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*Sociology* 2006 40: 717

DOI: 10.1177/0038038506065157

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## Dismantling Mantelpieces: Narrating Identities and Materializing Culture in the Home

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### ABSTRACT

This article applies narrative methods to an analysis of the meaning of British domestic culture. The data are from an exploratory study investigating how and why people displayed objects in their homes. Although mantelpiece displays were the principal focus, other display areas were considered, and interview respondents were invited to tell stories about the provenance and meaning of objects. Analysing such narratives as social performances demonstrates the extent to which the apparently 'private' experiences of the self are manifested by means of display objects and domestic artefacts. Narratives and objects inhabit the intersection of the personal and the social. An analysis of four narratives that two women related during interviews in their homes shows how people account for themselves in recounting stories of their home possessions. In conclusion, a research strategy combining narrative accounts with an interpretation of photographic data is suggested.

### KEY WORDS

consumption / home / identity / interview / material culture / narrative

### Narrating Materials and Reading Rooms

This is a discussion of material culture in the home. It explores the display of material culture as an everyday practice. The construction of narratives around objects displayed in the home is the focus of the article. This process is examined through a detailed analysis of informants' accounts. Rather than conceptualizing the meaning of objects as inherent and fixed, this

approach takes meaning to be contingent and co-constructed by informant, researcher and objects within their domestic setting. Interview accounts are one method of exploring the situational, interactive production of meaning. Analysis of these accounts demonstrates how individuals who are often conceptualized only as consumers become producers of meaning through their domestic stories. By constructing narratives around visual productions in the apparently private space of the home, people participate in the ongoing accomplishment of social, moral identities. Thus, the practice of producing narratives around objects contributes to the personal work of autobiography and renders objects as meaningful participants in the social work of identity-building.

Initial theoretical discussions locate the topic within existing studies of home and material culture and narrative methodology. Questions concerning the dominance of the unstructured, in-depth qualitative interview as a social scientific method, and in particular of the 'narrative turn', are raised briefly in the introductory discussion. Following an analysis of four narratives related by two people in an ethnographically informed project, a final reflection returns to the question of method. In conclusion, an approach recognizing both the visual and storied aspects of material cultures is suggested for the study of domestic display.

## **The Meaning of Home, Consumption and Material Culture**

As a substantive topic, domestic display inhabits a growing literature on the construction of home through consumption. This is at the nexus of three existing fields of study: the meaning of home, material culture and consumption.

For an overview of the literature on the meaning of home, which cannot be covered here in full, see Mallett's recent discussion (2004). The home is a site for consumption practices and the establishment of social and economic relations (Jackson and Moores, 1995; Wilk, 1989). As the articles in edited collections by Cieraad (1999) and Miller (2001) all demonstrate from a variety of perspectives, agencies of material culture, the house and the individual interact in an ongoing construction of meaning. Domestic settings can also be a domain of cultural anxiety, in that the 'private' space of the home may be implicitly felt to be the object of potential surveillance and judgement by visitors or a 'generalized other' (Allan and Crow, 1989; Darke and Gurney, 2000; Hunt, 1989). Homes are also a setting for the enactment of self, where the 'otherness' of previous owners and potential visitors must be managed – even exorcized (Gregory, 2003; Hockey, 1999). Thus, the management of domestic display has been conceptualized both as performance for others and a marking practice contributing to negotiations of identity within a network of relations.

The empirical findings in this research also help to illuminate Featherstone's discussion of the 'aestheticisation' of everyday life (1991), although it is not clear that the findings posited here represent a distinctively

postmodern consumer. Miller (2002) and Clarke (2002) both emphasize the materiality of home and things as constitutive of social processes, rather than an abstracted notion of home as symbol. Moreover, research from the perspective of design history (Forty, 1986; Kwint et al., 1999; Rybczynski, 1986) stresses the continuities of domestic space and everyday objects in the ongoing historical mundane practices of the social accomplishment of identity. As Kopytoff (1986) emphasizes, things have a 'cultural biography' and are embedded in frameworks of time and memory (Tilley, 2001). Biographies of things are important in the construction of individual and family autobiographies (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Woodward, 2001). By appropriating mass-produced objects to create 'meaningful décor' (Chevalier, 1999: 94), people can move from being supposedly alienated or passive consumers to active producers of meaning (see also Cieraad, 1999; Didau, 2001; Jackson and Moores, 1995; Miller, 1988, 1995, 2001). Therefore, empirical studies of interactions between people, their homes and material culture suggest that there is an active meaning-making process in which all three play a role (Dittmar, 1992).

In particular, Riggins' useful insights into ethnographic study of the domestic living room complement the analysis provided here (1990, 1994). His approach to analysis, 'mapping' and 'referencing' to render objects meaningful both in personal autobiography and within the realm of public cultural values, is one way of making sense of domestic space and material culture. The analysis presented in this article focuses on the personal, since, as is argued in the conclusion, narratives are one method of framing the relationship between individuals and domestic displays.

## Interviewing and Narrative Approaches

The article is based on empirical research, which used interview and narrative methods for exploring the social world. The 'narrative turn' in social science research has been evident for the last 20 years. As Mishler (1986), Riessman (1993, 2002), and Cortazzi (2001) – among many others – have established, the analysis of personal, narrative accounts is a powerful means to understand the construction and performance of selves. The analysis of biographical and autobiographical materials – spoken and written – provides a valuable resource in the exploration of moral careers and transformations in identity (Evans, 1993; Plummer, 1993, 2001; Stanley and Morgan, 1993). Narrative illuminates the intersection of biography and history, the focus of sociological study (Mills, 1959).

In some cases, however, people do not tell long stories about the objects they were displaying in their homes, and the interview structure remains stichomythic. This broken rhythm of talk consists of short questions being met with equally brief responses. This problematizes the concept of the 'narrative turn' in social science research, which gives primacy to one particular social

practice and form of interview talk. There is a danger in ignoring the fact that not all informants participate in the popularized social scientific practice of the unstructured or in-depth qualitative interview. In taking the interviewer's role to be one of providing opportunities to the interviewee to relate their 'own' story (Mishler, 1986), this approach places the interviewee in the role of a container of stories that can be mined, rather than as a co-constructor of knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The social character of these stories must be recognized, since in the 'interview society', it is recognized that interview narratives are not transparent reflections of lived experience or the self, but are interactive performances (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996). As Atkinson and Silverman point out, the emphasis on narrative in interview interactions results not from an essential superiority to this type of subject, but from a 'preferred subjectivity' (1997: 19) that is currently popular not only in the social sciences but more widely in society. With reference to the topic of this article, Coolen et al. (2002) express concern about empirical studies of the meaning of home in particular, which have tended to use small-scale, qualitative interview samples for data collection to the exclusion of other approaches.

### **The Study: Dismantling Mantelpieces**

The original focus of the study was the display of material culture on domestic mantelpieces. These were, for many generations, conventionally thought of as the focal point of the living room (Lawrence and Chris, 1996). In 1937 and 1983, Mass-Observation asked their respondents to list what was on their mantelpieces or equivalent space and those of acquaintances and family (Mass-Observation Archive, 1937, 1983). There were responses from 120 people: all but one had a mantelpiece. Now, central heating has negated the need for 'real' fires, yet even in newly built houses, fireplaces and mantelpieces continue to be a feature, although figures are not available. In this study, 100 of the 140 respondents to a postal questionnaire had one or more mantelpieces. Informants from a new housing development who had mantelpieces said that they 'made sense' of a room, giving it order and symmetry, in a way that a shelf unit or television did not. Nevertheless, all the people I interviewed commented on the many focal points in their homes, in the living room and beyond. These were not just display spaces, but also sites where family and individual stories were constructed around individual objects and assemblages of photographs and collections of artefacts.

The narratives discussed here are taken from an empirical study of domestic display in Cardiff. Thirty people and their families agreed to be interviewed following analysis of postal surveys returned by 140 households. In-depth interviews that were guided by their questionnaire responses and also focused on the displays as 'talking points' were taped in the living rooms of their homes. The four narratives were carefully selected for their salience in illuminating themes

that emerged from an extensive analysis of narrative sections of all the interview transcripts. The analysis was conducted according to guidelines discussed by Riessman (1993, 2002), Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Kvale (1996) and Czarniawska (2004).

Exploring the narratives about things emphasizes what mantelpiece displays (or other domestic display areas) are accomplishing in the home. Their materiality is not bound by temporal and spatial limits, since they are the material with which people build stories of absent presences, a horizon beyond which the past and future, the otherworld and ideal self dwell (Didau, 2001). The mantelshelf provides a formal structure for this display, a highly traditionalized and normalized form of revelation, which, like the 'once upon a time' narrative motif, can be conceptualized as a formal structuring device. These devices are not necessary for narrative or aesthetic accomplishment. In reading the poetics of living rooms, however, mantelpieces do predicate and delineate display space at the room's central point, in a way that perhaps no other architectural convention has done. It therefore seemed appropriate to apply narrative methods of data collection and analysis to the topic.

The focus of the interview seemed ideal for inviting informants to tell stories, and this was usually successful. In order to put their room displays into wider autobiographical context, I often asked them to tell me about their housing histories. Each object could also be made the subject of a narrative, as I asked individuals to tell me about the origins of the vase, or clock, or ornament. At other times, the information they had written in the questionnaires concerning childhood memories, or why they did not want a mantelpiece, suggested a narrative pathway. Objects were not only props to life histories but essential players; we were host and guest, yet also presenter and listener, judge and defender. The narrative was doing work, often in allowing the teller to display other worlds in an otherwise limited environment. She could show, by means of the narrative, that she had other identities, societies and values. Also, future narratives or narratives of intent were also constructed around domestic material cultural displays, as is discussed in the last case of the empty photograph frame.

Although the artefact on display remains materially the same, different stories, or different versions of the same story, can be related to it according to the specific identity its owner wishes to invoke in an interaction. One informant, whose narratives are not discussed in detail here, ended a story about a decorative plate with an illustration of this point:

If it was somebody who I knew better, or wanted to know better or whatever, then I might actually tell them a bit of the story, you know and it could be the long-winded version which you got or it could be something much, much more abbreviated which is just about, you know, 'I got that to remember my godmother' ... You know, there are any number of permutations ... of how I could wrap it up.

This account raises methodological questions concerning the use of interview narratives as a preferred resource for social enquiry. This is discussed in the

conclusion to the article, with reference to the narrative turn in the social sciences and the concept of the interview society. Yet, when reading the following storied accounts of material domestic culture, it is helpful to be mindful of their situated, material domestic context.

## The Stories

### Not just a Wife and Mother

Sylvia told the following narratives about two objects she had on display to make present other identities. She lives in a modern house with her husband, and has two adult daughters who both have children. She and her husband chose not to have a mantelpiece in their home. The first object was a large bronze of a male and female figure embracing, displayed on a shelf unit in the front bay window area. She tells the story of how she acquired the object. Its acquisition is given a place and time, based upon her knowledge of where they were living. In a sense, 'home' embodies not only place, but also time. This idea of the confluence of time and place as 'home' is discussed elsewhere (Hurdley, 2006).

*RH:* Is the statue on the, in the window alcove particularly special?

*Sylvia:* Our daughters bought it for us some years ago, would be less than fourteen years ago cos I know where we were living at the time, and it cost them a lot of money and a great deal of effort to get it. They wanted this specific one and it's very very heavy, and one daughter pushed it home from town in a pushchair (balancing it on the pushchair). And I was very touched that our daughters thought of my husband and myself as being you know, like that. You don't usually think of your mother and father I don't think – and I thought it was lovely. And it's got a little pamphlet you know about the person who made it and all that.

Sylvia concentrates on the moral values constructed around the object. It was a gift from her daughters to her and her husband. It cost her daughters money, time and effort. It was specially selected, and has a leaflet about its maker. An ordinary-looking domestic ornament is made abnormal by the story she reads into it, and which she chooses to tell to me. It is unusual per se, in that it is not mass produced, and is personalized by the pamphlet detailing its producer. It is also unusual in the amount of time and effort invested into it by the givers. This element of the story is emphasized in this particular production of it, as she details her children bringing it home in a pushchair. This personalizing detail of the effort that went into the object adds value, just as the pamphlet does.

The third element that makes this object no ordinary production (in her eyes and telling) is the revelation it gives her of her daughters' perception of her and her husband. However, rather than tell me directly what that perception is, she points at the statue of the lovers: 'You know, like that'. This emphasizes the dramatic nature of story telling in these interviews; the objects are

demonstrative of the themes of the stories. In a hermeneutic circle of narrative and material content, each augments and benefits from the other's meaning. In this case, the statue is ordinary, temporally and spatially static, yet in the telling it becomes unique, and even vivified. Simultaneously, the statue is the material present of the themes in the story. It is 'very very heavy' proving her daughters' effort; it has a pamphlet, evidencing its uniqueness, and this uniqueness is extended symbolically into the realm of filial perception.

The role of the listener is important, since to whom the narrative is told influences what is said and what is omitted. Sylvia might have felt able to tell someone else how they were 'like that', or omitted that element of the narrative altogether. Her daughters' perception of their parents as sensual is iterated: 'You don't usually think of your mother and father, I don't think'. The shift to the second person is conventional, yet brings into play our relative ages and gender. We are of an age to be mother and daughter, and this highlights the interactive nature of narrative. The moral is not to make assumptions about one's parents, a lesson which I am perhaps intended to take personally, since it is repeated. The realization of her identity as a sexualized human being (together with her husband), rather than just 'Mother', is a further accomplishment of the object narrative. Her comment, 'I thought it was lovely', is ambiguous. It could refer to her daughters' investments in it, their filial perception, and/or her identity. These are all highly moral identities, which are presented as unusual, yet not deviant, since they inhabit an institutional structure of marriage and family life ('my husband', 'our daughters', and 'the pushchair'). Similarly, the statue is described as unique and special, yet in its domestic setting provides a safe structure within which to construct meanings. Her concluding sentence brings us back into the present and the material, a fitting end to the tale.

The domestic establishment allows for certain exhibitions of the unordinary, since it is assumed to fit into certain conventional bounds of home, family, safety and so on. The context is important; had the same statue been in an art gallery or shop, its symbolic meaning could have been very different; acceptable sensuality could have been viewed as eroticism or even pornography; the heaviness as ugly or of only monetary value. Its specific cultural context, the domestic – like a stage set – imbues meaning, just as the tale told by its owner does, and this is a reciprocal action. The meaning of things in the home is what gives home its meaning.

Another convention that is considered to permit, or even invite the unique (in this society), is that of the gift. This value, which is loaded with moral imperatives for the giver and recipient, is related in this story. Investment of time, effort and money are moral actions for the giver, whilst appreciation, and, it could be argued, the production and telling of the gift narrative are prescribed for the recipient. Emotional investment on both sides ('I was very touched that our daughters thought ...') also adds value. Even if the object itself might be mass-produced, stories about it make it a personal production. It could be said, then, that prescribed public cultural



values are rewritten by individuals at home, where they transform artefacts by telling stories about them, and thus themselves.

It is interesting to consider the direct correlation Sylvia draws between the object's appearance and what this conveys about her identity, together with her daughters' perception of that identity. She perceives it as representative of her character and how that is seen by those closest to her. This valuation of art as representative differs from some other informants' views, but suggests a perception of art as representation that is highly traditional.

### The Good Grandmother

I now consider another narrative told by Sylvia, about a small hard dough ball on the display shelf, which she has selected as her 'mantelpiece' for the purposes of the research project. Again, the narrative starts with a statement establishing it as a gift from a family member, her young grandson. This story occurs earlier in the interview process than the tale of the statue, and I am still adopting a 'questioner' role. Nevertheless, the tale has a clear structure, beginning with object descriptor (gift), how it was 'produced' for her, when she received it and why it is on display.

*Sylvia:* It's a little thing that my grandson made – I'm not sure out of what – dough or something, and if you look ever so carefully it's got a G for Grandma but I can't see it. It's like a kit that he had, and you know, I had to enthuse over it and so on, cos he gave it to me for a birthday or Christmas or something. And I sort of had to waffle and say 'Oh, how lovely,' and try and find out what it was supposed to be without telling him I couldn't recognize it. It's a 'G' for Grandma.

*RH:* And how long's that been there if it was a birthday?

*Sylvia:* Probably about two years. Cos he's five now and he was very tiny – you know he made it with the help of his mother, so yes. And as I say you just don't see it anymore.

*RH:* So it's not that you haven't moved it because you know you thought consciously – it's just kind of been put there and stayed there?

*Sylvia:* Well, it was put there so that he would feel it was very important – which of course it is – but the fact that it's still there (I'd forgotten about it).

*RH:* And does he see it still?

*Sylvia:* Well he does visit but whether he notices it or not I don't know.

What is told in this narrative is her moral identity of being a good grandmother, as shown in the iterative 'it's a G for grandma'. Encircled by this repeated comment is a periphrasis supporting and supported by this emblematic device, comically describing how she tried to find out what the thing was without upsetting her grandson. I attempt to return to what I consider to be the 'plot' of the interview, being interested in decision-making processes underpinning display. However, Sylvia continues to hold the moral thread of her narrative, of a small boy being helped by his mother and then by his grandmother, to become a proud producer of cultural objects. In doing this work (using a 'kit', putting the

object on display), she and her daughter have successfully contributed to the transition a small child makes from indiscriminate dauber on walls to acculturated social being. The fact that he or she no longer sees this little ball of dough is irrelevant to her; the work has been done.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that she tells the tale from this moral perspective, of being a good grandmother and the associated task of acculturating her grandson. Although the dough ball was clearly an aesthetic monstrosity, the cultural norm is to display things in the home for moral reasons. It is also normal to leave things out on display months or years after their original moral role has ended. Yet the morality tales of British domestic culture – home and family, comfort rather than beauty – reside in these forgotten, often invisible things.

This is an important theme that has emerged from close analysis of this narrative: that the culture of the family and the home can be somewhat different from public culture. The moral economy of gift giving, of family values and identity-building within the domestic context could be seen as based on anti-aesthetic values. This is not to simplify domestic cultures, since, as many of the interview narratives suggested, the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic is complex and ambiguous. Each object on display contains many interwoven narratives, which are under constant revision, and are dependent on the teller and listener for particular momentary orientations. Yet these displays, whilst informed by public mores about what home is for, what is to be revealed or concealed, are also vital players in ongoing processes of individuation. The notion of home and self-identity as mutually constitutive is public, yet the work that goes on behind closed doors is seen as one's own business. The people who took interviews as occasions for relating narratives established this: my role was that of listener. Others who cast me as an interviewer, with a list of normal questions to which there were normal answers, were not, in a sense, 'at home' during the interview. As an interviewer, it was difficult to invite narrative; they had invited me into their homes, and I did not know then how to negotiate the etiquette of courting narrative. It seemed to happen spontaneously, or not at all.

### Framing Material

The last two interview extracts concern, paradoxically, resolution and deferment of a problem that is both aesthetic and moral. Naomi is a young woman who has recently bought a Victorian terraced house, where she lives with a lodger. The former owners had fitted a modern pine mantelpiece to one hearth space, yet the back fireplace remained a gaping hole, which Naomi liked as being 'modern'. This narrative concerns an immediate and seemingly unproblematic filling of the wall space above the mantelpiece. Since her budget would not permit the purchase of a large painting, Naomi simply bought a length of material from Ikea and had it framed. The narrative is one of resolution, a

problem solved. This contrasts with the future conditional narrative that follows, yet is concerned with the same issue: filling emptiness.

*Naomi:* Yes. Well the painting, I wanted something quite large to go above it [the mantelpiece], you know something to fill the space, and I looked into pictures and my budget, and it was sort of getting a picture the size that I wanted was quite expensive. So I just got the material from Ikea, and I just got it framed.

*RH:* Oh I see, now I understand what you put in the frame over there.

*Naomi:* Yes.

*RH:* It's brilliant.

*Naomi:* Well, it is quite dramatic I guess, and it's quite a cheap thing you know, cos you didn't have to pay for someone's work of art or something. But you know, if you were buying a frame or a sort of print in that sort of style, it would be quite pricey. But I thought, that's a little bit different, and you know, it was quite cheap.

In this case, the 'larger frame' is the wall above the mantelpiece, which is customarily filled by a mirror or picture of some sort. The convention of putting a mirror up is not mentioned and Naomi wants 'something to fill the space', something 'large'. Cost is emphasized as being the problem in this narrative. This is equated with 'a picture the size I wanted', 'someone's work of art' and 'print in that sort of style'. She solves the problem by going to Ikea, buying a length of patterned material and having it framed. This is 'quite cheap', 'quite dramatic' and 'a little bit different'. The iteration of 'quite cheap' encircles the second section of the narrative, so that the phrase rounding off the whole story of the object brings to the fore the theme of cost.

It seems like a simple tale, yet Naomi is accomplishing several tasks in her recounting of it. Principally, she is accounting for herself. In this sense, each retelling of the tale constructed around the object affirms her identity. Her performance is an investment not only in the narrative, which in a sense is a memory of past action, but also in her present self. Past and present are thus literally materialized in the frame. However, it is not until the narrative is told that this interaction can detach from this common grounding. This ongoing identity work can be seen in the way in which the provenance of the object becomes a moral narrative. Confronted with the problem of cost, the protagonist overcomes this through resourceful action, and, furthermore, she displays not just thrift, but also an aesthetic sensibility, since the framed material is 'dramatic' and 'different'. I, the listener, have no choice but to show admiration for this accomplishment, since to question it would be to deny the values of thrift and aesthetic sense and, moreover, Naomi's originality: this is no Monet print. The mass-produced material has been individualized by her work on it, which has reproduced it as her work of art. That is accomplished by putting a frame around it, thus separating and distinguishing it from the kilometres of the same material 'out there'. This act of separation has a simultaneous effect on its producer, individuating her from the common run of people. However, the values affirmed in recounting the narrative place her firmly within the frame of social normality: it is legitimated deviance, licensed carnival.

## The Empty Frame

Can displayed objects embody narratives of the future, of intent or directionality? Another narrative from the same interview, about an empty photograph frame, imparts a different perspective on the poetics of things in the home. In contrast, however, this is one of a possibly endlessly deferred future fulfilment of the aesthetic self and the photograph frame.

*Naomi:* So I picked a frame up in TKMaxx, and it was just, cos it sort of blended in and it was nice colours. But I haven't actually got a picture to go in it – cos I think I want a really nice picture. And I can't decide what it's going to be at the moment, you know, cos yes, it is the focal point and I want something quite nice to go there, and I haven't sort of – I'm quite fussy. I wouldn't put anything in. I'm a bit like that with things like, I wouldn't put anything in just for it to go, obviously a picture in. Oh, I won't have a picture in until I find the perfect one, and then I'll put that in – I think.

Several informants had empty photograph frames on display. The provenance of this particular frame is mentioned first, followed by an aesthetic reason for the purchase. This is followed by a 'but', a common word in the narratives, and one that is used, it seems, as a preface to an apologia. In this case, it pre-empted criticism by pointing out the obvious absence; the frame is empty. Since photograph frames are produced with the intent that the consumer will put a photograph in it, this seems like deviant behaviour. However, Naomi defends this omission by transforming it into a deliberate act. Moreover, this is not due to stupid indecisiveness, but a deliberate withholding of the decision. She backs up this argument by calling on two witnesses; the mantelpiece itself ('cos yes it is the focal point') and her own moral identity as a person of taste and discrimination ('I'm quite fussy. I wouldn't put anything in'). In this case, her identity and the mantelpiece display are mutually constructive and contingent; if the mantelpiece is the focal point, then she has taste, and vice versa. The repetition of, 'I wouldn't put anything in', emphasizes her intentional omission as confirmative of her aesthetic judgement. That conditional is mixed up with the present and the future, suggesting that the empty frame contains three time zones; the present, the future, and a curious contingent universal. In other words, her act of not putting 'anything' in is contingent upon the supposition, 'if I were fussy'.

It is interesting to note that dual meaning of 'anything', as 'just any old tat' and, 'anything at all'. As I noted in the discussion of the dough ball, that object's very invisibility denoted a kind of anti-aesthetic morality within domestic culture. In this narrative, the emptiness of the frame symbolizes an aesthetic moral identity by the very absence of a 'normal' aesthetic – a photo in the frame. The ambiguity of 'anything' highlights this paradox: that in order to maintain this identity, it might be imperative to maintain this emptiness – an ascetic aesthetic!

The particular behaviour embodied by the frame is then extrapolated to a general comment on her identity in the narrative, as 'I'm a bit like that with

things'. The 'like that', as heard in Sylvia's narrative of the bronze statue, endows the object with a demonstrative quality, showing that object, narrative and narrator are involved in interaction. Yet, whereas Sylvia's narrative was of a past action and present identity, this is a narrative of an intended future action, and a current stasis that is nevertheless highly active. The object is not only performative of an element of the narrator's universal 'timeless' identity, but also offering potential and intended action, a narrative of the future.

That there will be no picture 'until I find the perfect one' conveys the direction of the narrative, a purposive quest. However, as discussed earlier, it is possible that her aesthetic morality will not permit fulfilment of the task and the frame. The repeated 'I think' at the beginning and end of the narrative suggests Naomi's uncertainty concerning her intention. However, this is portrayed as a considered ambiguity, rather than inability to make decisions. The final act of putting in the 'perfect picture' will also confirm her perfection or completion of this identity. This is a narrative of the future, yet the emptiness of the photograph frame symbolizes the uncertainty of identity-building and the risks of completing such work: failure.

Naomi has deferred the filling of a photo frame because she wants to find the 'perfect picture', justified by it being on the 'focal point' of the mantelpiece (where she has placed it). Paradoxically, she has filled a much larger empty space above the mantelpiece with a piece of framed material. Her telling of its provenance is almost casual: 'So I just got the material from Ikea, and I just got it framed.' Like the naming of TKMaxx in the previous account, the mention of Ikea assumes a common frame of cultural reference. I suggest that they are both known for cheapness and appeal to a certain type of consumer, relatively young and poor, yet possessing a sense of fashionable taste that is not cheap (although this is debatable). The point is that it is a certain type of shopper who knows what these places are, rather than a certain type of art lover or connoisseur of antiques. 'Someone's work of art or something' is too expensive; aesthetics are then forced into the market place. Yet individual taste can be distinguished within the frame of shopping. Agreement with this principle is crucial within the frame of consumption; otherwise we stare into the abyss of anonymity, an emptiness in place of identity. When the choice of consuming 'someone's work of art' is closed, the thwarted consumer must become producer.

How is it that this empty space was filled so freely, yet the photograph frame remains empty? There is no simple answer, yet I suggest at this stage that it is to do with accomplishing identity. Naomi has individuated herself by means of the framed material and narrative, but a photograph is perceived differently by framer and viewer. This perhaps has to do with the filtering function of most objects; they are something in themselves. A personal photograph lacks that, being an apparently immediate representation of self or the places and people close to the self. This deserves further debate, and there is sadly no room to engage in it in this article.

Another account mobilizing a moral identity through the trope of absence was that of a mother who no longer had a fireplace or mantelpiece to protect her children from potential fire risk. The explanation was similarly offered as a self-apologia, implying that not wanting a domestic hearth and mantelpiece, like having an empty photograph frame, is deviant or resistant. In order to conform to social rules, the participant offered a narrative that upheld the moral imperative to protect children, and which I could not therefore contest. Thus, the absent mantelpiece, and a future conditional narrative of risk performed the same work as a present mantelpiece in that it interacts with the participant's identity as a mutually constitutive agent. By maintaining the mantelpiece as an absent presence, the narrator maintains her identity as a careful mother. This agrees with Naomi's narrative about the empty photograph frame, in which the mantelpiece in its role as 'focal point' was called upon to support her decision, which was indeed endlessly deferred. At a second interview, Naomi explained that she had stored the frame in a bedroom drawer, since she was yet to find 'the perfect picture'. It could be argued that Naomi, like the 'careful mother', maintains her careful aesthetic identity by not presenting a photograph in the frame: its emptiness guarantees purity.

## Focal and Vocal Points

I have shown how people telling stories about objects they have in their homes are also telling stories about themselves, as moral beings with histories and beliefs, who are both socialized and individuated. This narrative approach to domestic displays has therefore demonstrated how a micro-study of the home can illuminate the intersection of the personal and the social, the focus of sociological study (Mills, 1959). By narrating stories about and around the objects they display in their homes, individuals can account for identities that otherwise might not be immediately present or presentable. Narrative analysis of sections of interview transcripts has shown how informants accomplished the negotiation and construction of identities within interview interactions, invoking absent times, places and people. Methodologically, the article contributes to narrative approaches within social sciences. Substantively, the home as a site of identity work has been shown to be an important topic of continuing study (Allan and Crow, 1989; Cieraad, 1999; Gregory, 2003; Jackson and Moores, 1995). In particular, like other empirical studies, this has illuminated the role of the individual, not as just consumer, but also as producer of cultural displays and co-constructor of meaning (Cieraad, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1992; Miller, 2001; Woodward, 2001).

However, as discussed in the introduction, neither the 'interview society' nor the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences can be accepted unquestioningly (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). The interview, as a confessional, a method of excavating narratives from a subject, is not an avenue to direct experience. It is an interaction, in which knowledge

is contingent and co-constructed (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996). Similarly, narratives are not there as products contained within a passive subject, waiting to be found. Different versions of narratives are related as different aspects of identity are recalled in response to the demands of the present interaction and presence of others (Munro, 2004). Different objects are given prominence according to the stories that can be constructed around them. In an interview situation, the interviewer can ask about objects that might not be noticed by the casual visitor, family member or house guest. For example, Sylvia would not normally have told the story of the dough ball to any visitor. They offer a preferred perspective, of articulate speakers in in-depth qualitative interviews. The exclusive use of this method valorizes a particular form of social enquiry and practice. This does not invalidate the insights that this research strategy provides; narratives and their shared schemes of reference inform theories of taste, consumption and material culture. Such studies offer a glimpse of the personal, interactive and ongoing aspects of domestic life and the accomplishment of material cultures as everyday practice.

Nevertheless, I suggest that, in order to engage with and inform theories of taste and culture more fully, fieldwork in the home could step beyond the interview narrative that Coolen et al. (2002) criticized. For example, a combination of visual and verbal methods has been used in some studies of the domestic interior (Cieraad, 1999; Clarke, 2002; Hunt, 1989; Miller, 2001, 2002; Riggins, 1994). These position both the verbal/unseen and visual/visible aspects of material culture in the home within the frame of enquiry, highlighting private/personal and public/social modes of domestic space. Pink (2004) has recently called for methods of enquiry that engage with the 'pluri-sensory' character of the home: the smells, sounds and tastes of home, as well as its seen, tangible and storied properties. This opens up an exciting future for fieldwork in the home and its potential for informing and building theory.

In this article, I have demonstrated the substantive and methodological value of exploring the relationship between narrative and material culture. These are not the only modalities of domestic display, but in combination, they provide an excellent empirical grounding for theories of identity, together with social and economic relations and practices. This method offers one particular frame for material culture in the home, just as the mantelpiece orders and gives prominence to a specific display at the focal point of the living room. Other frames for collecting and interpreting home possessions might foreground other modalities of the domestic interior and deserve further exploration.

## Acknowledgments

This article was originally written for the BSA Annual Conference 2004, and I would like to thank Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont for their invaluable comments and encouragement while I wrote the original paper and redrafted it for publication. I am also indebted to the three anonymous referees for their helpful



recommendations and suggestions for further reading, the ESRC, which funded the doctoral project (award number R42200134124) and the informants who took part in this study. I also thank William Housley and Maggie Gregory for their unflinching support.

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