

Introduction to Folklore II: Folk Genres and Analysis

2010-03-16 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Objects of Memory"

FOLK AND FINA 113

WHAT DID *YOU* THINK?

HER POINT

- ✘ Certain actions elicit memories of previous performances and experiences of those actions, connecting the distance in time and space
 - + She gives the example of *kaddish* (the ritual prayer of mourning for a departed parent)
- ✘ An object can operate in the same way
- ✘ Folklorists have paid attention to objects in terms of their production, but less so in terms of how they are saved, collected, and arranged in ways found meaningful to their owner

“MATERIAL CULTURE AS LIFE REVIEW”

- ✘ Far from exclusively, but particularly and intensively among the elderly, objects serve as means of organising one’s life experiences
 - + They become opportunities for narrative
 - + They become tangible connections with the / a / their past
 - ✘ (She doesn’t discuss sympathetic magic, but it works here)
- ✘ She suggests a taxonomy of these objects

MATERIAL COMPANION

- ✘ An object which has aged along with its owner
- ✘ Typically not tied to one specific episode but with an extended period of time
- ✘ Valued for its continuity
 - + Such objects are not “saved”; they are allowed to grow old and, however humble, they accumulate meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life.
- ✘ Often a functional object, which provides denotative / connotative associations with that person’s occupation
- ✘ Her example: wooden cooking spoon

SOUVENIRS AND MEMENTOS

- × *A little unclear on the distinction, but I have always interpreted the difference as...*
- × Souvenir: reminder of an ephemeral experience
- × Memento: reminder of an absent person
- × The value of the object is connotative, providing a connection between the ephemeral or the absent and the present
 - + Think of items on mantle-pieces, dressing tables, in scrapbooks, etc
- × Typically saved from moment of experience with for the express purpose of serving as object of memory

MEMORY OBJECT

- × *Why she didn't use a different term considering her calling everything "objects of memory" I do not know, but...*
- × A constructed object that gives memory a material form
- × Life paintings, embroidery, memoir
- × BKG's own father did this upon his retirement
 - + <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/ce/kirshenblatt/kirshenblatt-main.htm>
- × They tend to be less autobiography as ethnography
 - + They reflect life witnessed by the artist, not necessarily with artist as protagonist

COLLECTABLES

- ✘ The act of collecting is future-oriented, including as it does the possibility of further collecting
- ✘ The criteria for what constitutes collectability is at the discretion of the collector
- ✘ Have a life prior to entering into the world of the collector
- ✘ Are partially, if not wholly, removed from their original context to create new meaning

ENSEMBLES

- ✘ The assembly of objects (whether of similar kind or not) into some form of unified whole
- ✘ Meaning in the individual objects, in their juxtaposition with other objects, and in their inclusion into a larger piece
 - + Individual objects may be meaningful but not “displayable” – scraps of fabric, etc.
- ✘ Quintessential example: the memory quilt

MINIATURE

- ✘ Representational object, substitution for uncollectible
 - + “Economy of scale”
- ✘ Exercise of control not (often) attainable in real world
- ✘ Hermetic, idealised
 - + Often removed in time, evocative of an eclipsed past
- ✘ Application of skill in aid of memory, art, and leisure design where once was (or might have been) for work

CONCLUSIONS

- ✘ Objects of memory, in whatever form they take, are “conversation pieces”
- ✘ They allow for not only personal reminders but for the communication of those memories to third parties
- ✘ They personalise a space by materialising the life experiences of that person through objects, that remain even in the person’s absence

EXTENDED EXAMPLE: BRODIE'S HOSPICE ROOM

- ✘ Actually as good example, and not just a blatant attempt to have you look up an old article of his.
- ✘ “The very environment militates against denial”: Negotiating Place Through Material Culture.
 - + *Ethnologies* 27.2 (2005): 189-217

THE NINTH QUESTION OF THE WEEK

- ✘ Describe and provide context for an object in your room that functions as an “object of memory” (in BKG’s sense).

GO AWAY FROM THIS PLACE

- ✘ Read “Documenting Folklore” by Wilson, from the *Introduction*