



Souvenirs: Magical objects in everyday life



Michael Haldrup

Visual Culture and Performance Design (VISPER), Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, bd. 43.2, P.O. Box 260, DK-4000 Roskilde, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the role of souvenirs within domestic spaces. Souvenirs are ambivalent objects; at the same time the very epitome of tourism kitsch and personal objects for which the owner holds significant affection. Rather than pre-framing these objects either as 'touristic signifiers' or as personal memory objects, this article reflects on the roles they take as material and embodied co-habitants in domestic space, living - and communicating - with their owners. Hence, this paper departs from 'humanistic' accounts of cohabiting people and things and instead attempts to put human and non-human agents on an equal footing. It does so, by discussing the 'magical capabilities' of everyday objects that enable these to enchant the lives of their human cohabitants; animating them with affects and emotions, feelings of remembrance, affection, appreciation and loss. By drawing inspiration from autoethnography and in particular its potentials for interrogating objects, the author explores the 'souvenirish' qualities of five homely objects; using this exploration to enter into a dialogue with objects as well as theories and studies of objects. Considering the many faces of the souvenir - as utility item, mediator, fetish, tuner and artwork - the article suggests an opening for more imaginative thinking and explorations of how we live with objects in everyday life.

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1. Introduction: the ambiguous souvenir

"Souvenirs: trinkets, bagatelles, mementos, fragments, remnants, fluid, constructed, active, performative, extending, disturbing, tactical; little things that hold explosive possibilities when approached anew through theory, touch, production, consumption, and use." (Love and Kohn, 2001: 61).

In academic literature the tourist souvenir has generally been treated as the very epitome of tourists' cultural *kitsch*. Tourists are - it is often assumed - on a constant quest to purchase, collect and exhibit local culture materialized in the home as collections of primitive, 'genuine fakes' (Brown, 1996; Shiner, 1994); tacky objects, superficially referring to places and localities visited by the owner. This conception of 'the souvenir' is further underscored by the apparent frictionless mobility of tourist signs and markers in contemporary cultural consumption resulting in a sort of 'geographical displacement' of objects' authenticity. We experience this on a day to day basis when we encounter the multiplicities of ethnic styled consumer goods finding their way into our mundane

spaces, or across the globe, as when tourist shops at the Niagara Falls display Egyptian themed souvenirs regardless of their geographical 'belonging' (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2007: 204). As O'Connor (2006) observes, the legacy of early social and cultural theories of tourism, with their contempt for the alienation, false consciousness, and 'staged authenticity' of tourist practices and performances, weighs heavily also on contemporary social and cultural studies of tourism, meaning that "when material objects do figure [in social and cultural studies of tourism], they are treated *a priori* as kitsch." (O'Connor, 2006: 253). The souvenir seems to fall victim to the general dramaturgical vocabulary of alienation and authenticity in early tourist theory. Hence, critical discourse on tourist consumption has (un)critically reproduced this dichotomy rather than destabilizing it. As Goss notes:

"[I]f tourism is conceived of as a quest for authenticity in the world of the Other (...) the gullible tourist is presented with only 'reconstructed authenticity' and staged "authenticity" behind which lies a hierarchy of "backstage" regions, or reserves of more or less authentic culture to which they have no access." (Goss, 2004: 330).

This has led to different strategies for re-instating the souvenir

E-mail address: mhp@ruc.dk.

as a modern artifact worthy of our attention. Whereas consumption (and tourist and leisure) studies have largely conceived of such things in terms of their semiotic and symbolic qualities (Goss, 2004), their sign value, others have sought to trace out the use value of souvenirs; with special attention to how they make part of broader ‘material cultures of tourism’ (Haldrup and Larsen, 2006). Still, tourist studies have generally subscribed to a conception of souvenirs as material mementoes, touchstones of memory, that enable narratives of distant times and places to be re-told and re-lived in (see contributions to Hitchcock and Teague, 2000; Morgan and Pritchard, 2005). As Morgan and Pritchard contend, these abilities are not fixed. Souvenirs may acquire new meanings and significances (even unpleasant and inconvenient) when they move through the times and spaces of the people they live with, carrying with them a “complex and changing social life of their own” (2005: 45; see also Appadurai, 1986). However, in doing this they do not differ much from other objects, and while autoethnographic accounts of such metamorphoses do shed interesting light on how meanings are created and re-created on the intersection between tourism and everyday life, this approach also has to be furthered into the realm of objects and materialities engaging not only with memory and emotion, but also with emergence and affect (see Anderson, 2006a, 2009). For, what is it that enable or (dis)able an object to perform their roles as personal memento, as souvenir; as precious token or inconvenient ghost, home décor or excessive ballast?

Studies of souvenirs have frequently pointed to the role of the souvenir in the home as a mediator enabling the narrative construction of identity in the home. As a materialization of (tourist) culture, objects on display on shelves, mantelpieces and refrigerator doors (see Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Hurdley, 2006; Haldrup, 2009) souvenirs (re)present distant places in people’s homely environment. Hence, souvenirs performing a ‘magic’ role (Digby, 2006) in bringing distant, faraway places into the orbit of peoples ordinary lives. Following Bennet (2001), Ramsay (2009) has suggested the notion of ‘refracted enchantment’ to think about how souvenirs mediate tourist lives in their homes. Taking inspiration from Bennett, we may further unpack the ‘magic’ through which ‘homely’ objects work and consider the sensory and affective means by which such objects enters into and perform in their role as souvenirs. In Bennet (2001) understanding, to be enchanted “[I]ncludes, (...) a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (ibid.: 4) and “to be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away.” (ibid.: 5). Hence, enchantment, both in its pleasurable and uncanny form, is more of an affective and somatic event than a cognitive and symbolic. Hence, investigating it must include a sensibility towards the material and affective qualities of the objects and sites that are already in our everyday lives and spaces producing such eruptions of magic amidst our mundane lives (ibid.: 8).

Souvenirs are part of the material stuff we live by (Miller, 2008; Gregson, 2011). Following material cultures’ concern for the growing ‘modern world of things’ as a subject for academic enquiry, this article argues for cultivating an ‘archaeological sensibility’; a ‘care for things’ in our enquiries (Shanks, 2012: 25–26). As Ingold (2007) contends we need not only deal with the material culture of objects but also consider the material properties of artefacts, what they afford and what not. In other words, we have to scrutinize the potentials of such other-than-human agents and their various material biographies of growth and decay for telling stories (DeSilvey, 2006). Following Bennet (2010) more recent work, we may think of affect as a property and a power “not specific to human bodies.” But a power that “is not transpersonal or

intersubjective but impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons (ibid.: xii). Hence, instead of thinking about affects restrictedly in terms of those humans that ‘feel’ enchanted, Bennett suggests also to think in the direction of the things that produce such affects and effects in human and other bodies (op. cit). While recent turns toward ‘new materialism’ and affect theory in cultural studies have drawn criticism for “killing the vitality of objects, things, artefacts” (Tolia-Kelly, 2011: 157), producing only “surface geographies”, the ambition here is to show how such approaches may produce more vivid and dense accounts of the role everyday objects have in animating, enchanting and energizing mundane lives.

From this perspective the souvenir is a ‘little thing’ that holds ‘explosive possibilities’ (cf Love and Kohn, 2001; quoted above); possibilities that cannot be reduced to either its material form or its symbolic meaning. Anything can be a souvenir, and items purchased as souvenirs may shift function and significance during the lifetime of the object and its owner(s):

“Although souvenirs are objects of the past we do not – or cannot – deal with them here and now. The memories and narratives that souvenirs afford travel in time as people move through life. A given souvenir can bring about as many stories and emotions as time passes by and people move through life.” (Haldrup and Larsen, 2010: 182).

In what follows I engage in a series of explorations and excavations of souvenirs within the habitual spaces of home (Miller, 2001; DeSilvey, 2006; Harrison and Schofield, 2009) scrutinizing the material findings on the different excavation sites scattered across my living room.

2. Conversing with ‘homely’ objects

The home is the single most significant material and affective space through which the interrelation between everyday life and things are organized. Yet the home is not a secluded ‘private’ space but a space in which outside forces make their entry. As Burrell (2014: 163) shows the desire to create the home as a private space “emanates from (...) a wider context of precarity, change, uncertainty and inequality”. Here plans, imaginations, fears and dreams are anticipated, remembered, rehearsed and retold. Material artefacts in the home, including souvenirs, photographs and other travelling objects placed in the home play a crucial central role for enacting these personal emotions and relationships and reinforcing bonds as well as boundaries between the home and the world outside. As Riggins (1994: 109) notes:

“[D]omestic artifacts are (...) likely to serve as entry points for the telling of stories of self and its personal relationships’ through a process of ‘mapping’, meaning by this that the self uses the displayed objects (gifts, heirlooms, photographs, etc.) as a way of plotting its social network, representing its cosmology and ideology and projecting its history on to the world’s map, its spatial spread, so to speak. This is indeed what objects are – dots on a map connecting links, which can be retraced in any direction.”

Hence, the private home is a personal space “invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life” (Blunt and Varley, 2004: 3, see also Blunt, 2004). The home, and its living-room with its blended public-private character; the place we welcome guests, display family photos, watch television and so on is the central space for enacting

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