

The collection I have chosen to discuss is a series of elongated one cent coins (pennies) that I collected as a child while on holiday in the United States of America (USA). Many of the places I visited, including Disneyland, San Francisco and Las Vegas, had “penny-press” machines. When confronting each machine, I was encouraged to insert a fifty cent coin and a penny, and then select one of several designs to have pressed onto the penny. I collected these in a small folder suitably named “The Penny Passport.” To this day, these souvenirs are displayed on a bookshelf in my bedroom. Every time I look at this collection it reminds me of the enjoyable experiences I had. I will use my collection of pennies to argue that although the designs available at the penny-press are commodities, in that they commodify the experiences of being in particular tourist destinations, once they are in my possession they are outside the commodity circuit. In other words, I have no intention of selling these objects because they are visual, physical memories of my holiday. Leading on from this, I will also argue that the processes of selecting, collecting and displaying, are significant in that they are all results of enculturation.

Firstly, my collection functions as a group of souvenirs. Essentially, souvenirs are purchased because we desire them. Baker et al. argue that when people become tourists they are “likely to seek tangible reminders of their interactions with these places” (214). Gordon explains that the souvenir provides the tourist with “tangible” evidence of “what was otherwise only an intangible state” (135). In my case, the experiences I had when being in these places are not actual objects. However, I wanted and looked for objects that, after I travelled back home, would give me real, touchable reminders of my experiences.

Windsor argues that it is the “spirit of nostalgia” that motivates us to put together a souvenir collection (54). Therefore, the souvenir has the ability to install in its owner a feeling of nostalgia. This is a key function of my collection. Frow mentions that the souvenir does not have any use value, but that it fulfils the “insatiable demands of nostalgia” (94). In other words, people can find enjoyment in being nostalgic because it is a desirable need. Souvenirs are not collected to be used. They are collected so people can display, and have visible proof of, what they have done and where they have been. It is human nature to want to remember pleasurable moments.

Frow argues that souvenirs establish a “metonymic relation with the moment of origin,” and points out that the souvenir is a “metonymic rather than [photographic] representational

figuration of the world of past experience” (94). Knowles and Moon believe that, “metonymy is about referring: a method of naming or identifying something by mentioning something else” (54). It can be thought of as a small object or concept that stands in for some other larger concept. Put simply, my pennies can function as a substitute for the experience of being a tourist in a Western country because they refer to the many places I visited.

According to Clifford, “collecting and displaying” are significant processes of “Western identity formation” (83). The process of souvenir collecting is a result of enculturation. Mikula defines enculturation as: “the process of internalizing the basic knowledge, beliefs and patterns of behaviour of the surrounding culture ... [It is the] lifelong process of cultural learning” (60). What Mikula is saying here is that people are not born with any inherent knowledge of how to act or think. This knowledge must be learnt through a process of socialisation. That is, learning the norms and acceptable practices of the culture around you. In Western society, souvenir collecting is a normal practice. From childhood, individuals begin to realise the significance of collecting and learn to do so.

However, before we collect we must select. Clifford notes that the need to have is transformed into meaningful desire and that the selection process involves the “channelings of obsession ... to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately” (83). At each penny-press machine, I too had to select which particular design was of most interest to me. In some cases I did select two, but it would not have been meaningful if I had of selected multiple designs at every machine. For this reason, selecting is also a consequence of enculturation. From a young age we “learn how to collect in culturally and socially appropriate ways” (Hillyer, *Visual Objects*). We realise that it is not normal to have everything. Essentially, we learn the importance of choice.

My collection is also significant because it is displayed in my bedroom. A bedroom is a very personal space that can contain fascinating objects. Having said this, the bedroom can be a place for constructing, to quote Clifford, a “personal ethnographic museum” (82). According to Mikula, ethnography is the study of the “behaviours and practices of social groups” (64). Just as people in Western culture learn how to collect and select, they also learn the importance of displaying personal objects. The penny collection has a significant place in my “museum.” My bedroom is my own exclusive space where I can proudly display memorable

objects from my life that are historically important to me. People are more than welcome to come into my bedroom and hopefully be captivated by what I have on display. Therefore, displaying souvenirs is also a result of enculturation.

Unquestionably, a souvenir collection will always have a singular, personal story behind it and the owner will always have this to tell. Stewart argues that the souvenir is not actually an object, but is more of an allusion:

“[The souvenir] will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regards to those origins ... this narrative of origins ... is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor” (136).

What Stewart is saying here is that the souvenir is not an actual object and cannot be a real souvenir without a subject, and that subject's story, to go alongside it. The souvenir and the owner are connected to each other and only the owner knows the true story behind the souvenir. This fully applies to my collection of pennies. There is only one authentic narrative that adds to its significance. Even though many people can view my collection and make assumptions about its origins, only I can tell the real story behind it.

A collection of souvenirs can express the idea of commodity fetishism. This concept, proposed by Karl Marx, involves the process of taking an object out of its original context. The object is then given new meaning by its collector (Windsor 50). Windsor goes on to argue that: “In souvenir collecting, the object is prized for its power to carry the past into the future ... Collecting has to do with our need to make visible our own reality” (50-51). In other words, souvenirs can be fascinating objects and can be seen by their owners as having some sort of power. Therefore, a souvenir collection can serve the purpose of bridging the gap between the past and the present. Once a souvenir, the object is taken out of the commodity circuit. It is taken out of the public sphere and does not have any economic value.

Commodification can be described as the transformation of something into a commodity. As mentioned above, the experiences of being at tourist destinations can be made into commodities in the form of designs at penny-press machines. A commodity can be defined as an object or experience that is the subject of a financial transaction (Schirato et al. 189).

In my case, before my designs of choice had been pressed into the pennies, they were commodities. Frow points out that the commodity form transforms previously common resources into private resources (138). Tourist destinations such as Disneyland are open to the public, and one cent coins themselves are widely circulated in the USA. However at the point of exchange, that is, once the actual design has been pressed onto the penny, it exits the commodity circuit and becomes a possession. Once a souvenir, the object is not meant to carry any commercial value.

Souvenirs are essentially tourist art. Clifford has developed an “art-culture system” which proposes that cultural objects in Western culture are mobile, in terms of their value, and are involved in an institutional process of circulation between four zones. These zones help to classify objects and assign relative value to them (Clifford 85). Value can change, for example, over time, through change in location or through change of availability. The zone that most closely relates to my collection is zone four: the zone of inauthentic artefacts. According to Clifford’s system, this zone includes commodities and tourist objects. Objects in zone four are not art because they can be mass-produced and are widely available for consumption.

The system involves the public circulation of artwork and artefacts. However, even when objects change in value they do not necessarily move into a different zone. This applies to my penny collection. For example, the pennies could not have moved into zone two because Clifford suggests that this movement occurs when objects become “rare period pieces and thus collectables” (85). They could not have moved into zone three because pressed pennies are not “new or uncommon.” Put simply, when the pennies have their designs pressed onto them and become souvenirs in my possession, they have changed in value but have not transitioned into another zone. It would be safe to say that they have exited the system, momentarily at least.

However, this does not mean that my collection cannot re-enter the art-culture system in the future. As explained above, my collection would begin in zone four. Clifford suggests that movement between zones four and three can occur when an “object is selected out of commercial or mass culture, perhaps to be featured in a museum of technology” (85). Therefore, my collection could have more commercial value if the penny-press machines became obsolete (Hillyer 2011). Pressed pennies would become rarer over time. Another

instance of how my collection could re-enter the system would occur if I became famous. If my collection was promoted as an important memory of my life, people in the public would be encouraged to purchase it. However, let us not forget that all this depends on my decision to make my souvenirs available to the public. If I did, the pennies would surrender their function as a souvenir because they would lose their connection with their subject. The historical narrative to go with these objects cannot be passed on.

In conclusion, the activities of selecting, collecting and displaying, are all results of enculturation. These behaviours can be seen in Western society and most often begin during an individual's childhood years. It is common for a tourist to want to collect objects so they have physical reminders of the pleasurable experiences they had while being away from home. The tourist will then have stories of nostalgia to tell if people query them about their objects. This all accumulates to the significance and function of the souvenir in Western culture. Even though a souvenir begins as a commodity, once it is in the hands of the owner, and has a supplementary story to go alongside it, it is not a commodity. It is a treasured, priceless possession and is not up for public circulation. It is a meaningful collection that only the possessor can relate to truthfully. With my penny collection, yes it is true that the penny designs I chose are available for consumption to the public, and yes it is likely that other tourists would have a similar collection to mine, but what I am sure about is that no one else has the exact same collection, in the exact same order, with the exact same story to tell as I do. The penny collection and its story is an authentic memory in my eyes.

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