

MA Project

"Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present"

- Svetlana Boym, 2001

**Embodied Artifacts:
Memory, Nostalgia and Mid-Century Objects**

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The Project is submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Joint Graduate Program in Communication and Culture
Ryerson University—York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

May 3rd, 2011

“Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present”

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There is a certain magic held in everyday objects, whether from the present or the past. Their lines, curves and colours have an unfamiliar sensorial quality to them and their chipped, faded surfaces are reminders that these things belonged to a life before the present, perhaps to the possessor's loved one, or perhaps a stranger whose story can only be imagined. Temporally distant things have a particular appeal and have long been valued and sought out by connoisseurs, collectors, the nostalgic and the aesthetically curious. To hold an object from the past is also to engage with the weight of cultural history. Collective memories of the 19th Century, the American Revolution, the Great Depression or the decades after 1945 are held within an object as everyday as a teapot or a clock. But what is it that draws people so passionately to objects from the past? And why do particular eras speak to us at certain times? For example, one could dismiss the latest fascination with the mid-century period as simply a passing trend in design aesthetic, but what about the cultural narratives that objects from that time hold? Are we not, in some sense, also procuring the optimistic sensibilities and values of that time, such as familial cohesion, progress, and domesticity? And if so, why now? What is the lack in our contemporary lifestyle that triggers such a deep nostalgic yearning for this period in particular?

The aim of this paper and its accompanying documentary video is to contemplate the value that we place on objects from the past, specifically the mid-century period from 1946

to 1964. This value, I will argue, comes from a combination of subjective, sensorial contemplation, nostalgic yearning, and a reaction to the spatial fragmentation and temporal acceleration of contemporary North American life. In order to bridge the gap between academic discourse and personal narrative, I will apply the theories on memory by Pierre Nora and Andreas Huyssen and on nostalgia by Svetlana Boym to the conversations in the video component of my project about the current fascination with mid-century objects. While the style of the 1950's and 60's could simply be an aesthetic trend, moving to other periods in a few years, perhaps the narratives that surround the mid-century period speak to busy, young people today because of a deeper cultural yearning for postwar ideals like quality and domesticity.

THE MEMORY TURN: LIEUX DE MEMOIRE AND PRESENT PASTS

The literature that addresses memory is wide-ranging, and takes many intersecting paths. Henri Bergson's philosophical inquiry into perception, matter and the mind uncovers the intricacies of individual memory.¹ Frances Yates' historical survey of memory brings to light the important mnemonic practices that were necessary before the printed word.² Maurice Halbwachs was the first to articulate the cultural theory of collective memory,³ and Paul Connerton extended inquiry into collective memory by considering the body's role within society.⁴ These key figures, among others, provide a rich theoretical framework that is worthy of further contemplation than this paper allows. Pierre Nora and Andreas Huyssen—who draw predominantly from Halbwachs—are of specific importance to my work because of their focus on how the material world embodies memory, especially within the shifting temporal and spatial environment in which we live today. As Huyssen

asserts "...it seems the focus has shifted from present futures to present pasts, and this shift in the experience and sensibility of time needs to be explained historically and phenomenologically" (22).

Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Memoire* is celebrated for uncovering "...a modernist melancholia in which degradation of memory is the defining feature of modern life" (Schwarz, 49). Immediate memory has been "torn" Nora states, by the breakdown of collective memory and overarching ideological narratives, forcing us to rely on indirect, external representations rather than internal memories (7-8). "There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora, 7). Now, more than ever before, the anxiety that we feel about the meaning of the present and the uncertainty of the future has compelled us to fight the act of forgetting with staggering numbers of museums, archives, libraries and national monuments (Ibid, 13). As reassuring as we believe this practice to be, it is only a temporary remedy for our modern anxiety. Essentially, what makes *lieux de memoire* so appealing to us is that while they are fixed, their meaning is open to change:

For if we accept the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de memoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial...it is also clear that *lieux de memoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications. (19)

Nora's work brings to light the critical role that material culture plays in the act of individual and collective memory. One must rely on the spatial and visual qualities of the exterior in order to compensate for internal loss. Mnemonic devices anchor us to a stronger sense of historical understanding, defining what is and is not supposed to be

memorable. However Nora is generally ambiguous about exactly what constitutes *lieux de memoire*. He states, "...it is clear that some seemingly improbable objects can be legitimately considered *lieux de memoire* while, conversely, many that seem to fit by definition should in fact be excluded" (20). The diplomatic treaty, history books, manifestos, cemeteries, museums, anniversaries, architectural monuments and even "non events that are symbolically charged with meaning" like media events are all considered potential *lieux de memoire* (22). But what if we considered the possibility of *lieux de memoire* on an everyday level? Could domestic objects from the past like a lamp or a clock hold the kind of meaning that we might find in something like an historical public monument? Indeed, Nora speculates that his classifications could be refined infinitely to include public and private sites as well as pure and composite commemorative sites (23).

Huyssen builds upon Nora's critique of modern memory, but focuses primarily on the temporal and spatial shift in modern culture as a result of the digital revolution and proliferation of mass media. "The turn toward memory," he writes, "is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (28). From iPhones to satellite television to magazines, mediated memory is available to us as never before, but yet lived memory seems to be disappearing. Hence, the turn towards memory is paradoxical—as much as we obsess over the act of memorializing and remembering, information technologies, media politics, and fast paced consumption work against lived memories to construct a culture of amnesia (Huyssen, 27). While we commend our contemporary media for being increasingly immediate and archival, they squander our historical

consciousness by replacing lived memory with 'imagined memories' "...pillaged from the archive and mass-marketed for fast consumption"⁵ (Ibid).

THE AFFECTS OF MEMORY: NOSTALGIA, MYTH AND MELANCHOLY

It is difficult to consider the relationship between memory and objects from the past without the concept of nostalgia. Because nostalgia is such a bodily experience, it tends to be overlooked in most academic discourse in favor of memory in general, but key works such as Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* and Susan Stewart's *On Longing* shed crucial light on nostalgia's complexities. Woven into the fabric of memory, nostalgia is the simultaneous sweetness and the bitterness of wanting to return to another place or time. Boym defines the feeling "... (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) [it] is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii).⁶ Originally conceived as a curable illness in the late seventeenth century, nostalgia was treated with leeches, hypnotic emulsions and opium, but by the twenty-first century, "...the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia" (Boym, xiv). Echoing Huyssen on memory, Boym claims that our nostalgic yearnings have grown considerably stronger in contemporary culture:

In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals." (xiv)

Here, the digital revolution has enhanced the sense of longing for a time or place to which there is no return. It is clear that the turn towards memory and the turn towards nostalgia are interwoven, but it is important to identify where they come together and where they part.

In Janelle Wilson's study of nostalgia and identity she notes, "...memory, the actual recall of the past, *and* nostalgia, the emotional component of remembering and longing, are instrumental in one's quest to know who one is" (35). But nostalgia does not accompany every memory; sentimental longing is generally reserved for pleasurable memories—whether they are real or imagined—while painful times are better forgotten. The postwar era for example, was undoubtedly infused with patriarchy, racism, homophobia and nuclear anxiety, but collectively and even individually, we choose to ignore these facts and glorify the seemingly positive characteristics—the "American Dream" of family cohesion, economic abundance and freedom. Hence, the feeling of nostalgia only arises when we are able to frame a memory in a pleasurable manner, whether or not it was ever actually pleasurable. This act of re-framing the past in order to gain potential for nostalgic longing, therefore, relies heavily on idealized narratives. Wilson continues, "while recollection and reminiscence require the selection and ordering of facts, this is less marked than with nostalgia which is more actively (even if unconsciously) myth-making (25). Similarly, Boym writes, "...shared everyday frameworks of collective or cultural memory offer us mere signposts for individual reminiscences that could suggest multiple narratives" (53). These fluid, multiple narratives can be understood more explicitly if we turn to the definition of myth offered by Roland Barthes.

According to Barthes, all myths originate from speech (107). But the Barthesian concept of speech is meant to encompass *all* forms of communication— interpersonal discourse as well as mediated representations like magazines, television, film, advertising etc.—all of which fall under a larger framework of semiotics (109). Barthes writes extensively on everything from soap powder advertisements, Greta Garbo films, and ornamental cookery in *Elle* magazine to the form of Citroën cars, uncovering the rich semiotic world of representation that reflected and built upon the dominant values of French society in the 1950's. The myths that come to light upon contemplation of speech are ever changing and unpredictable. "One can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones," Barthes writes, "for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language" (108). The myths that rise from discourse and representations of real and imagined memories are at the heart of nostalgic experience. Returning to the origin of nostalgia, Boym asserts that as an intermediary between collective and cultural memory, nostalgia is reliant on cultural myths, which "...are not lies but rather shared assumptions that help to naturalize history and makes it livable, providing the daily glue of common intelligibility" (54). But there is more to nostalgia than the simple desire to return to the idealized myths of the past. Nostalgia carries with it an underlying realization that the myths it is predicated on really are just simply *myths*. This unsettling paradox mars the nostalgic experience with a sense of sadness, an indescribable ache for that which has been.

Such an ache can be deciphered more articulately with the concept of melancholy. Susan Stewart expresses the underlying lack associated with nostalgia, drawing from

Freudian thought, “Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience” (23). Psychoanalytic tropes come to the forefront here, especially Lacan’s work on melancholy.

Lacan is especially resonant for my project because he addresses the emotive power of the object—the “unfathomable something” that makes an ordinary object meaningful: *l’objet petit a* (Žižek, 66).⁷ Generally separate from our conscious reality, it is the abstract quality that raises an ordinary object into the sublime (Ibid). Like the indiscernible trait that makes an alien different from a human in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *l’objet petit a* could be as subtle as the shape of a pepper grinder from 1956 or the tiny chip out of a muted pink Pyrex bowl (Žižek, 66). But *l’objet petit a* generally leaves the subject with a mournful sense of lack. Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan identifies an underlying feeling of melancholy that arises when we project feelings of desire upon objects, which matches Huyssen’s assertion that we consistently attempt to anchor ourselves with memory in a ‘fractured’ contemporary world. There is a process by which we invest desire into an object, only to realize that we cannot obtain desire from it—an act of giving, but never receiving—, which sends us into a state of melancholy. Melancholic persons are those who have obtained an object, but have lost their desire for it, leaving them with a feeling of emptiness and disappointment (Žižek, 68). Melancholy, as one of the powerful symptoms of nostalgia will be considered in relation to material culture as I move to the analysis of my documentary piece.

OBJECTS FROM THE PAST

As vessels of nostalgia, material objects can tell us a great deal about ourselves on a personal level as well as on a broader, cultural level. Csikszentmihalyi and Roshberg-Halton write, "The material objects we use are not just tools we can pick up and discard at our convenience; they constitute the framework and experience that gives order to our otherwise shape-less selves" (16). As external as the material world may seem to be, the discourses and practices that we associate with objects are linked to internal processes of subjectivity and identity and are therefore worthy of extended contemplation.

Cultural theorists have examined material culture as a whole extensively over the last few decades, but consideration of memory and nostalgia in relation to objects is far less prevalent. Inquiry into material culture tends to gravitate toward practices of cultural consumption, instead of identifying the small-scale, personal interactions that we have with objects.⁸ Capitalist processes of consumption are inextricable from material culture, but at the same time, our relationship with objects runs much deeper than supply and demand.

Critiquing theories on commodity Huyssen asserts:

Adorno's critique is right as far as the mass-marketing of cultural products is concerned, but it does not help explain the rise of the memory syndrome within the culture industry. [He]... occludes issues of temporality and memory and remains oblivious to the specifics of media and their relation to structures of perception and everyday life in consumer societies. (32)

Others dismiss the act of acquiring objects as a compulsion, reserved for those who lack the strength and insight to negotiate properly in contemporary society.⁹ Thus, I will intentionally look past the pathologizing aspects of consumption in favor of the sensorial,

nostalgic draw that objects offer, thereby uncovering the universality of material experience.

It is also important to contemplate the importance of the old as opposed to the new. Many authors discuss new objects and objects from the past in the same breath, ignoring the immense weight of history and personal experience that objects from the past hold in comparison to new ones.¹⁰ Conversely, those that do acknowledge the unique characteristics of 'pastness' do so using categories like the 'antiquarian' and the 'collector' again, pathologizing and compartmentalizing our connections with objects. All of us choose to live with certain objects, over and above their use value, whether or not we identify as "collectors," and so it is necessary to acknowledge this practice as a part of the human condition.

THE DOMESTIC SPHERE AND THE EVERYDAY

"Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society," Barthes writes, "for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things (107). Whether it is a lamp, a cup, or table, generally overlooked everyday material goods hold a wealth of meaning that can be traced back to larger discourses about collective and cultural memory. Nora concurs, "All *lieux de memoire* are objects *mises en abime*" (20)—'endless stories within a larger story'. Commonplace activities are generally neglected in academic disciplines, overlooking the lived experience of daily life and the meanings and mythologies that circulate around it (Moran, 8). The everyday is a setting where practice and representation are completely interrelated, where lived reality of the quotidian co-exists with clichés, mythologies and stereotypes. It is also

in the scope of the everyday where nostalgia comes to the forefront. Because nostalgia is such a personal, affective emotion, the best way to understand how it is made manifest is by meditating on individual narratives of everyday objects as exemplars of a cultural whole. It is fitting then, that documentary practice should be my mode of inquiry into a subject that is so heavily reliant on individual narratives.

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE AS CASE STUDY

THE MID-CENTURY PERIOD

My decision to use the mid-century period as an ethnographic case study was inspired by the newfound desire that North American individuals—predominantly middle class and in their 20's and 30's—feel for objects from the late 1950's and early 1960's. It is important to note that nostalgic yearning through material culture has existed in most every period of history. Revival of the Renaissance respect of ancient Rome was illustrated in the 18th Century with Neoclassicism, and the 19th Century saw a revival of Greek and Gothic design (Pile, 236-237), among others. Such revivals are fueled by the enduring power of historical myths. For example, after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, interior styles in America shifted to a neoclassical style, marking the Federalist period of design (1780-1830) (Ibid, 224). America was finally an independent country and wanted to establish itself as an empire worthy of international respect, and what better way to do so than to borrow design and architecture from the most successful empires in history? Columned porticos, domed buildings, marble floors, furniture shapes suggestive of the images on Greek vases and detailed white mantles and door frames based on Palladio's villa schemes all point toward devotion to Greek models (Ibid). Similarly, the

Arts and Crafts movement in the late 19th and early 20th Century was essentially a reaction to the mass, inexpensive production techniques that began during the industrial revolution (Pile, 251).

In the last ten years, there has been a notable increase in interest in mid-20th Century design. In Toronto specifically, there has been a proliferation of new stores that specialize in mid-century artifacts, and the vendors at the St Lawrence Antique Market increasingly offer items from the period.¹¹ According to the individuals that I interviewed, the surge of interest in mid-century can be observed most acutely in the "Generation Y" crowd.

Samantha, a dealer at the St. Lawrence Antique Market confirms, "The older people just associate it with stuff that got old and tired in their lives and went down to the rec room or to the cottage, so definitely a younger crowd." Similarly, Shauntelle, the owner of the store Ethel, affirms, "The majority of my customers, I hate to use the term hipster, but it's... the late-twenties hipster creative class..." While the interest this demographic feels for mid-century could simply be an aesthetic trend, moving to a completely different era in a few years, my interviews reveal that the myths about the post-war period evidently speak to busy, young people today because of a complex cultural turn back to ideals like quality and domesticity.

WHY DOCUMENTARY?

The relationships that people have with objects from the past are generally varied and highly personal. These range from a necklace passed down by a great grandmother to a chrome breadbox from a garage sale. While objects themselves can come from a wide range of places and times, there is a universality about our relationships to material objects,

which is precisely why documentary video is an ideal medium for my project. The experience of watching documentary brings personal experiences into the public realm, and prompts the viewer to reflect more acutely upon his or her own experiences, thereby forging a deeper connection with culture as a whole.

My fundamental reason for choosing documentary was for its sensorial quality. Through interviews, I was able to document body language, expressions, surroundings and the objects that are discussed, which allows for a more affectively charged viewing experience. Additionally, the highly sensorial experience of nostalgia in relation to everyday objects is something that the interviewees discuss at length; it is only fitting that the visual and auditory experience of the video allow the viewer to do the same.

TECHNICAL CHOICES

As a first-time filmmaker, I found the process of production both inspiring and challenging. Prior to filming, I watched as many documentaries as I could in order to see the range of possibility that was available to me.¹² The documentaries that spoke to me the most profoundly were ones that chose not to include a narrative voice—most notably, films by Errol Morris and Gary Hustwit. To cut out a mediating voice allows for the viewer to relate directly to the subject, instead of feeling controlled by the filmmaker. Undoubtedly, the documentary process is always mediated by the filmmaker's interview questions and editing, but mediation is simply less apparent when the narrative voice is lost. Further, as I am part of the demographic that I document, I had to be careful not to let my own subjectivity towards nostalgia influence my work. Distance from the interviewees was maintained by keeping the interview process conversational and open-ended instead of

adhering to a rigid list of questions. I encouraged all the interviewees to talk about specific objects in their lives and to reflect upon why they feel the way they do towards them.

Ultimately, the key themes that emerged during my interviews were: sensorial appreciation, historical myths, quality, nostalgia and the role that contemporary life plays in our draw to mid-century.

In order to evoke a feeling of comfort and domesticity, I chose to interview each person in their home, studio or store with some of their favorite mid-century pieces in the frame with them. I framed all the shots in the classic documentary style—from the chest up, looking to one side of the camera—and varied the colour temperatures (Mike and Shauntelle are warm, while Samantha and Chris are cooler). I wanted to use natural light as much as possible in order to keep with the casual, domestic tone, but in some cases subtle lighting was necessary to fill outstanding shadows.

Over five hours of interview footage was edited down to a final cut which is approximately twelve minutes long. In order to illustrate the weight of my interviews and to bridge the gap between everyday conversation and theory, I separated the key themes with quotes from my writing in this paper as well as quotes from theorists. The font I used for the quotes and titles is called *Univers*—a Swiss sans serif designed by Adrian Frutiger in 1956 (Monem, 308). This font is emblematic of the forward-thinking simplicity of design during the mid-century, and so it effectively reinforces the themes that are considered by the interviewees. Finally, the colour palette that I chose to use behind the quotes is also indicative of the postwar era; pale pink, turquoise, vivid red and canary yellow provide a naïvely positive gesture despite the decidedly dystopic textual content.

STILL PHOTOGRAPHS AND B-ROLL

During the editing process I intercut my footage with close-up photographs of mid-century objects using a large aperture (f/2.4), to give everyday items like a bowl or a cup a more enduring, aestheticized quality. As with most b-roll in documentaries, many of the photographs are inserted over parts that required audio editing—the interviewee paused for a long time, went on a tangent, coughed etc.—but in other parts, such as the introduction, the photographs are meant to prime the viewer for the subject matter, allowing them to contemplate specific objects while listening to the interviewee's words. I also chose to include several documentary and advertising images from *Life* magazine between 1957 and 1962 in order to better illustrate the myths that were presented to the masses during the postwar era and have been sustained to this day. Additionally, clips from *Leave it to Beaver* (1958), *I Love Lucy* (1951), *Mad Men* (2009, 2010), *Down With Love* (2003) and *Far From Heaven* (2002) were inserted over interview footage in order to visually exemplify what the interviewees discuss.

Two time-lapse videos are used in the documentary: one of St Lawrence Antique market at sunrise and one of Yonge-Dundas square at sunset. The jarring effect of time lapse—especially in juxtaposition to the lingering photographs—aims to evoke the sense of temporal fragmentation that is discussed both in the film and the paper component of this project. Paradoxically though, the time lapse of shoppers at the St Lawrence Market could suggest the convergence of contemporary, fast-paced life with the intention of 'slowing down' through the acquisition of objects from the past.

MUSIC

In line with the aesthetic experience of the film, the music I chose adds to the emotive quality of nostalgia in relation to everyday objects. I used two tracks by a band called The Album Leaf who use ambient noise, field recordings, vocals and radio transmissions to create a uniquely sentimental mood.¹³ The tracks fade in when the quotes come up, which helps to break up the topics of discussion.

INTERVIEWEES

My goal was to have conversations not with collectors per se, but with individuals who appreciate the intrinsic value of objects from the past, using the postwar period as a common thread. Of the six interviews I conducted, five are included in the documentary video. Shauntelle, Chris and Sam are all self-professed collectors and mid-century dealers. I chose to interview these individuals because I felt they could offer a wealth of insight into the world of postwar objects. I was careful not to delve too deeply into the politics of antiques as commodity or the subculture of collecting—what was more valuable to me was their vast knowledge about objects from that period and their articulate reflections upon specific objects in their lives.

I was motivated to speak with the last two interviewees, Colin and Laura (a young married couple) and Mike (an actor) because they were excellent examples of people in generation Y who are not avid collectors, but who still appreciate the draw of objects from the 1950's and 60's. I believe that by including this range of individuals I have tried to depathologize the act of acquiring objects for more than just their use value. Popular television series like *Hoarders*, *American Pickers*, and *The Antiques Road Show* tend to frame the collector and dealer as obsessive pack-rats who are part of isolated subcultures. But, as

Laura points out in her interview, "Everyone collects something beyond what they need. For some people it's something like makeup or shoes. They don't think of themselves as collectors ... but they're doing the exact same thing as people that collect tea pots." Thus, my hope is that when people watch my documentary they will be able to identify with the interviewees instead of feeling a sense of alienation from them. Even if the viewer does not have any emotional connection to the postwar era, I am confident that they will see, as a case study, it is simply one of the many historical periods brimming with signification on an individual and cultural level.

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

SENSORIAL EXPERIENCE

Before considering the important appeal that memory and nostalgia hold for objects from the past, I wanted to talk to my interviewees about the often overlooked sensorial qualities that they possess. As Csikszentmihalyi and Roshberg-Halton note:

The meaning that releases the symbolic power of things is created, first of all, by the act of perception. The primary skill one needs to unlock the magic of things is that of seeing them objectively and subjectively at the same time, thus joining the nature of the perceiving subject with the nature of the object." (247)

The immediate, subjective experience of colour, shape, weight, texture and patina, before they are imbued with cultural interpretation is worthy of exclusive contemplation, but is often difficult to articulate.¹⁴ I asked all my interviewees to talk about one of their favorite mid-century objects; to consider how the lines, the material, the contours make them feel on a very basic level. Before the interviews, I envisioned whimsical meditations on the effect of the lines of a teak coffee table, reminiscent of Proust's famous musings on 'petites

madeleines,'¹⁵ but unfortunately, most of the interviewees found it difficult to separate the physical form from all the other emotional and cultural signifiers that objects embody. For example, the young couple, Colin and Laura, attempted to make sense of the complexities of our sensorial experience of objects when they debate the reasons behind choosing one set of plates over another:

Colin: "why don't we want those plates? ...they're perfectly good plates, but we want other ones instead..."

Laura: "I don't know; those were ugly"

Colin: "Were they?...Yeah, I guess"

Laura: "...And the little plates were such a weird shape and they had a twiddliness around them"

Colin: "Yeah, but why do we think that's ugly? Whereas your grandmother might not think those are ugly."

Laura: "I don't know, I just think they're ugly."

While this may not be able to answer any key phenomenological questions, Colin and Laura establish the significance of the subjective, aesthetic experience of an object.

During my conversation with Chris, he incorporated his bodily experience with the functional experience of a mid-century pepper grinder made from a round piece of teak with a cast iron top.¹⁶ He considers the feeling of its weight: "...it makes me feel... like there is something to it when I hold it" and continues later about the importance of the material, "...it's natural, it's a piece of real wood. One piece, not a bunch of little pieces..." But, as one might expect from a functional domestic object, Chris cannot help but talk about the use of the object as part of his sensorial experience of it: "It has an artistic quality to it—very simple design, but functional, extremely. It works extremely well."

Similarly, my interviewee Mike talks about an old metal fan and how he is drawn to the aesthetic nuances of it, but also considers the cultural meaning of the form. As he fondly

touches the round edges of the object, he says "... I remember seeing this fan and...loving the shape of it— the bottom, the stand—now we're so protective about the propeller, it's covered... And this is ...visually... so pretty". Here is the evidently inextricable nature of the sensorial experience from all its other qualities. While perception is a vital starting point, worldly things are always enmeshed in a complex network of social relations and historical narratives. According to Stewart, "We may apprehend the world by means of our senses, but the senses themselves are shaped and modified by experience and the body bears a somatic memory of its encounters with what is outside of it" ("Museum of Touch," 19). In order to make better sense of our material relationships, all these factors need to be taken into account as important parts of our overall awareness. In the next section I will outline some of the historical myths of the mid-century period that have come to be part of our collective memory of that time, thus offering an explanation for our nostalgic longing for that time through everyday objects.

MYTHS AND MEDIATIONS OF THE PAST: THE MID-CENTURY PERIOD (1946-1964)

As Barthes has established, everyday phenomena are filled with mythological meaning. Media and personal narratives, whether they are from that time or not, can paint an idealized picture of the past, which reverberates long into the future. The post World War Two decade in particular is considered to be a utopic era of positivity, domestic cohesion and progress. Emerging from the Second World War, families were reunited and were able to focus on building a happy home that embodied their optimism with cheerful colours, smooth contours and state-of-the-art materials (Quinn, 15). It was the golden age of conspicuous consumption, a time that celebrated confidence in the future, the

excitement of the present and the ability for the average family to share in the bounty of a prosperous time (Hine 3-6). Thomas Hine defines the design period between 1954 and 1964 as "Populuxe", marrying the terms 'populism', 'popularity' and 'luxury' (3). This decade was "...one of history's great shopping sprees when America found a way of turning out fantasy on an assembly line and during which products became not only more readily available but also...invested with greater meaning" (Hine 3). Durable plastics like Melamine, vinyl and Formica emerged from the post-war industrial boom, giving rise to vibrant dishware, tables and chairs (Hine, 64). From chrome and Pyrex to Scandinavian ceramics and teak, the mid-century style speaks volumes about the myths of positivity, domesticity and progress that have become embedded in our cultural memory of that time.

As Cold War ideologies and the atomic age came into full swing it was vital for media, especially the 'ultra-modern' television, to uphold the ideals of the "American Dream". Sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* mythologized the perfect suburban family, forming and mediating conceptions of what life should be like, and in turn, how it is remembered today. Lynn Spigel affirms, "...The vision of family values promoted in contemporary political life owes much to a "collective nostalgia" not for real families but rather a white, middle-class image of suburban families that comes to us largely through reruns of 1950's sitcoms" (5).

Douglas Sirk is seen by many critics as the director who epitomized the 1950's in film, celebrating the world of white, protestant, middle class housewives and 'organization men' (Spengler, 118).¹⁷ While Sirk's melodramas were later heralded as ironic critiques of postwar America, many people see this idealized image of American life as an authentic

glimpse into the past, which works to form imagined memories, regardless of whether we were alive to experience the 1950's first-hand.

Sirk's films, particularly their production design, come to the forefront in my documentary interviews. Mike, for example, mentions that his ideal home would be "...very 1950's housewife...something from a Douglas Sirk film". Upon further discussion he reveals that the sets of the film *Far From Heaven* (2002)—an homage to Sirk, set in 1957—are actually what he feels the most drawn to.¹⁸ There is a double mediation at play here. Mike's memory of the 1950's is based not simply on representations from that time, but representations from today that are built from the already idealized representations of the 1950s. Mike also mentions *Mad Men* as a key influence in his fascination with 1950's style, simply because it is "...so popular, and so incredibly well styled." While this contemporary television series has managed to expose the many imperfections of the mid-century era, like sexism, racism and adultery, its meticulous production design prompts the viewer to believe that every room during that time was filled with Eames lounge chairs, Howard Miller starburst clocks and Scandinavian teak credenzas. Lastly, Shauntelle references *Down With Love* (2003), a comedic parody of the 1960's Doris Day and Rock Hudson films, as another example that takes the mid-century style to an idealized level. "We look at the past through filters and movies do that for us," she says. The streamlined New York penthouse that we see in *Down With Love*, "...never happened, but it's fun to think it could happen".

Shauntelle's reflection takes us back to Huyssen's assertions about memory and amnesia in contemporary culture. He states, "The amnesia reproach is invariably couched

in a critique of the media, while it is precisely these media—from print and television to CD-ROMs and the Internet—that make ever more memory available to us day by day” (27). The interviewees’ lives are meditated by representations of the postwar era, both from that time and from the present day, and while they acknowledge that these representations are largely inauthentic, they still act to construct their memories, what Huyssen calls ‘imagined memories’. Thus, the nostalgia that comes from these imagined memories fails to provide access to real history, but still triggers a powerful yearning for that time. As Boym remarks, “...the danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with the imaginary one” (xvi).

NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST QUALITY

All the individuals I interviewed for my documentary touched on quality as one of the main reasons why they were attracted to mid-century objects. “The whole point of buying something Pyrex is that you have it forever, like until you destroy it...” says Laura, “its not going to fall apart like newer stuff is...” While this may or may not be true, it seems that most interviewees draw from myths that have been placed upon the past in general. We all know the saying, ‘They don’t make them like they used to,’ but the 1950’s in particular, offered little in terms of craftsmanship. Hine argues that because of the boom in consumption in the postwar period, “The chief challenge for home builders, car manufacturers, furniture and appliance manufacturers and all the other segments of the consumer economy was to get the product out as quickly as possible and at an affordable price” (18). The result was a decline in quality. “Service, not durability, was paramount...you did not have to worry about what you would pass on to your children,

because they would have things unimaginably better than yours" (Hine, 60). It is more a question of authenticity that arises here; the *aura* of the object from the past is what actually gives us the impression that it is a higher quality item.

In his celebrated critique of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin sheds some light on why objects from the past seem so uniquely permanent, claiming that is it the presence of the original that makes something authentic, or auratic (222). The authority and historical testimony of the object is lost when it has been reproduced, thereby depleting its aura. For instance, a handmade ceramic vase from the past could make its owner feel a sense of permanency and comfort knowing that there is not another one like it; this is the aura at work. But confusion arises, especially if we consider the mid-century period. As the golden age of conspicuous consumption and one of 'history's great shopping sprees' the domestic objects that were mass-produced in this era are no more auratic than the objects we find today; the difference is that we associate the past in general with the pastoral, the handmade, the pre-industrial, which is simply another cultural myth. Writing about Benjamin, Jameson confirms, "...the objects of aura stand perhaps as the setting of a kind of Utopia, a Utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plenitude of existence in the world of things, if only for the briefest instant" (77). Thus, the mid-century period's auratic value can be categorized in the same manner as *all* objects from the past, regardless of their historical origins and mythologies. It is merely the 'pastness' that holds the aura more than the real, historical circumstances under which an object came to be. The nostalgic longing that we feel for a time when things were more authentic, of better quality is "...a longing for a home...that has never existed" (Boym, xiii).

NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST DOMESTICITY

A second major theme that emerged from my interviews was a longing for the domestic. Laura states, "I guess it's like creating the grandma's kitchen aesthetic... or the comfort of that space; like growing up surrounded by old post-World War Two era things that remind us of grilled cheese sandwiches and Campbell's soup. It's comfortable." Of all the myths that the post-war era is predicated on, the domestic is surely the most powerful, but also the most distorted. A well-kept bungalow in the suburbs with a white picket fence and two children comes to mind for most people. The wife, in her perfectly coordinated kitchen, works tirelessly to keep the home a flourishing haven of comfort and security. "...The husband's back, the women are not by themselves, and they have this chance now to create this beautiful home, and their day is all about getting ready for the husband to come home. And it just seems kind of sweet and kind of a lovely simple way of life," says Mike wistfully; unaware, or perhaps choosing to ignore the misogynistic implications of this common myth, instead, favoring of the utopic comfort of nostalgia. At this point, the melancholic symptoms of nostalgic longing rise to the surface for my interviewees.

As we have seen from Žižek's reading of Lacan, the desire that we project upon objects is only a temporary solution to the underlying lack that is felt in the human condition. No matter how securely we grasp hold of the object of our desire (*l'objet petit a*), its magic is destined to fall away to reveal its insatiable emptiness. For example, Žižek describes the feeling of moving away from a city. On top of the sadness that we feel for leaving our home, there is another sadness over the knowledge that one day we will forget the place that now means so much to us (68). "In short, what makes me sad is the

awareness that I will lose my desire for (what is now) my home" (Ibid). While on a smaller scale, the objects that my interviewees surround themselves with work in much the same manner. As much as we revel in the nostalgic desire that objects from the past hold, we ultimately know that a white and turquoise salt shaker from 1962 cannot bring us back to a time that was—or we believe to have been—more comfortable, familial, "better"; and so our desire is tarnished by an intrinsic melancholy.

But why is there such a profound melancholy for the domestic? Indeed the myths of the mid-century period (regardless of their authenticity) point to domestic ideals, but what makes them so appealing today has just as much to do with today's contemporary condition. The family unit, gender roles and living spaces have become increasingly fragmented over the past few decades, pushing us further and further from the myth of postwar idealism, initiating a new negotiation of spatial existence. Consider a working, single mother for example, who has no time to cook in her kitchen, instead opting for simple, fast pre-made items. She feels a sense of alienation from the domestic ideals that she grew up with, or has seen through media representations, so decides to fill her kitchen with domestic objects from the 1960s: bright Pyrex dishware, etched glasses and a Formica table. These objects work to reconstruct the myths of the time, anchoring her with a sense of comfort and stability, regardless of whether or not she has the time or patience to use them. Mike touches on this same tendency in his interview, "...because I live in a city and because I'm a young professional, I just feel the pressure to constantly be on the go and work, work, work, and so what I've tried to do, I think, is surround myself with objects that kind of bring me back to that era because maybe it brings me a bit of that feeling." This

need to 'anchor' ourselves in contemporary society comes back to Nora and Huyssen, and as I will argue in the following section, is part of a larger cultural reaction to the fragmentation of space and more importantly, the acceleration of time in the digital era.

NOSTALGIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: LONGING FOR A TEMPORAL ANCHOR

As Nora has established, modern memory is defined by an underlying dislocation and sense of loss. Since the turn of postmodernism, grand narratives have fallen away, erasing the past from the present, pushing us further away from human consciousness. New memory forms are "...performed rather than lived, mediated rather than unmediated" (Schwarz, 53). In this difficult new cultural environment we cling to media representations and technological mediations of memory to compensate for our sense of lack. "...Cultural memory practices...express a society's need for temporal anchoring when, in the wake of the information revolution and an ever increasing time-space compression, the relationship between past, present, and future is being transformed beyond recognition" (Huyssen, 37). The temporal acceleration that has come with the digital revolution has triggered a desire to look to the past. Memories evoke a slower time, a time where things were stable and tangible; they provide anchoring in a fragmented world. Similarly, nostalgia, as an affective symptom of memory, intensifies our look back. Boym states, "Time in cyberspace is conceived in terms of speed: speed of access and speed of technological innovation. There is simply no time for temporal experiments of remembering loss and reflecting on memory" (347). It is therefore up to us to lament this lack of slowness, to negotiate our longing and melancholy, especially in relation to the material world.

Everyday objects as *lieux de memoire*, allow us to engage in acts of remembering on a

material level, offering a tangible anchor in a highly intangible, digital world. One of my interviewees—Chris—addresses the anchoring feeling of ‘slowness’ that he gleans from postwar objects: “Maybe it’s just our way of applying a little bit of brakes to it. Slowing down, breathe the fresh air sort of idea. Because you can keep going—our society allows you to go a thousand miles an hour, no rest at all...” Perhaps for some, even the simple act of gazing upon or using a plate from the 1950’s could conjure enough mythological signification to evoke a sense of slowing down. Indeed, the conversations about myths of quality and domesticity and the mid-century I had with my interviewees culminate under a larger myth of temporality. Representations and imagined memories have led to the nostalgic impression that times were slower then, so things were made with more care; families had more time to cook and clean and build a happy home. Thus we use objects from the past today, especially from the postwar period, to ease our anxiety, to convince ourselves that the aura of an object is enough to decelerate our busy lives.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In terms of the mid-century period, it is only reasonable to forecast a slow decline in public interest, moving forward or backward, to another stylistic period, with its own deeply embedded mythologies. All design trends enjoy several years of popularity, only to become oversaturated and ultimately worn-out. Perhaps the nostalgic comfort of the mid-century’s clean lines, post-war optimism, progress and domesticity was only necessary to soften the jarring shift into the digital revolution. When we finally get our bearings in this new temporal reality, maybe we will be ready to embrace objects from yet another time.

But is it possible to break free from the habit of revivalism altogether? "...[T]he past is selling better than the future." Huyssen writes, "But for how long, one wonders" (30). He considers the potential for a new phase in cultural consciousness, after the memory boom has run its course, but what that could entail is mere speculation. Similarly, as nostalgia situates us in a place of sweet recollection and bitter melancholy, it is difficult to acknowledge the future as a realm worthy of extended meditation. "One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that no one strives to realize in the future" (Boym, 351). Thus, to hold an object from the past is to uncover real and imagined memories, to feel a powerful historical weight—an aura, but it is also to be held captive by promises of an unattainable homecoming, shrouding the potential that the future holds.

⁹ See Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects* (1996), specifically, "Marginal Objects: Antiques" and "A Marginal System: Collecting" where he tends to pathologize lovers of objects as "boarders," drawing from Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

¹⁰ For example, Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton: *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981), Sherry Turkle: *Evocative Objects* (2007), Susan Pearce *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994), Marius Kwant et al: *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (1999), Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey: *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2001)

¹¹ Such stores include: Ethel, Machine Age Modern, GUFF, Zig Zag, Empire, Chief Salvage, Mrs. Hutzenga, Hawk Eye, Ping Pong, Phil's 20th Century Design. Popular design websites like *Design Sponge* and *Apartment Therapy* also feature mid-century interior design trends above all other periods.

¹² The most influential for me were: Astra Taylor's *Zizek!* (2005) and *An Examined Life* (2008); Werner Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007); Errol Morris' *Fast Cheap & Out of Control* (1997), *Mr. Death* (1999) and *The Fog of War* (2003); and Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* (2007) and *Objectified* (2009)

¹³ Specific tracks are from the album *In A Safe Place* (2004)

¹⁴ In fact, my initial intention for this project was to perform a strictly phenomenological analysis of objects from the past. This proved to be unfeasible because of the difficulty that my interviewees faced with separating the perceptive experience from the socially and emotionally constructed experience.

¹⁵ "An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—"

Notes

¹ *Matter and Memory* (1896)

² *The Art of Memory* (1966)

³ *On Collective Memory* (1941)

⁴ *How Societies Remember* (1989), most notably the chapter "Bodily Practices"

⁵ Here, Huyssen attributes the term "imagined memories" to Appadurai's discussion of "imagined nostalgia" in *Modernity at Large*, 77.

⁶ Boym defines two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia generally works on a national level and is often at the core of national and religious revivals, likening itself more to truth and tradition than nostalgic yearning (xviii). Conversely, reflective nostalgia calls truth into doubt, dwelling heavily on individual and cultural human longing, deviating from a single plot to inhabit many places at once (Ibid). Because of my study's focus on personal, small-scale experience, I will overlook restorative in favor of reflective.

⁷ Literally translated as "the object small a" this is a particularly fluid concept that can be reductively defined as the object of one's desire. Slavoj Žižek's commentary on Lacan's work gives a clearer and more detailed definition of this difficult term.

⁸ See Daniel Miller: *Home Possessions: Material Cultures Behind Closed Doors* (2001), *The Comfort of Things* (2008) *Stuff* (2010), Arjun Appadurai: "Consumption, Duration and History" in *Modernity at Large* (1996), Grant McCracken: *Culture and Consumption* (1988), Russell Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (1995)

⁹ See Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects* (1996), specifically, "Marginal Objects: Antiques" and "A Marginal System: Collecting" where he tends to pathologize lovers of objects as "hoarders," drawing from Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

¹⁰ For example, Csykszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton: *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981), Sherry Turkle: *Evocative Objects* (2007), Susan Pearce *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994), Marius Kwint et al: *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (1999), Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey: *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2001)

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¹⁵ "An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—

this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself" (Swann's Way, 43).

¹⁶ This conversation was cut from the video in the editing process, but it is important to consider in relation to the theme of sensorial appreciation

¹⁷ Sirk's most notable films include *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *Imitation of Life* (1959)

¹⁸ See Christine Spengler's chapter in *Screening Nostalgia* (2009): "Far From Heaven: Creative Agency, Social History and the Expressive potential of Costume" for a detailed analysis of the nostalgic power of this film.

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