable. McCracken (1986) suggests that our nostalgia for a bygone era is an attempt to use the past to convey its values upon ourselves. The experiences of the car-boot sale would suggest that objects that are purchased for personal use, such as

clothing and kitchenalia, require divestment of previous meanings in order to expel all traces of the former user, but those objects that are purchased for display, such as framed photographs, ornaments and vases, do not require such purification because the visible patina (McCracken 1986) is a vital part of their appeal. This is possibly what distinguishes an antique from bric-a-brac.

The face to face interaction between vendor and purchaser is another unique aspect of the car-boot sale that contributes to the overt personalisation of the objects on sale. The contact between past owner and future owner denotes a critical intersection in the biography of the object, a moment when the previous experience and the future career of the object meld. This momentary encounter is an opportunity for the vendor to assess where their possession is going and for the purchaser to assess where it has been. Often this experience is so fleeting that neither party realises such significance. Still, for others the lack of anonymity is unsettling, especially if either party is known to the other:

Sometimes you'll have your head down rummaging through a pile of clothes or something, and you'll look up to ask the price of something and realise you know the person who's selling. That's really embarrassing. I usually just put my head down and walk away. (Jean, 50 something).

Though this may have much to do with the stigma attached to second hand objects and the fear of such items being recognised by the previous owner, there is also the notion that the personal qualities of the item can never be erased, that knowledge of the previous life of the item renders it unpossessable. No amount of divestment ritual could erase the previous owners hold on the object or release it for the new owner's meanings. For Jean, it would seem, her acquaintance's possessions were forever tainted by virtue of their association.

Thus, the face to face contact of vendor and purchaser can prove distasteful. This would suggest that a distancing from the meanings of objects may be desirable for some people. The role of bric-a-brac shop owner can be seen as significant in this respect. Many bric-a-brac dealers use the car-boot sale at Brighton station to purchase the items that stock their shops. As such, objects sold at this site are not invariably removed from their status as commodities immediately after the vendor relinquishes ownership. The shop

owner will maintain the object in its commodity state, often carrying out extensive transformations, and then selling them on at a substantially higher price. Such items exist in an extended phase of commodification and may remain at this point for some considerable time before being spotted and their potential as possession once again realised. At this stage in its biography the object seems completely empty of meaning. Advertising and marketing forces do not operate to endow it with cultural significance at this phase of the consumption process (McCracken 1986). The previous owner's meanings have been divested as the object realised its commodity potential and, as such, the object is stripped of its previous social significance and becomes a non-object (Kopytoff 1986). Such objects exist in limbo, divorced of their previous experience, shelved and waiting to begin a new life. As a result, the bric-a-brac dealer appears to perform a distancing role. The items in these shops, far removed from any trace of their previous experience, no longer carry the threat of meaning contagion. Face to face contact with the owner is eradicated. Consequently their purchase becomes easier and less risky. The object is unfettered and thus open to redefinition and the instillation of emotional significance. For some, this mode of consumption is more acceptable than battling with the tangle of meanings that exist at the car-boot sale, as Jan, a purchaser from a bric-a-brac shop explains: -

J: *I hate car-boot sales actually. They make me feel like I need to go home and have a bath, you know. Everything's so dirty.*

I: *But you don't mind buying from a shop like this?*

J: *Well, there are some things I wouldn't buy, like plates and saucepans and stuff. They seem like they've got years of grime on them that you can't wash off. I just wouldn't feel comfortable eating off them. But I'm OK with other stuff like jewellery and candlesticks.*

Despite their prolonged status as commodities, and therefore, non-posessions, the bric-a-brac shop owner's role in their experience should be recognised. In the conventional retail environment the shop worker's and manager's role is to offload their stock as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this respect the traditional vendor is consistently viewed in relation to their practices of consumer exploitation (Blomley 1996; Langman 1992). Yet the bric-a-brac shop owner's attitude to the objects in their shop suggests that meanings are still conveyed onto the items despite their status

as commodities, as Teri, a Brighton bric-a-brac shop owner expressed:

T: *I become very attached to some things and really don't want to sell them but I have to because it's my trade. If I really want to keep something from the shop I have to get rid of something else, so it has to be an object that I really want because I have to sacrifice something I already possess. Otherwise I'd just end up keeping everything I have in the shop.*

I: *How do you feel about selling those items that you are particularly fond of?*

T: *Well, it depends really. If someone comes into the shop who I think I'd like and they want to buy something I have become especially attached to I don't mind so much. I like my things to go to a good home. I like it if I know where its going, if I know the people who bought it so there's always a chance that I might see it again, that's always nice. I had a lovely pair of curtains that I sold a week ago and I asked the gentleman who bought them that if he ever decided to sell them would he come back and sell them onto me. I would have kept them but I needed the money. Yes, I do become very attached to some things and if there's an item that's been in the shop for a long time I'll often keep that because if nobody else wants it then I'm going to have it.*

I: *So how would you feel if you had become attached to an object and somebody wanted to buy it who you really didn't like?*

T: *I'd make the sale more difficult. I wouldn't offer a discount or anything, but ultimately I'd want to sell it.*

It would appear then that though the items for sale in Teri's shop are ultimately commodities they can still contain emotional significance and may even have the honour of Teri's temporary possession bestowed upon them. Here again we encounter the synthesis of the status of commodity and possession, demonstrating the significance and extent of object-person relations. In this way the bric-a-brac shop can be seen as an arena for personal exchange compared to the impersonality of the conventional retail environment.

The next and, possibly the last, phase in the second hand objects life cycle is when it is purchased, taken home and once again transformed into a possession. For some objects this is merely a matter of changing hands from personal vendor to individual purchaser who buys in order to possess the article. Other items, such as those in Teri's shop, are left suspended for undetermined

periods of time before they are once again returned to the domain of everyday experience. Yet, other objects have a substantially more eventful biography. Monica, a 37 year old air hostess from the United States uses the car-boot sale on the station site to stock her own second hand booth in Atlanta. In between flights she stops over in Brighton, purchases items such as walking sticks, decorative plateware and mirrors, and ships them back to start a whole new life in Atlanta and beyond. Thus the social life of such objects can take on a distinctly cosmopolitan air. However, the majority of items will, eventually, find their way into other peoples homes and, thus, into their lives. Consequently, divestment rituals are once again important tools for the removal of unwanted meanings and the investment of new ones. The usual way in which people tend to conduct such rituals is through extensive cleaning and polishing. The majority of objects purchased at the car-boot sale are taken home and washed in some way. Recently bought objects are often described as being dirty or soiled and in need of freshening up. This persistent notion of impurity appears to be less about the fear of grime and more about the desire to wipe away the previous owner's meanings, as if the item is tainted by another's experience. Douglas (1966) suggests that the concept of dirt is essentially about our notions of disorder. The meanings imbued in others possessions are beyond our control, and as such we conceive of them as an offense against the order of things. We express this feeling of disorder as taint, pollution or impurity. Here, rather than see the ritualistic practice of washing and polishing as necessary for hygienic reasons, we can conceive of it in terms of protecting our own meanings from defilement. Douglas (1966) claims that for the Havik people of India pollution or contagion lingers in cotton cloth, metal cooking pots and utensils, and cooked food. In car-boot culture those items that seem to require most divestment are clothing and household implements. Thus by cleaning the object the new owner is removing the threat of pollution of their own meanings by those of others. When the previous meanings are removed and there is no longer differentiation in meanings, there is no longer defilement (Douglas, 1966). The object is then ready for personalisation. Sometimes objects are completely transformed, accompanied in some cases by conversion of their original uses and meanings. Emma (22) had bought a pair of blue velvet curtains for £12, intending to transform them into a ball gown. This instance reveals how changes in

ownership not only result in changes in meaning but may also indicate a change in use-value. Thus the biography of these curtains involved not only the destruction and creation of meanings when they changed hands but also a complete redefinition of their identity. In this way we can see that the absolute status of objects as commodities or possessions is clearly contentious and that when the final decision regarding the objects status is made more work and preparation is required before it can be personalised. As such the selling and purchasing of an item is not invariably an objective decision but often involves an emotional significance beyond that suggested by the concept of a single act of purchase.

Selling the Symbolically Supercharged

The previous section demonstrated how the intentional sale of one's personal possessions can have varying emotional reactions. For those who perceive of particular possessions as being incompatible with a new self-image, dispossession appears untroubled. For those who need to sell, but do so begrudgingly, experiencing the commodification of cherished objects is problematic. If relinquishing an object that still harnesses meanings for the individual is disconcerting, then the sale of symbolically supercharged items (McCracken, 1986) should be even more difficult to endure. It is considered that baby equipment, such as clothing, toys and accessories, can be conceived of as just such items. These high involvement articles (Belk 1995) can represent the essence of a woman's baby rearing role and symbolise her memories of early motherhood and her role as absolute provider. They may also symbolise the offspring's childhood and, as such, the mother may form a vicarious attachment to, for example, a much-loved toy, or a particular outfit. Belk (1995) suggests that the personal significance of consumption is more extreme in the case of high involvement objects, which are likely to be particularly meaningful for self-definition and, as such, may become parts of the extended self. Consequently such goods take on a secular, sacred quality and become cherished because of their remarkable singularity. Kopytoff (1986) suggests that singularity denotes unexchangeability, setting the object apart from the "common" possession. Thus, whilst the sale of baby equipment is likely to be intentional it may be forced

by circumstance causing the commodification of these items to be an extremely emotive experience, the depth and significance of their association making the parting difficult. Such a rift may be akin to Belk's suggestion (1982) of the sense of loss and mourning that often accompanies the unintentional loss of one's possessions. Yet baby equipment is frequent car-boot fodder. If these items are so emotionally laden what are the reasons for their frequent disposal?

I'd love to keep loads of it but you accumulate so much stuff when you've got kids, don't you. You just can't keep it all. There isn't the room. And as they get older they get more and more stuff, so...you've just gotta get rid of it. Claire (30 something).

The desire for extra space is a major driving force behind the sale of such items. Though there is a real sense of regret at having to sell these meaningful items, there is also an inevitability, and acceptance of the end of a phase in one's life:

I've got four kids already. If I sell all this stuff then it makes it a lot harder to have anymore! (Mandy, 35).

It may be prudent to suggest therefore that throughout the course of one's baby-rearing years certain items will be infused with more meanings than others and that such sacrosanct objects will be less open to commodification than other, more mundane, objects. Mandy, who found the experience of selling her baby equipment particularly unpalatable confirmed this suggestion:

Oh no, I'm not selling it all. I've kept some of it back that I really, really loved. A couple of little outfits and a babygrow and a few cuddlies that were special to them. I won't sell those. I'd keep more of it if I could, but it's silly really, when you need the space, isn't it.

The majority of women interviewed, who had come to the end of their baby-rearing years, kept back certain special items that were particularly expressive of this phase in both theirs and their child's experience. One interviewee recalled how some of the items of baby clothing she wore as a child have been retained by her mother, despite having moved home several times. Another described how she had retained certain items, particularly the hand knitted jumpers and

cardigans that had been made especially by her mother, suggesting the extent of the generational significance that such objects embody. These items have been sacralised and represent the essence of the emotional bond. Yet in some cases it would appear that the sacralisation of certain items is not a discrete process. For Jo (37) the emotional attachment to some of her recommodified baby equipment was clearly apparent and their sale tenuous:

It's the teddies that I find the hardest to sell (picking up and stroking an orange teddy bear). They're the one's that were with them all the time, you know, in bed at night, and all the games, they bring back all the games, the tea parties that they had with them and that. They were special to them. Actually, to be honest with you I really don't think I can sell this one. (Jo threw the orange teddy back into the boot of the car).

Thus the orange teddy bear was rescued from its status as a commodity, to become, once again, a singularly important possession. This phase in the biography of the bear involved a period of singularity, followed by a stage when the object was considered dispossessible leading to its transition into the commodity state, before being reclaimed and its sacred character once again realised. Yet, though the teddy bear has been readmitted into its previous life the indecision regarding its status suggests that its resacralisation may be only fleeting. McCracken (1986) suggests that symbolically supercharged items such as these require a period to "cool off" before they can be disposed of. As such, they need to be put away for a while to allow the 'heat' from their emotional significance to subside. Jo's orange teddy bear was being sold because her children had outgrown it, its use-value had diminished. Thus after a period of redundancy it was considered fit for recommodification. Yet on reflection its symbolic-value outweighed its possible exchange value. After another period of "cooling off", however, its status may, once again, be redefined.

When describing his rituals of possession, McCracken (1986) describes the purpose of a rite of passage in which an individual will relinquish one set of symbolic properties in order to take up another. For some of the women interviewed there appeared to be the suggestion of such a ritual taking place. Many sold their equipment only after the decision not to have any more children. Such items no longer had any use-value, and after a "cooling off"

phase were being sold in order to make space for other possessions. In some cases the relinquishing of these significant items had the symbolic purpose of moving the woman from her previous role as baby rearer to her new identity as mother and individuated self. One vendor was about to start a new job, her first since her initial pregnancy. As such, though the process of selling one's baby equipment is relatively painful, it is a necessary step in the course of a woman's life. Yet, despite the previously represented emotional significance involved in the sale of baby equipment, such powerful experiences are not universal. For some, who expect to eventually have more children, the experience appears to be of little consequence. Karen (aged 23) was selling her babies clothes because they were outdated and no longer fitted with the image she wished to create for her child:

She's only 2 years old and I am going to have more kids eventually, its just that trends change don't they. I like high fashion, I like her to look a bit trendy, you know. I mean, all the stuff I'm selling here today, none of its got the Telly Tubbies on. I buy clothes with the Telly Tubbies on now, 'cos she loves them.

Here, again, is evidence to support the claim that when an object no longer befits a current self-image, or that of one's child, it is easily relinquished. The baby clothes Karen was selling held little or no symbolic-value for her, possibly because they did not yet represent a phase in her life that had passed. They did not evoke particularly poignant memories and were therefore easily commodified. Yet most of the people were selling their baby equipment because they no longer needed it and, as such, the process was infused with nostalgic regret.

Since baby equipment is usually such an emotionally laden item the divestment rituals used to move such meanings should be particularly apparent. The threat of contagion seems exceptionally salient to both vendor and purchaser as items are routinely scrubbed in order to purify them, as Maureen and John (both late 50's) explained:

M: *We've got a grandson of just over a year old now, so we come up here to see if there's any little things we can get a bit cheaper, you know, because things are so expensive these days aren't they.*

J: *And they need so much of the stuff as well.*

I: *Have you managed to buy anything today?*

M: *Not today, so far. But last week we bought one of those play centers, you know, that fit on the side of their cots. It was in perfect condition - hadn't been used much at all. He loves that doesn't he, John.*

I: *Did you do anything with it before you gave it to him? Did you prepare it in anyway?*

M: *Oh yes, we always clean everything. John took it apart and cleaned all the bits with a toothbrush, just to make sure it wasn't dirty or anything. I wouldn't let him have anything that wasn't cleaned first.*

What is particularly revealing about this comment is that although the item bought by Maureen and John was in "perfect condition" and had apparently barely been used, both felt it necessary to carry out extensive and time consuming cleansing of it before they felt comfortable giving it to their grandson. For some vendors the very fact that their sacred items had entered the commodity state was enough to suggest corruption of their meanings. On finding it difficult to get her asking price for a particularly memorable and cherished baby outfit, Mandy had decided that she would rather keep it:

This was bloody expensive when I bought it. It's a French designer outfit and they're certainly not cheap. Makes me want to take it back home with me. In fact, I think I will...wash it and iron it again and put it away.

Although the outfit had already been washed and ironed in order to sell it, indicating an attempt to divest it of its meanings prior to commodification, Mandy felt the need to reinvest the outfit once she had decided to reclaim it as her possession. Its brief foray into the commodity state had infected the object for Mandy, instilling in her the desire to wash away the impurity. This can have little to do with the notion of dirt since the outfit had not actually left Mandy's possession. It therefore must be considered soiled because of its redefinition as a dispossessed article, profaned by its status as a commodity.

Thus the tension involved in commoditising sacred items is apparent. This tension also manifests itself at the point of sale. The majority of prices cited by vendors at the car-boot sale are negotiable

and, as a consequence, 'haggling' is an expected practice. According to Gregson and Crewe 'haggling' is perceived of as a major participatory skill by buyers whose primary motivation and source of enjoyment is to obtain a bargain (1997: 249). Yet for the vendor of symbolically supercharged items, 'haggling' over cherished items can be a contentious issue. The purchaser's expectation of making substantial savings and the vendors reluctance to sell emotive objects too cheaply results in profoundly disparate views of the value of the object to be exchanged. As has been indicated previously, to the vendor the item for sale may still be potentially sacred, suggesting a pricelessness, or at least a value relating to its significance to the individual. Yet to the purchaser the object is nothing more than a second-hand commodity, designating it a bargain. The conflict, then, results from the vendor's perception of the item as more valuable than the price it can reasonably fetch and the purchaser's insistence on its negligible price. As such, anger and resentment arises in the vendor and impatience and ridicule in the purchaser:

The more attached I am to things the more I want to charge, but also, you know, this stuff cost me a fortune new. I'm not about to let it go for nothing. It makes me really bloody angry, especially when they tell me I'm mad...I'd rather take it down to a second hand shop than let this lot have it. (Mandy, 35)

For Mandy the market price, the price she paid for the item, is still clear in her mind and seems closely related to the symbolic-value of the outfit. In a sense this can be interpreted as Mandy's inner compulsion to defend her items of baby equipment from commodification. By valuing them at a price that most buyers were unwilling to pay she was legitimately able to keep them, maintaining their significance for her. As such, it is clear that objects not only have a social biography as they are transferred from hand to hand, they also have an economic biography (Kopytoff 1986), and the two are closely allied.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated how the view that all objects are commodities at all times, that can be exchanged for any other

commodity of equivalent value, is misguided. The experience of the car-boot sale suggests that within its biography, an object may sometimes be a commodity and sometimes not, that those objects that are considered sacred defy commoditisation and that some items, at one time considered dispossessable, can be salvaged from their commodity state and their meanings once again activated. Thus commodification is not an invariable state but a mere phase in the biography of a particular object (Appadurai 1986: 17).

The objects in this study could be construed as having relatively active biographies. Though the origins of objects and their final resting-places have not been assessed, their emergence at the car-boot sale can be seen as a critical phase in their careers, a crossroads when the old life is renounced and a new existence awaits. Some of the items had potentially international careers with past lives in The Netherlands and possible futures in Atlanta. Some items not only changed hands but also identities as they were transformed to become different categories of objects. Though the majority of items are passed from hand to hand, the process of singularisation, divestment, commoditisation and resingularisation renders their career as involving more than just a single act of purchase. One of the most significant findings of this research is the realisation that an objects use-value is not exhausted when its initial owner no longer needs it. When its symbolic-value has been exhausted its use-value remains to be exchanged and entered into another cycle of consumption (McRobbie 1989).

Beyond this, it is clear from this research that the status of possessions as commodities can be unstable. After the first cycle of consumption the personal meanings that pervade an object render it unexchangeable. When such meanings are no longer relevant to the individual the object is effortlessly disposed of. However, if the symbolic meanings are not adequately divested and the object remains significant for the individual then its condition as a commodity is precarious. This highlights the fact that the relationship that exists between people and their possessions is a critical aspect of consumption. For so many of the vendors that were interviewed the emotional attachments to the objects they had decided to sell were barely suppressed. Any cue, however small, that facilitated the recall of poignant memories, often resulted in the decommodification of the object and its subsequent resacrilisation. The only time that commodity status is completely assured is at the

point of actual exchange. Prior to that moment the object can still be reclaimed as a possession by the vendor. As such, within the context of the car-boot sale there is often a possession/commodity paradox with an extremely attenuated distinction between the two. From the evidence provided by the bric-a-brac shop owner even commodities can hold emotional meanings. Consequently the individuals role in the impregnation of the object with meaning is clearly apparent.

The various divestment rituals that this research has revealed support McCracken's (1986) claims that the meanings of objects have a mobile quality. The ritualistic cleaning and polishing that seems to accompany many purchases illustrates how individuals have an implicit notion of the flow of meanings from one owner to the next. The notion of dirt and impurity is common and would appear to represent the fear of meaning transfer and the subsequent blight from another's experience. Some of the extreme expressions of disgust at other people's things suggest that some people are more sensitive to this issue than others and that some of the meanings imbued in objects are open to debate. Those items that will be used for self-definition such as clothing, require more divesting than objects used for display. As such, some forms of meaning contagion appear more acceptable than others.

The apparent personalisation of objects and the problems encountered by their re-commoditisation are manifested in the divergent perceptions of their value. According to Simmel (1907; English translation 1990) the value of an object is not an inherent quality but is subjectively decided by the individual. The invariable overestimation of an objects price by the vendor reveals how the market exchange value of a second hand item can be overridden by the symbolic-value placed upon it by the owner. And in the case of objects that are no longer needed but are retained due to their sacrilisation, such as baby equipment, the symbolic-value overrides the use-value of the object denoted by its concrete form. In this way use-value and symbolic-value merge. Items are retained because of their usefulness as a symbolic receptacle for memories, experiences and past lives. As such, finding an equivalent value proves problematic. Moreover, within the context of the car-boot sale there are no perfect commodities. Everything has a history, was singularized at one point by the owner and carries part of that biography into its re-commoditisation.

Significantly, then, this research has been able to support the notion of consumption as process, through the perspective of consumption in practice. Through empirical investigation we can provide a more informed view of consumer behaviour that links academic theory with what people actually do when they consume. By contextualising theoretical representation we can gain a more authoritative understanding of consumption practices. As such, the demand for further empirical grounding of abstract opinion is clear.

Though this has been only an investigation of a phase, albeit critical, in the possible biography of objects, it has highlighted the fact that the objects life cycle is not over on its initial purchase. Though the literature on consumption highlights the importance of identity formation through the act of purchase, it neglects the continuing significance of object-person relationships. It is evident from this research that the meanings of the surface characteristics of goods are only a shallow aspect of their salience to an individual's identity. The meanings invested in objects give a far more comprehensive portrait of a person's individuality. Thus, though mass production is said to standardise goods and homogenise culture, this research suggests that goods become individuated once they are imbued with meanings through the processes of singularisation and sacralisation (Kopytoff 1986). As such, the act of purchase is only a minor factor in the significance of consumption to the individual. In order to have a coherent view of this significance we must unite the act of purchase with what the individual does with that purchase. This research suggests that the actual point of sale is merely a bridge, over which the object must cross in order to continue its journey through the life and emotions of its next owner. To prioritise the bridge rather than the journey is to disregard a wealth of experience that can reveal much about what consumption means to the actual people who consume.

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