

# **University of Alberta**

Bringing the Collection to Life: A Study in Object Relations

by

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## Abstract

### Bringing the Collection to Life: A Study in Object Relations

This dissertation investigates how collectibles are made meaningful within collecting communities in order to better understand the intricate processes by which lead soldiers, toy trains, dolls, Dinkie cars, Star Wars figurines, and teddy bears come to be so enchanting for their collectors.

An ethnography of toy collecting, including interviews with toy collectors, and observations at toy fairs and gatherings, this project contributes to debates on the use and role of material goods in practices of meaning making and social reproduction. In contrast to theories of material culture, this project aligns itself with consumer theories of the cultural constitution of objects. Emphasizing that object-centered analyses provide little insight on the value of collectibles, it advocates, instead, the centrality of perception and imaginative practice in the hold collectibles come to have over collectors. Drawing from consumer culturalists' work on processes of identification; Bourdieu's theory of consumption; Foucault on the archive; as well as Marxist inspired theories of the fetish, this project engages with nostalgic practice, the collectible market, judgments of authenticity, practices of ordering, as well as the complicated rules governing collecting.

Working from collectors' own stories, debates, contradictions, discussions and imaginative engagements this study uncovers that the mutability of the meanings assigned to collectibles is at the heart of collectors' enchantment with their collectibles, and a central factor in how collecting becomes an eminently political activity. Collectors are not free to construct meanings for their collectibles at will but subject to community constraints, markets and battles of legitimacy. The various mystifications and social maneuverings present in their collecting practices imply that an object's value is the outcome of a careful mediation of both personal and wider cultural meanings. Mobilized to particular ends however tenuously held their meanings may be, material goods become powerful components to the wider cultural, social and economic fields in which they circulate.

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## Bringing the Collection to Life: A Study in Object Relations

Bill Chapman is an avid collector of Hornby clockwork model trains, an individual recognized within his collecting community as an expert. He has published various well-known reference books on Hornby's output and is known for his meticulous cataloguing of each and every train in his considerable collection. In talking with Bill I was immediately struck by the extent to which his catalogue, a compendium of hundreds of pages of details and minute variations in each and every Hornby train car, figured into his description of his collecting activities. For Bill it was all about his catalogue: the collectible object seemed secondary. When asked which would hurt him most, the destruction of his train collection or his catalogue in a fire Bill replied without hesitation: "the catalogue, yes definitely, no question, because I can start again if I've got the list" (interview with author, December 2006).

To continue with the central activity of his collecting, Bill, in many ways, did not need to maintain a collection. He could obtain trains, perform his detailed examinations, catalogue his findings and pass them along, their fleeting presence fixed in his catalogue. Possessing objects, it would seem, was not essential to Bill's activities. Yet, paradoxically, Bill had amassed one of the most significant collections of Hornby in Britain. His collection was large enough to fill two homes, and finding more space for new acquisitions was a constant pressure. Bill cheekily noted that his philosophy of collecting amounts to "buy(ing) as many different items as we possibly can without the bank manager calling" (interview

with author, December 2006). For Bill it was not enough just to document his collectibles, he had to possess them and, what is more, hold on to them long after they were logged into his catalogue.

I was constantly surprised at how deeply immersed collectors were in the history of their particular collectibles, the minute details and historical facts surrounding their consumption and production, and the general social history of the era from which they originated. Their level of knowledge was impressive. Collectors spoke at great lengths about the actual circumstances surrounding their toy collectibles, often more than about the collectibles themselves. Likewise the collectors displayed a notable ability to work within, manipulate and speculate about the collecting market and communities in which they found themselves immersed. Playing the collectibles market, and developing key relations within the collecting community was an activity occupying a great deal of their time. Manipulating, positioning and strategy were every bit as much as part of collecting as moments spent appreciating the collectible object itself.

From these conversations numerous nagging questions began to emerge: How did collectibles come to be cherished by collectors? What exactly was the role of the collectible in their activities? How did collectors mobilize material goods in cultural, social and political ways? The collectible seemed almost secondary in the collectors' collecting activity next to their passion for history, and the market. I began to wonder exactly what collectors were collecting. On the surface it appeared to be the object, and collecting is undoubtedly an activity characterized by an especially intense bond to material goods, yet a collector such

as Bill's incessant need to categorize, order and solve a wider historical puzzle dominated his activities. It was in transacting his collectibles to particular ends that they became valuable to Bill. Whether using them to illuminate a historical time era, or to assert his erudition and expertise as a collector it was not the collectible itself but what Bill did with his collectibles that imbued them with value for him. Collectors are part of a culture defined by a dedication to their collectibles yet it is how they mobilize their collectibles, in a drive for order, repetition and detail, and their compulsion to use collectibles to tell stories and to make wider historical and value judgments that ultimately sets them aside as collectors.

This project endeavours to examine, in close detail, via an ethnography of toy collecting, how it is that collectors become enamoured and enchanted by their collectibles. What do the intricacies of these relationships tell us about our use of material goods in fostering communities, reputations and markets and how objects subsequently become meaningful to us? Focusing on the development, maintenance and negotiation of particularly intense attachments to an assortment of toy collectibles, I demonstrate how collectors, in processes of social reproduction, mobilize material goods. Material goods are implicit to and must be understood in terms of the wider socio-cultural processes that ultimately imbue them with value. As such this project addresses the concern that "the cultural constitution and understanding of objects remains a neglected area" (Meskell 2005: 4).

We learn nothing about collecting by looking at the collection alone. We learn by exploring the social dynamics between collectors, the negotiations taking place in the collectibles market and by examining how collectibles are mobilized to political, economic and cultural ends. This assertion evokes a longstanding tension in social and cultural theory over the role of material goods in sociality. Object centered analyses and arguments for the agency of objects have gained a strong foothold as of late in contemporary material culture studies. They argue that we need to theorize the active role that objects play, underlining their ability to influence and affect social situations. Debates over how best to account for the material world in theories of sociality pervade the literature. My project directly confronts these appeals to effective intentionality, secondary agency and proposals for object centered analyses by illustrating how collecting is about far more than the accumulation and assembly of objects. It is instead about negotiations with fellow collectors, playing the market, immersing oneself in history and arguing for authenticity. It is also, importantly, as this project will emphasize, about an imaginative engagement with the material world in which collectibles are not powerful on their own accord but *attributed* a power, and related to at times by collectors *as if* they were animate. An object centered analysis may prove informative on the material qualities of collectibles, their composition, physical condition and weight, but it proves completely insufficient in explaining the value collectibles come to hold for collectors and the intensity of the relationship collectors have with their collectibles. Object centered analyses

fail to grasp the integrity of material goods to social and cultural worlds nor the role of our perception in how this material world comes to have a hold on us.

A glimpse into the world of toy collecting offers not only great insight into the nuances of how we become attached to and relate to objects, but speaks to larger socio-cultural processes such as the advancement of consumer culture. Ours is a world saturated with commodities, organized according to consumer culture imperatives and as the consumer culture literature points out, consumer goods are increasingly integral to the establishment of our identities and the creation of social meaning (Giddens 1991; Lash and Urry 1996; McCracken 1996; Miller 1987). Consumer commodities have permeated our lives and have come to occupy a prominent place in our everyday existence. To study toy collecting is to study a highly complex and engaged form of consumption practice. Toy collectors are instructive because of the depth of their engagement with material goods. Collectors devote inordinate amounts of their time and energy to a particular group of items, spending years, decades even, assembling and reassembling them into collections. Collectors come to be associated with their collectibles, building an entire social history and personal reputation on the basis of their collecting activities. The pull a particular set of collectibles has over them is strong because they have mobilized these collectibles to assert their expertise, to navigate social networks and to make wider value statements.

Toy collectors are consumers extraordinaire, expert marketers and connoisseurs of the commodity. Their dedication to the detail and the minutiae of history surrounding a figurine, train or a doll is astounding. Toy collectors, in

particular, consume the entire history and network of significance surrounding the collectible. From tiny material clues, collectors reconstruct and imagine the circumstance of a toy collectible's production: how it was made, who made it and why they made it as they did. Likewise collectors reconstruct the collectible's history of consumption, tracing the multiple hands the collectible has passed through and the social worlds these individuals inhabited. In collecting toys collectors consume the accumulation of meaning tied to the collectible as it has circulated through various social worlds. These exercises in reconstructing the sedimentations of meaning in the collectible and its extension through multiple social worlds and phases of commodification are what define collecting as an activity. The continuous working and reworking of object meanings collecting entails, and the insertion of these reconstructions into the wider series of the collection means collecting is unparalleled in terms of its sustained and complex engagement with the material world.

In attending large collectors' fairs, visiting auction viewings, and speaking to toy collectors in their homes, I was able to explore the complex historical statements collectors were able to make with their collectibles; the extent to which they employed collectibles to construct particular identities within the wider collecting community; as well as the complicated rules governing collecting practice. The collectors' engagement with their collectibles spoke to much wider themes of identification, community, economic gain and nostalgia, and it was within these domains that collectibles were culturally constructed as valuable objects. In this way, an exploration of toy collecting is valuable not only for those

interested in collecting, but also for anyone fascinated by the process in which objects come to have a hold over us. My analysis may detail the politics of auction viewings, debates over the restoration of toy collectibles and authenticity but it speaks more generally to the use, role and situation of material goods within the politics of community and practices of meaning making. The inferences I draw and my contribution to the debates present in the literatures can inform any study into the character of our engagement with material goods. As a phenomenon collecting is the negotiation of a constellation of activities and meanings involving collectors, collectibles, communities and complex economies through the deployment of the collectible object. As such studying collecting provides cues as to how material goods are threaded through and complicit in the political and social processes that extend beyond them. As Lynn Meskell argues, “studies of materiality cannot simply focus upon the characteristics of objects but must engage in the dialectic of people and things” (Meskell in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 249).

### **In the Field**

In his well known essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” Clifford Geertz praises ethnographies’ ability to access “pattern(s) of life” asserting that “it is through the flow of behaviour – or, more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation” (1973: 17). Likewise Foucault, whether studying prison systems or medical clinics, instructed that “the historian must excavate an archive to reveal not merely what is in it, but the very conditions that have made that archive possible” (Bate 2007). Both Geertz and Foucault

encourage an assessment not of contents but of the ways of knowing and doing that are at the heart of the formation of the social world around us. Taking a cue from their focus on social praxis, and the doing of culture over its content, I advocate approaching collecting as an activity. All too often when we think of collecting we think of the collection: a cabinet full of static dusty and silent items, rather than acknowledging collecting as something done and a continuously negotiated relationship with the material world. Collecting is not just about gathering items into groupings but is an expansive constellation of activities around bargaining, social contacts, negotiations, nostalgia, and debates over authenticity.

My ethnography of toy collecting comprised two main components: interviews with thirty collectors across different toy collectibles ranging from teddy bears to toy trains, and participant observation at various sites of collecting such as auctions, toy fairs and collector gatherings. I also paid close attention to collecting magazines and websites as spaces of collecting in and of themselves. Of all the multitudes of collecting practice I chose to examine toy collecting. Within a much larger field of toy collecting I spoke to six distinct groupings of collectors, based largely on my ability to access a proper sample. These groups were: collectors of teddy bears, Hornby clockwork model trains, William Britain's lead soldiers, dolls, Matchstick or Corgi toy cars, and Star Wars toy figurines. Part of the attraction of toy collectibles stems from the fact that toys are objects which are typically animated. Toys often comprise miniature worlds, and are played with in ways that involve bringing them to life, speaking for them,

moving them and engaging them in imaginative scenarios. As Susan Stewart reflects,

the toy is the physical embodiment of the fiction: it is a device for fantasy...the toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not. To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts...to toy is "to dally with a caress, to compose a fantastic tale, to play a trick or satisfy a whim, to manipulate, and to take fright at," according to the OED (1994: 56)

In conceptualizing this study animation, fetishization and a play of meaning figured heavily into my understanding of how toy collectibles come to have a hold over collectors. Animation as it emerged in my ethnography, however, was broadened beyond simple ideas of play and came to involve the immersion of collectibles in historical and market settings. This emergence of new means by which collectibles were animated by collectors is indicative of the shift from toy to toy collectible, and from child to collector that characterizes collecting as an activity. As toys are designated collectible they come to circulate in new social contexts of complex collecting communities, and economies far removed from their original location. Relations between collector and collectible in this process become politically amplified, and defined in concert with issues of social capital, financial might and expertise.

Ethnography helped identify the complex social transactions negotiated with and around toy collectibles and how it was exactly that these transactions imbued collectibles with value. I was afforded access to a wide range of collectors, collectibles, and spaces of collecting as they were enacted. My approach was two-prong. I talked with collectors about their collections and

collection activities in loosely structured interviews allowing them to highlight what they thought were the key facets of their collection. I also observed collectors interacting in wider communities, the manner in which markets functioned within these communities, as well as the myriad activities comprising collecting. This wider context is what Foucault, in conceptualizing his archive, might refer to as “the whole system or apparatus that enables such artifacts to exist...One must dig to make sense of the systems behind what one sees” (Bate 2007). Indeed layering collectors’ voices, stories and comments over what I observed was central in reiterating the extent to which collectors’ accounts could not be taken at face value. The discrepancy between what was said and what often happened provided invaluable insight into the social and political maneuverings in which collectible objects were mobilized.

I accessed collecting communities in two main ways. The first was by approaching organized groups on the Internet, either posting a call for interview participants, or making contact with a central figure in the community requesting he/she contact members of the community on my behalf. The second was to approach collectors directly at toy fairs. This led to a particular bias in my sampling toward collectors more actively organized into collecting communities, that is, those at the more expert, serious end of the spectrum in the former sampling method, and toward dealer/collectors in the latter. The contrast between these two groups proved valuable and will be discussed further in later chapters.

The interviews moved from more general ‘tell me about your collection’ prompts, to a more specific investigation into the particular hold collectibles had

over collectors and the depth of engagement the collector had with their hobby. That the collectors detailed not only their attachment to their collectibles, but the complexity of rules and debates governing the parameters of a collection provided some insight. Collectors sketched out a world wherein collectibles are mobilized in the production and legitimization of social relations and struggles take place over the symbolic meanings of particular collectibles. Among other themes, collectors highlighted the stigma attached to collecting for investment, the role of reputation and the constantly shifting background upon which the authenticity of collectibles is established. Their collecting worlds were far more social than I had anticipated, filled with gossip, and rumour, and governed by an astoundingly complex set of rules.

The worlds of toy collecting I was privy to are fields, “social arena(s) within which struggles or maneuvers take place over specific resources [in this case collectibles] or stakes and access to them” as Richard Jenkins paraphrasing Bourdieu explains (1992: 84). It is within this network of actors that collectors, collectibles and collecting spaces come together and in which cultural, material and political struggles take place. The snapshots that follow of the toy collectible, the sites and spaces of collecting as well as the toy collector are thus intended as a general overview of this field of shifting components informing my study of collecting.

### **In a Snapshot – The Toy Collectible**

The collectors I studied collected either Hornby clockwork model Trains, William Britain’s lead cast Toy Soldiers, Matchstick or Corgi cars, Teddy Bears, Dolls, or

Star Wars action man figurines. This list of toys alone demonstrates the extent to which collectors largely organized their collections faithful to branding. The level of specialization and lines along which collections were developed varied greatly among collectors. Alongside the actual toy collectible collectors would also collect a host of accessories such as trees and water-towers for the Hornby group, clothing for the doll and teddy groups, as well as any promotional material, signage or original packaging. Collectors also amassed libraries of books related to their collecting area of preference. Although the hierarchies governing collecting communities are extensive and complicated, there were general hierarchies of value to which the vast majority of collectors subscribed. One such hierarchy was the value of vintage. Old antique collectibles are generally of higher esteem and value than newer, plastic and artist made toy collectibles. For Teddy Bear collectors this means German-made Steiff bears are more desirable than collector club bears, and for Hornby collectors that metal locos, as collectors refer to them, are more desirable than plastic ones. Another hierarchy applies to the degree of provenance evident in any toy collectible. In this case, photos of the original owners posing with their teddy, original papers of purchase and letters mentioning the toys are held in high esteem.

Toy collectibles were all originally produced as consumer items to be played with by what would have mainly been middle class and upper middle class children of the era in question. Although they vary greatly in physical composition, and durability, from heavy metal Hornby Locos to plush teddies to tiny repetitions of regiments of lead soldiers, all were designed and marketed with

play in mind. Most were mass-produced in factories, a few crafted by hand. I was consistently surprised to see collectors stuffing bears into backpacks and tinkering about with toy trains despite the financial and cultural value assigned to them. Along with a social and historical engagement toy collectors demonstrated a tacit material engagement with their collectibles. The weight of a toy collectible, its fragility, as well as its physical condition did impact, to some extent, how it was collected. We have to remember how:

Things, both natural and man-made, are appropriated into human culture in such a way that they re-present the social relations of a culture, standing in for other human beings, carrying values, ideas and emotions...But unlike images, ideas, talk and texts, things are not just representations, but also have a physical presence in the world which has material consequences..." (Dant 2000: 1)

One collector, for instance, with a loft full of lead toy soldiers expressed his concern that the ceiling would hold. Another spoke of the importance of the material proximity of heavy metal Hornby trains to their original counterparts in comparison to what he saw as undesirable “plastic nonsense” toy trains (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). Grasping this interplay of the material, culture and economic is crucial when exploring the value collectibles come to have for collectors.

### **In a Snapshot -- The Sites and Spaces of Collecting**

Collecting spaces are diverse and range across the public private divide, from auction houses to collectors fairs to private homes. The public sites of collecting are spaces of social networking, where collectors get together to discuss, to view collectibles and to get a feel for the competition. Public sites are also market sites: sites of exchange and acquisition. Toy Auctions and fairs are the most typical

sites of exchange, although eBay and the Internet can be included here as well. Toy fairs attract much larger groups and are far more informal. Held at town halls, and conference centres they take place on the weekend and draw large crowds of collectors. They are noisy affairs, and the excitement in the air is palpable. They are spaces where collectors check out their fellow collectors as much as the collectibles on offer. Likewise for auctions. Much higher end affairs, or perceived to be so, auctions are steeped in the competition and politics that define many collecting “fraternities” (John, interview with author, September 2007). At auction viewings collectors get a first hand glance at the collectibles up on offer and gather along with other members of the community. It is a moment of coming together as much as a moment of strategy and decision-making. The collectors I worked with would spend hours at a time making their way through auction viewing rooms, table by table, box by box, often taking notes and inspecting with an expert eye what was up for auction. As one collector notes, “you know it’s not just about the day and what you did or didn’t buy, it’s also about reference material you know, about what prices items made” (John, interview with author, September 2007).

The last site, the private home of the collector varies greatly among collectors although as a general rule the collection is normally kept in a designated space in the home, a workshop or playroom of sorts. Access to these private spaces allows a glimpse of the many ways in which collectors choose to display their collectibles, ranging from the very animated and play based train set-ups, or miniature worlds where trains are run around a track complete with

outbuildings, storage depots, trees and cars; to the more museum like glass display cases where collectibles are presented according to groupings decided by the collector; to rooms filled with boxes that constantly seem to defy order and challenge even the most fastidious collectors' organizational skills. The way collections are assembled and managed within these spaces is of interest because it speaks to the classifications and hierarchies collectors believe define their collections. Collectors' decisions about how to order collectibles in to space: how and where things are juxtaposed, and what is left in storage and on display, are all a way of making sense. These spaces are where the values and meanings of collectibles are continually negotiated, presented and represented.

Far from a mere backdrop against which the relation between collectors and collectibles is enacted, spaces of collecting shape the attachments between collectors and collectibles in specific ways. "The collection is not constructed by its elements: rather, it comes to exist by means of its principle of organization" (Stewart 1994: 155). To return to Foucault's theory of the archive, the act of ordering material goods is ultimately an argument. A defining feature of collections is that they are arranged and displayed in space according to very detailed criteria. As Mike Featherstone working with Foucault's ideas on the archive explains: "each classification system opens up new avenues in to the material, yet it also closes off others" (2006: 593). Applying Foucault's concept of the archive to the toy collections I viewed, means taking the tiny details and choices of ordering made within a collection, as well as the boundary work done around these spaces, as a moment of production. This is the archive "as an active

aspiration, a tool for reworking desires and memories, part of a project for sustaining cultural identities” (Featherstone 2006: 594).

### **In a Snapshot – The Toy Collector**

Across my sample the typical collector of Hornby toy trains, William Britain’s toy soldiers, and toy cars was a fifty or sixty year old retired male. Only the Star Wars figurine collectors tended to be slightly younger in age, in their thirties and forties. The female collectors I spoke with all collected dolls and teddies, and this significant gender division surfaces throughout my findings. The collectibles chosen by collectors are largely a continuation of, and direct reflection of wider cultural beliefs about ‘suitable’ toys for girls and boys. The importance of this gendering will be addressed throughout the thesis. Most of these collectors had dabbled in collecting throughout their lives but were, in retirement, experiencing a renewed involvement in their collecting activities. Against the label of “anorak” (a British term for eccentric) collectors present themselves as very friendly and are seemingly well adjusted. They had families, were working regular jobs and/or retired and were simply enamored with their hobby of collecting, and the collectibles themselves. The collectors I spoke with all collected to varying degrees of seriousness. Some had built complete reputations and identities recognized across collecting communities and were more invested in the hobby than others who, although passionate, were less engaged in the social networks and did not self identify as expert.

All of the collectors I spoke with drew great pleasure from their collecting activities. They were able to joke about their ‘obsession’ and make light of what

they imagined others thought of them. Many insisted that collecting was a great way to keep active and to make friends, a passion toward which they could focus their energies. Some were born collectors, others got in to it late in the game. Perhaps not all, but a significant number of collectors gossiped about members of the community, and tensions did exist, after all, as one collector reflected: “we like each other very much but we’re after the same thing” (Roger, interview with author, December 2006). That larger issues of community and social networks were primary to the activity of collecting speaks to how material goods are mobilized actively by collectors. The common devotion displayed by all collectors to a particular group of objects and the time they spent researching, displaying, imagining but also socializing with these special objects, reiterates the value of a study of collecting in examining the role of material goods in social reproduction.

### **Looking at the Literature**

The goal of this study is to examine how the collectible comes to hold value for the collectors. It is a study of a developing fascination and requires an understanding of how the collectible is mobilized to political, cultural and social ends. There are a wide variety of approaches to the process by which objects come to be imbued with value. The debates between these approaches centres around the role material goods play in social negotiations. There is a decided emphasis within the material culture literature on the impact of the very material properties of objects in social transactions. These theorists do not deny that objects are mobilized symbolically but have tended to insist that the physical

materiality of the object, its weight, chemical composition and condition also needs to be taken into account. They charge that to do otherwise is to treat the artefact as “an empty space, of interest only because of the ‘meanings’ that invest it with significance” (Pinney in Miller 2005: 257). The target of these critiques, namely culturalist, symbolically oriented theorists of consumption, assert their awareness of the material properties of objects and acknowledge that these properties can temper the consumption of goods but reiterate that objects are only imbued with value on account of their social, cultural, political and economic resonance. As Stuart Hall summarizes, “meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*” (1997: 24).

I work from within these latter theories of consumption. I forward consumer theory’s framework for understanding the cultural constitution of objects and how it is that objects are imbued with value in place of the object centered analyses of material culture studies. In particular, consumer culturalists’ work on the extent to which we use consumer goods in processes of identification and the assertions of subcultural studies on the use of goods in the negotiation of group membership and community, as well as a long tradition of considering how we fetishize consumer goods is of special relevance. I will show how making sense of my findings through a theoretical framework of cultural consumption helps us to grasp how collectibles are mobilized by collectors in making wider value statements around identity, economic gain, history, authenticity and nostalgia.

The literature review that follows will begin with a review of material culture studies addressing their position on the role of material goods in sociality and the debates over how meaning is produced in concert with the material world. Although I do not subscribe to material culture study's repeated calls for a focus on the physical materiality of the object and its potential to play an active role, some of the more moderate works in material culture studies are helpful. The literature review will then quickly move on to present the literature on collecting and then on cultural consumption as an alternative framework to that of material culture theory in understanding the processes which "render these objects meaningful" in collecting communities (Hebdige 1979: 2).

In studying the processes by which collectibles are mobilized in practices of meaning making my project parallels with Judy Attfield's study of the material culture of everyday life. Attfield is also intrigued by the relationship between people and their things and the moments in which, in the course of our relations with the material world, we play the borders between the animate and inanimate, fetishizing and attributing objects particular powers. As such Attfield's attempt to situate her project and her discussion of the contradictions of her study is worth quoting in full:

This is a contradictory project because although its main focus is on the material object it is not really about things in themselves, but about *how people make sense of the world through physical objects*, what psychoanalytic theory calls 'object relations' in the explanation of identity formation, what sociology evokes as the physical manifestation of culture, and anthropology refers to as the objectification of social relations. This is a study situated at the dynamic point of interplay between animate and inanimate worlds in order to look beyond the material world or mere things in

*themselves and reconsider their complex role in the relationship between objects and subjects*" (2003: 1, emphasis added)

### **The Materiality of Things - The Material Culture Literature**

Anthropology and archaeology continue to have strong ties to ideas of materiality. Due in part to its holistic and descriptive ethnographic methodologies, anthropology has always reserved an important place for material culture. Material culture studies, under the rubric of anthropology, has addressed the role of religious icons, the exchange of the Gift, inalienable possessions and the development of ethnology (classic studies in these areas include Mauss 1950; Weiner 1992; Strathern 1988). These studies demonstrate the centrality of material goods to the expression, negotiation and exchange of culture. More recently, and due to a burgeoning interest in consumer culture, material culture studies have turned to the exploration of contemporary western societies, which, as in my project, work largely with the commodity and the relations developed between objects and people in late consumer capitalism. This focus on commodities widens earlier theories on the gift and its role in facilitating social relationships, to include the entire market economies and consumer cultures in which the gift is made meaningful. This widening of material culture theory has been helpful in my positioning of the collectible as commodity. Working forward from Mauss' elaboration of how the gift is "a concrete manifestation of the relationship," studies of the commodity underline how objects can have an impact and circulate at great distances from the individuals involved in their original production and exchange. This vein of material culture studies draws heavily on

the work of preceding consumer theorists who tell of the enchanted spaces and commodity dream-worlds of consumption and of the effort to create new markets and sites in which consumer and commodity can be attached in novel ways (Benjamin 1999; Campbell 1990; Jameson 1993; McCracken 1998). Studies of material culture are interested in topics as diverse as VHS collections (Bjarkman 2004), t-shirts (Cullum-Swan and Manning in Riggins 1994), and computer screens (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002); how people relate to these objects; and how cultures are organized around them.

The material culture literature has largely developed in response to the predominance of symbolic and consumer approaches to the material world namely in theories of postmodernism and post structuralism. Material culture theory reiterates the centrality of the material world to culture and everyday life in the face of a theoretical dominance of ideas based on textual metaphors and representation. As such it advances an object centered analysis and engages in a largely unresolved debate over the relation between, and the influence to accord, both the material world and cultural practice. Material culture theorists have made various arguments about the inclusion of materiality in our conceptions of sociality. These arguments go from being gentle reminders not to overlook the material, to complete reconfigurations of the Cartesian dualism between subject and object, mind and matter, and a call for the reworking and application of concepts of agency to the non-human world. Above all, material culture theory seeks to re-engage with the material world in all of its physicality and material immediacy.

After poststructuralism and constructivism has melted everything that was solid into air, it was perhaps time that we noticed once again the sensuous immediacy of the objects we live, work, and converse with. High times perhaps also, after this panegyric of textuality and discursivity, to catch of theoretical sensibilities on the hard edges of our social world again, to feel the sheer force of things which strike back at us with unexpected violence, in the form of traffic jams, rail accidents, information overload, environmental pollution, or new technologies of terrorism (Pels et al. 2002: 1)

What emerged from this paradigm shift or call for a return to the material was the argument that objects are active in ways beyond their symbolic or communicative properties. Theorists began emphasizing the ways in which objects circulate as active entities, which facilitate, encourage, forbid and deny human actions (Dant 2000; Gell 1998; Gosden 2005; Graves-Brown 2000; Knappett 2002, 2005; Meskell 2006; Miller 1998, 2005). A theory of object agency, a central debate informing contemporary material culture studies, began to take shape in which artifacts are viewed not as mere reflections of but as active material constituents of the culture and society in which they are embedded. A central focus of this shift was Bruno Latour. Explaining Latour's influence on the field, Victor Buchli notes how:

Until Latour, artifacts were for the most part understood as mute entities subject to the vicissitudes of human intervention. Instead, Latour suggests that artifacts in themselves, in their material properties, exert an independent non-human agency in social life and that our social and material worlds must be understood in terms of the interaction of human and non-human forces (2005: xxxvi)

Object agency's criticisms are fundamental. Aside from reformulating philosophical ideas of agency, these theorists take aim at the limits of Cartesian thought. Object agency challenges the very lines we draw between active subjects

and inert objects, proposing that no neat boundaries can be drawn between them. Indeed Carl Knappett claims that our dualistic conception between mind and matter, agent and artefact, “hinders a full development of material culture theory” and cautions that assessing what is object and what is subject in a relation merely reinforces an unproductive dualism in systems he sees as “organizationally fuzzy rather than closed” (2005: 4, 15). Yet problematically, object agency theory and its foundational critique that we evacuate materiality at the expense of cultural perception does just what Knappett charges, it places the object in opposition to the subject in a kind of zero-sum relation. In her consideration of the materiality of the body Judith Butler believes this opposition can be eliminated by “understand(ing) materiality as that which is bound up with signification from the start” reiterating that “against the claim that poststructuralism reduces all materiality to linguistic stuff, an argument is needed to show that to deconstruct matter is not to negate or do away with the usefulness of the term” (Butler 1993: 30, 29). I see my own ethnography of collecting as a contribution to this argument. Proponents of agency theory have themselves responded to this critique by refiguring our conceptualization of agency as “a factor of the ambience of the whole...rather than as an attribute of the human psyche exclusively” (Gell 1998: 19). Agency, in this way, is seen to emerge in the coming together of object and subject rather than from any underlying property of either.

Agency theory has branched off in many directions including thingness (see Brown 2003; Lorraine 2006); actor network theory (see Law 1992, 2002; Pels et al. 2002; Gieryn 2002); studies on the interconnection between mind and

matter (see Knappett 2002, 2005); and studies specific to a politics of objects with agency (see Gosden 2005; Graburn 1976; Meskell 2006). All of these theoretical offshoots support, to a different degree, the idea of objects as agents, from Aafke Komter who reminds us that “there is no meaning inherent in things themselves” cautioning us to look at the way in which things come to mean in their relations with humans (2001: 60), to Lorraine Daston’s concern with “the way that things can be made to talk” (2006: 20).

I do not subscribe to the idea of objects as agents given the findings of my study of toy collectors. Instead of understanding the value of objects as a form of power somehow inherent in the objects themselves, my findings underscore how objects are *made valuable* by virtue of their mobilization, by collectors, in social worlds, markets and collecting spaces. Objects may have a hold over people but this is purely a function of the social, cultural and economic value they have been attributed and is not a function of a form of agency in the object.

The collectors I spoke with characterized their collecting as everything from an obsessive passion to a disease. When questioned about the hold their collectibles had on them, collectors invariably spoke of occasions when they purchased an item despite their better judgment and the extent to which collecting has shaped wider factors in their life such as their travel habits and major financial decisions. One collector explains the choices collectors can find themselves making, “collecting is a little bit of a disease you know, you’re just hooked into it and you know you have no, you know, I’m sure there are many collectors who would skimp on a bit of food as long as they can get that thing they need”

(George, interview with author, March 2007). Another collector described how the drive to complete a set takes over, “the problem with the disease is that you collect things because they’re dinky toys and you actually start collecting things that you don’t really like because of its association” (Charles, interview with author, October 2007)

Looking at the hold collectibles come to have over collectors takes us into the realms of social, historical and cultural signification not one of a materially based agency. When I dug into the source of a collectible’s enchantment for the collector I inevitably found myself entangled in webs of culture, in stories of consumption and events on the market. Collectibles accrue value by virtue of their valuation in collecting communities and the meanings that are invested in them by collectors. To paraphrase Bourdieu, objects become meaningful and powerful as components of a wider cultural, social and economic *field* (1984; 1997). Toy collectibles are antiques made fantastic by virtue of their close proximity and circulation throughout points in human history. Without a collector worshipping collectibles and pulling them from the detritus of history they are nothing. Objects are valuable because people treat them ‘as if’ they were valuable. Despite object agency theories’ charge that in highlighting the symbolic and communicative dimensions of the object cultural theorists forward a view whereby “material entities exist primarily as envelopes of meaning, acquiring their social presence as a result of processes of linguistic coding and discursive interpretation” to not do so would cripple our understanding of the role of material goods in social worlds (Pels 2002: 5).

The vessel argument in favour of object agency is decisive and its target clear. To consider the cultural and social circulation of the collectible is to compromise a consideration of its materiality. In responding to the culturalist turn, and arguing for an object centered analysis, agency theory establishes itself in direct opposition to theories of culture and signification. It is a limited either/or theorization, asserting that in order to redress the evacuation of materiality from social theory we need to focus exclusively on the materiality of the object in question. To do otherwise would be to propagate what Daniel Miller terms the “tyranny of the subject” (2005).

A theory of object agency and the vessel critique were too highly problematic a framework from which to examine the relationship collectors had with their toy collectibles. Not only were theories of object agency abstract and not readily operable in an empirical setting, they were widely misinterpreted and ambiguous. Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* a defining text of object agency theory, for example, has been frequently misread and his argument interpreted to mean that objects have agency in the same way humans do. Further considerations by theorists outlined Gell’s concept of primary and secondary agency and worked through ideas of agency as both intentional and effective in hopes of clarifying what is an exceedingly dense text (see Robb in DeMarrais et al. 2004). The literature is a tangled knot of theorizations about object agency at times seeming to argue that meaning and materiality can somehow be separated. Examining my findings on practices of collecting only underscored how objects are active because we attribute them a certain power, and animate them in particular ways.

Consequently, my framework is guided by how collectors themselves spoke about the value of their collectibles, and how the relationship between a collector and their collection was shaped by the social and cultural worlds both they and their collectibles inhabit. Although day dreamers who fantasize about their collectibles and often elevate them to magical proportions, collectors ultimately, at the end of the day see clear lines between themselves as active persons and their collectibles as inert matter. As one collector reflects, “I’ve got control over it, its harmless, I mean you’re not controlling another person, it’s an inanimate object in that sense you know” (Vincent, interview with author, December 2006). This discrepancy between the proposals of object agency theory and my own research findings is what Avery Gordon would identify as “the disjuncture between identifying a social structure...and its articulation in everyday life and thought” (1997: 19). Drawing on toy collectors’ relations with the material world to understand how collectors mobilize and negotiate social meanings through their collectibles is not a compromise of the materiality of the objects in question. I do not agree with statements such as Baudrillard’s that “the object is nothing. It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it” (1981: 63). I acknowledge, in keeping with the position advocated by consumer culture studies that collectibles have a physical presence and material properties that can impact their collection but the meaningfulness and value of collectibles is not a function of this materiality. The value of a collectible is a function of its mobilization by the collector into social and cultural worlds.

## **Collections, Collectors, and Collectibles – The Collecting Literature**

Collecting has fascinated people as long as it has existed and the scope of literature on collecting is vast. Commonly collecting is presented as a pathology, a psychoanalytic fixation of eccentrics who are positioned as anomalous and apart from the societies in which they are found (see Pearce 2000). This typification does not sit lightly with the collectors I spoke with who were eager to present themselves as adjusted hobbyists merely taking part in a harmless social pastime. I was thanked on more than one occasion for approaching their relations with their collectibles as one of intensity over obsession. The collectors I interviewed regularly responded to what they saw as a societal assumption that all collectors were “anoraks” or in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary: “a boring, studious, or socially inept person with unfashionable and solitary interests” (2000: 51). Pointing out the famous celebrities who collected (Frank Sinatra was a toy train collector), and underscoring the monetary value of their collectibles was their typical line of defense. I also found collectors somewhat guarded when, in investigating their animation practices, I asked about their collectibles “coming to life” and about relating to them “as if they were more than matter.” Their responses more often than not ended with a chuckle “no, I’m not that crazy” and a deferral to the story of some other collector who did “cross the line,” such as those who treated their doll like a living baby or gave their teddy its own personality. The connotations attached to some manners of relating to the object for collectors were sensitive to say the least, and were evidence of the extent to which social negotiations of reputation and self-preservation permeated the

interviews. Both the exaggerated tales of other collectors and of the personal triumphs of collecting figure heavily into my analysis of how negotiations and ways of dealing with material goods come to influence social position in collecting culture.

As the collecting literature shifted from a psychological orientation to a consideration of the precedents of collecting, the longstanding typification of collectors was open to criticism. A cultural perspective takes collecting as a cultural activity and has begun to understand collecting as a way of making meaning (see Bianchi 1997; Belk 1995; Elsner and Cardinal 1994; Pearce 2000; Pomian 1990), as a way of mediating between the tangible and intangible (Pomian 1990), and as a negotiation of authenticity and value (see Pearce 2000). A way of meaning making refers to collectors' use of material goods to make particular statements about the world and their values, or their building an extended history around a series of material goods. This includes Bill who used the minute physical differences among his Hornby toy trains to extrapolate a detailed history of production circumstances and material shortages during World War I. Not unrelated, a mediation between the tangible and the intangible refers to employing what are tangible collectibles to bring forth otherwise intangible and elusive histories and social positions. What is of relevance and interest are the *immaterial* intangible social and cultural meanings built up in and around collectibles by collectors. Across my sample the collectors' negotiation of these immaterial meanings (as I will refer to them throughout the project) whether authenticity, identity or nostalgia manifest various patterns telling us a great deal

of how power is negotiated in collecting communities and the extent to which the mutability of collectible meanings is mobilized to negotiate these hierarchies of status, power and economic gain. Far more is being transacted in the collection than mere collectible objects. Many collectors' pride in their level of expertise was mobilized through the distinctions they made between what were, to outsiders, seemingly identical pieces. Collecting as a negotiation of authenticity and value largely refers to how the assembly of the collection becomes the battlefield on which hierarchies of the authentic and inauthentic are played out. Collectors' definitions of the authentic extend out from individual assessments of collectible pieces to ideas on the proper way to collect to wider arguments about the posterity of the material record.

In focusing on collecting as a particular activity, or hobby undertaken by various individuals over time, the collecting literature encourages us to approach collecting as something people do, and furthermore, something that is variable across history. Full of fascinating accounts of historical collections, Wunderkammern and curiosity cabinets of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the collecting literature, drawing on Foucault's work on regimes of knowledge, firmly establishes collecting as productive of and a product of historical periods and paradigms of thought (Bennett 1995; Impey 2001; Elsner 1994; Bianchi 1997). In light of "discoveries of foreign lands, European population growth following the plague, new inventions such as the clock and the printing press, and the rise of capitalism" collections developed to display the wonder of these changes (Lourenco 2003: 20). Wunderkammern or curiosity cabinets were

originally rooms and later self-contained cabinets or pieces of furniture with various drawers and doors designed to separate collectible goods into an ordered display. What were often very ornate doors on these cabinets were opened to display the select treasures that lay behind them. In their very physical design “cabinets of curiosities emphasized the marvel and wonder of objects” (Belk 1995: 31). They also testified to the power of their possessor. Cabinets of curiosity, historically the domain of nobleman and monarchs, were filled with specimens of far-flung lands and thus constituted symbolic assertions of imperial dominance. These assertions were not only based on the contents of the cabinets but on their assembly into an ordered whole wherein every artifact had its place. On top of their ordering, the fact that all of these diverse specimens were contained within one room to be consumed upon the whim of their collector further underscores the power of their ‘master.’ The relation between the monarch and all of the objects in his curiosity cabinet, it could be argued, is a microcosm of his relation to his entire domain. Although the curiosity cabinet collection is a distant historical precursor to the modern collection of popular cultural artifacts such as toys, the line of continuity around mastery and expertise that runs between the collecting subject and his collectible objects must be acknowledged.

The historical variance in the display practices and classificatory schemes governing collections helps locate collecting as a cultural practice reflecting particular regimes of knowledge, and firmly establishes the role of material goods within these regimes. The Wunderkammern example highlights not only that material collectibles can be classified and displayed in variable forms to variable

effect but that how we choose to employ material goods is at once a reflection *and* construction of our social worlds. The choices Renaissance collectors made in their curiosity cabinets reflected ideas about ordering and how specimens were best made intelligible at the same time as they were, in and of themselves, comprehensive statements about newly discovered parts of the world. Foucault's consideration of the historical variability of our relation to the material world opens up the effect of contemporary factors such as eBay and the Internet on our relationships with material goods, and the means by which we are able to mobilize them.

A perspective approaching collecting as a constellation of activities rather than the product of those activities – the collection – allows us a glimpse of the collectible in a current of activity where it is best understood in all of its complexity. It is within a current of activity, around authentic practice, purchase, and restoration that a material good becomes a collectible. What it means to collect is far more than the collection itself. Indeed looking at the collection alone tells you very little about a collector's attachment to their collectibles. Thinking about collecting as an activity helps broaden our understanding of collecting beyond object centered ideas of mere accumulation to examine what it is exactly that collectors do with their collectibles. Here the collecting literature takes a page from Foucault's encouragement that we focus on the practices of the archive rather than its contents (1969), as well as Bourdieu's field of practice (1984). Bourdieu, not unlike Foucault, viewed practices of consumption as “profoundly cultural” moments of reproduction and as “structures of meaning and practice

through which social identities and institutions are maintained and changed over time” (Slater in Anderson et al 2003: 147).

Collecting is made up of a constellation of activities, oftentimes contradictory, in which the relationship between collector and collectible is negotiated, and develops over time. The collectors I worked with did not just talk about their collectibles but about an array of affairs which spoke to the sustained and continuously negotiated interaction they had with their collectibles.

Collections are amassed in a flurry of engagement where reputations, hierarchies, values and community connections are also established. Collectors’ access to and opinion of collectibles varied wildly according to these parameters. A number of collectors described the progression and reshuffle of their collections as their expertise developed. Collectors told endless stories of manipulating their social connections and mobilizing expert strategy in an effort to obtain collectibles at an accessible price. In fact every collectible’s value is defined, to some extent, by the moment governing its inception into the collection. The attachments between collector and collectible varied greatly and were much more of the constellation of activities governing the collectible than any quality of the collectible itself.

Collecting is productive of other things beside the collection. Collecting is meaning making, and it is *to do something*. “The physicality of the artefact [collectible] lends itself to the work of praxis – that is, cultural construction through action rather than just conceptualization” (Miller 1987: 129). What then, are collectors doing when they collect? How do collectibles become meaningful in collecting? As Appadurai working from Simmel reminds us, value is about the

judgments we make on objects, it is never inherent in the object itself (1986: 3).

This is why, as this project will demonstrate, the meaningfulness of collectibles is constantly established, challenged and reestablished in collecting practice. As objects, collectibles are exceedingly mutable in value. Their value is socially and culturally constructed as well as tenuous, making them useful tools in wider negotiations of power and identity. This mutability of a collectible's value means not only that they become effective tools of social location, and of establishing economic prowess but that they require the collector's continual engagement to maintain and re-assert their meanings. Collectibles are symbolic commodities of the highest order, no longer valued for their function. As Pomian describes it, collecting is a

strange world where the word ‘usefulness’ seems never to have been heard of...the locks and keys no longer secure any door, the machines produce nothing and the clocks and watches are certainly not expected to give the precise time of day” (1990: 7).

The activity of collecting also produces new knowledge, new ways of seeing our world and particularly, our past. Collectors are proud of their contributions toward filling important gaps existing in our historical narratives. That Bill and Roger, two Hornby model train collectors, present their activities as a historical exploration or discovery, as if they were sleuths of the past solving a mystery, forefronts the extent to which collecting goes far beyond mere accumulation.

It’s not just the acquisition, the owning, it’s actually with a purpose of trying to define the area of interest. We’re in an area of collecting where there wasn’t any knowledge, any great knowledge years ago. There is very little historical record where you can go and find out accurately what it was that was made. And I think

that's of great interest to find out what on earth the stuff was in the factory, and we talk about social history, it's not just the social history of the trains themselves and how they were used by families, it's the social history of the actual creation of the trains...how they were made, different production techniques, there's a whole range of things that start to come to light. (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

Focusing on the interwar years and using their cumulative knowledge and their collections of trains, Bill and Roger paint a picture of the otherwise invisible and bring history to light. In these activities Bill, in particular, conforms to Foucault's definition of a genealogist who "sets out to study the beginning – numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of colour are seen by a historical eye" (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 81). Bill identifies the train collectible as an essential component to filling gaps in the historical record. It is on the basis of his employment of the collection as material record that he is able to shed some light on the interwar production of Hornby trains and the wider social circumstances of the time. Bill uses the toy train collectible in a "tournament of value" where "what is at issue...is not just status, rank, fame or reputation of actors, but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question" (Appadurai 1986: 21). Bill is not merely filling in the gaps of our historical record but making statements about what is worth remembering, selecting the war years of Hornby's production from a much wider past.

This process of selection is a moment in which Bill *produces* meaning and subsequently asserts it within the wider community. Bianchi explains how "identifying a set, imposing a pattern and establishing recurrences and difference is not inscribed in the objects that comprise it, but must be discovered...as part of

a collection, an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and reframed into new ones” (1997: 276). Bill’s erudite comparisons, analyses and contextualizations are the means by which he is able to mobilize his collectibles in particular ways to assert his vision of Hornby production in World War II, his expertise, as well as a wider commentary on what it takes to be an expert.

In developing his picture of Hornby’s production Bill works on a scale of minute variation, as his colleague remarks, “they can be absolutely tiny differences, you know, cuppling. I think if it’s got a different number on it which you can’t see without a magnifying glass, that’s different to Bill” (Roger, interview with author, December 2006). This is the “relentless erudition” that genealogy “demands” and Bill’s focus on the “minute deviations” in the Hornby toy train lines he collects, confirms his status as genealogist (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 76, 81). His fascination with variation, his collecting and documentation of every tiny detail, some invisible to the human eye, is a form of special visibility, and an argument about value. Bill’s display of his collection is then a particular presentation of his genealogy, a material testament to a particular way of knowing and the brain behind it.

The establishment of Bill’s expertise according to new levels of detail shows how material goods are employed in wider processes of identification. Bill’s delving into the collectible in ever greater detail is a form of mastery over it, opening it up to further scrutiny, and extending it’s productivity, all of this done in the name of furthering his expertise and filling the gaps in the historical record. Quite interestingly Bill also brands a stamp or code into his locos. Derek,

another colleague of Bill's, explains in a separate interview how: "Bill codes everything, he's seriously into that sort of the rigorous collecting... everything Bill gets regardless of whether he wants it or not he codes, then sells it off and it's got the code number on it" (interview with author, December 2006). Bill stamps the mark of his possession onto all of his possessions, in effect objectifying his expertise and ensuring a trace of his mastery remains on those collectibles he releases from his possession. This act of mastery legitimates the historical statements he is able to make with his collectibles and maintains his position within the wider collecting community. Bill's collecting activity is evidence of "the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in...meanings [which] change and are renegotiated through the life of an object" (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170).

The energy Bill commits to these acts of mastery is evidence of the faith he places in the collection as an archive and his ability to gather things into a whole to tell us about the past. That the activity of collecting ultimately culminates in the presentation of an assembly of collectibles is a mark of the collector's faith in the value of material goods in conveying much wider socio-cultural messages. These acts also testify to the evocative powers collectors assign to collectibles. "The physical character of objects means that they are capable of being owned, stored and handed from one person to another, but the reasons why these things happen to them...rests in the value that is ascribed to them by the community concerned" (Pearce 1992: 27). In hearing Bill speak of his historical passions it is as if, in gathering collectibles, he feels he is able to gather the past

into being, with each detail adding a proximity and realism to this imagined past. Featherstone, paraphrasing Ernst describes this as “the sense that it was possible to ‘tell history as it was’ through careful scrutiny of the treasure-house of material from the past, accumulated in the archive waiting for the historian’s gaze to bring it to life” (2006: 591). As Featherstone outlines, this faith in the collection as evocative reinforces the value of the collectible at the same time as it legitimizes the historian collector capable of putting such objects into a meaningful whole. Although Bill’s behavior of stamping the trains in his possession is curious given the controversial debates in the community over restoration and tampering with toy train collectibles, it is understandable. Bill’s mark of expertise is able to circulate beyond his person via the coding system he has materially branded into each Hornby locomotive in his possession.

A consideration of how a collectible is used to mediate between the immaterial, or invisible meanings in a material and visible form is the second pertinent contribution of the collecting literature to our understanding of the value objects come to hold for us (Pomian 1990). Like the idea of Bill filling in the puzzle of past Hornby production history, these ideas speak to the collector’s use of collectibles in accessing or making contact with distant places and times. The collectible is employed as an object of enjoyment through which collectors can entertain themselves and fantasize about fond memories, or perhaps to argue in favour of ‘the way it was’, and bemoan the current state of affairs. The multiple historical, social and cultural locations a single toy collectible has circulated through and occupied throughout the years means its presence is multiple. The

collector as genealogist responds to and mobilizes their collectible on the basis of the array of histories, owners, locations and phases of commodification it has occupied.

Things provide a powerful medium for materializing and objectifying the self, containing and preserving memories and embodying personal and social experiences...things have a fluid significance. Their meanings change throughout time and in relation to the manner in which things are circulated and exchanged and pass through different social contexts  
(Tilley 2006: 9)

Collecting as an activity is all about bringing such fluid significance and sedimented meaning to life, pointing out the provenance of a collectible, imagining the children who consumed the toy, and facilitating the toy's circulation in a new phase of commodification wherein the collectability of the toy becomes paramount. I extend the work of the collecting literature on this point and use my findings to consider how the value of the collectible as mediator between the invisible and visible is a function of the collectible's multiple presences. During the interviews it quickly became apparent that, for collectors, collectibles functioned as mediators. Nowhere was this mediation more prevalent than in the nostalgia of collectors.

Under the umbrella of the literature on collecting is work done on nostalgia and the role of memory in the attachment between collectors and collectibles (see Pearce 2000; Stewart 1994). Nostalgia figured heavily into collecting activities, and as we will see in Chapter Three, the collectible functioned as an augur through which collectors reflected on and constructed the past. Collectors repeatedly mentioned the prominent role nostalgia played in their

attachment to their collectibles. Collectibles brought back childhood memories in particular ways. As Stewart explains “it is not a childhood as lived; it is a childhood voluntarily remembered, a childhood manufactured from its material survivals” (1994: 145). A unique attraction of the collectible’s multiple presences is that, although definitely present, the collectible carries with it and is made to evoke the traces of other times and places. Contact with the collectible transports collectors, affording them a certain proximity by proxy, and a moment of reverie in other spaces, however reconstructed it may be. What is more, nostalgic reverie plays an important role in the collector’s ability to identify and locate themselves in relation to the past. “Collections become part of the owner’s extended self...by contributing to the collector’s sense of past” (Belk 1995: 89, 91). As an imaginative and emotional engagement with objects nostalgia is an act of cultural construction, a means of using collectibles in the production of identity and social positioning.

Theories of nostalgia complicate our understandings of what it means to look back arguing that nostalgia takes on varied forms. Nostalgia can no longer be delineated as “the conceptual opposite of progress” nor a “reactionary, sentimental or melancholic” orientation to the world (Pickering and Keightly 2006: 920). Despite a legacy of such approaches presenting nostalgia as repressive and a retreat from reality (Grainge 2002; Pickering and Keightly 2006; Tannock 1995) nostalgia as it is increasingly enmeshed with consumer culture, can be seen as a productive activity. Nostalgia in contemporary consumer culture can be seen as a fun-loving activity around which communities of appreciation are

built. Nostalgic objects are prized as “mediated representations of the past” and “for their relations to collective identities and experiences” (Grainge 2002: 925)

These new approaches to nostalgia line up with my findings. I found that collectors’ nostalgia operates in many different forms and to different ends. Some collectors are immersed in what I have come to term a direct or primary nostalgia, whereby they collect those very same toys they had as a child. Other collectors’ activities, while no less nostalgic, are less direct, a kind of secondary nostalgia if you will, where they reach toward an era that appeals to them and experience nostalgia in a much more generalized manner. Collectors too, I found, alongside being nostalgic for the times from which their collectibles derived, developed nostalgia for their very collecting activities themselves, people they’ve met over the years, past triumphs at auction, and the old days of the market.

This project invokes work on nostalgia to argue more generally how collectibles are made to operate as mediators (Pomian 1990). Collectibles function as “intermediaries between those who looked at and touched them and the invisible,” the invisible being both spatially and temporally distant (Pomian 1990). The ability of objects to be used as intermediaries and to reach towards other places and times accords them a certain value. In using collectibles to mediate distant meanings collectors are able to draw upon a wide range of narratives, histories and values to make assertions about the past as well as the present.

Collectibles are valuable because of what they make present to us. The presence of the object in front of us, promises a close proximity to the past. The

collectible is used as a tool of access, allowing us to reach towards the past. Helen, a teddy bear collector, captures how this sense of proximity is a constant source of enchantment in her relations to her collectibles. Enchantment will be employed as a concept throughout the project to convey not only that collectors are attached to their collectibles, but that these attachments often have a magical quality or presence, are often the outcome of activities of animation, and are built on an already existing fascination with the object. For Helen, the knowledge that her bear has been present during the two wars, firsthand, adds to the value of the bear: “there’s just something magical about them...you know they’ve got this, you know if only they could talk, you know what I mean like history, World War I, World War II. Where they have been and what they have done, it’s a sort of mystery I suppose” (interview with author, March 2007). In playing on what objects make present, collecting establishes and invigorates new relationships between the collector and their collectibles. Part of my engagement with the collector’s nostalgic valuations of their collectibles addresses Pearce’s insistence that “we must, therefore, try to understand how it is that objects can operate in both the past and the present, how they work to create the present, what the nature of the relationship is and why it has such profound significance for us” (1992: 24).

The final valuable contribution of the collecting literature is the consideration of how collecting is a negotiation of authenticities, values and hierarchies. Work done in the collecting literature on auctions as sites of value decision making (Smith 1991; van der Grijp 2006); on collecting communities

(Belk 1995; Elsner 1994, Pearce 2000) and on the shifting registers of authenticity (Appadurai 1986; Karp and Lavine 1991; Stewart 1994) help us to understand how collectibles accrue value because of their centrality to the negotiation of social power in collecting communities. Speaking with collectors I was repeatedly struck by how collecting is a practice in differentiation, as much about combining collectibles into sets on accord of their differences as their similarities. The level of detail from which collectors recognize difference and slot items into particular value systems or hierarchies sets them aside from the lay population. In this respect Bourdieu's work on distinction and the role of consumption practice in the signification of social difference is immensely helpful in understanding collecting. Bourdieu's theories around the social and cultural origins of taste will be used throughout this project to grasp the complexities of collecting communities and their constantly shifting rules, as well as the struggles within these communities over definitions of collecting, expertise and the authentic. As Bourdieu notes in *Distinction*:

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects classified by their classification, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed” (1984: 6)

Collecting as an activity of assembling and reassembling material goods into continually shifting hierarchies of difference is an exemplary practice of distinction. Furthermore, it is a practice built upon what Thomas terms “the mutability of things in recontextualization” (1991: 27). On numerous occasions collectors would point out differences between collectibles I was unable to see. In

one such instance a collector spoke of the difference between what appeared to be identical Capston vans he collected.

RM: right, the same van over and over. Interesting you're collecting a type?

H: well I like the van, and those are the best three examples I've managed to find in that type, two of them come from America and one came from Belgium...you check each one against each other and you see now that the colour varies on the three

RM: really?

H: yes, it's a slight difference, see...the lights in here are not very good for it. (Harold, interview with author, May 2007)

Collecting affords collectors the ability to make value judgments and to assert these judgments within wider collecting communities. In Bourdieu's theory of consumption goods are integral to the social fields in which struggles over identity and positioning take place, thus explaining how the material world is used in the mediation of powerful cultural and social relationships. The minute differences collectors such as Harold observe between their collectibles not only signify but reinforce their expertise and commitment to their collection. This process, which Bourdieu calls "the transmutation of things...raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions" (1984: 174). Collectibles in this framework come to matter, embodying and constituting the world of values and hierarchies through which they circulate.

In making meticulous distinctions Harold is asserting his expertise. Harold's interest goes beyond the ordinary. He leverages tiny differences between otherwise identical pieces to illustrate his overall depth of knowledge about Capston vans. Basing his collection on the minute differences between these vans

Harold goes on to comment on how fingerprints affect the paint, noting that “every time you pick one of these up you take a little bit of paint off it” (interview with author, May 2007). In evaluating his collectible vans according to such levels of detail Harold is arguing for the value of the Capston van, at the same time as he is invoking an extensive hierarchy of values beyond the vans themselves. Not unlike Bill’s detailed conjectures on metal roofs and bearings on his toy trains, Harold’s initial distinction of colour is a wider commentary on caring for valuable collectibles, and the importance of paying attention to detail in collecting practice.

In distinguishing between his collectibles Harold is constructing his choice of collectible as a valuable pursuit both socially and economically. Not only does this process demonstrate Harold’s expertise, it makes a specific value assertion about Capston vans establishing their status as collectibles. “The value of a potentially collectible object thus was, and remains, determined by social valuation and not by any intrinsic properties of the objects themselves. Rarity and scarcity are other non-intrinsic properties that affect the social valuation and collectibility of objects” (Belk 1995: 38).

Harold’s approach to expertise is exemplary of the gendered distinctions replete throughout my findings. This meticulous attention to detail was not practiced among all collecting groups, and most notably, not among teddy bear and doll collectors who were overwhelmingly female. Aside from the gendered implications of the fact that the women collectors I was able to access almost all collected teddy bears and dolls, these groups also collected differently. In keeping

with Bourdieu's connection between social objects and consumption practice: "differences in consumption patterns between social groups reflect not only differences in taste but also hierarchies of wealth, gender, and 'race,' and the valuations of goods reflects this too" (Sayer 2003: 351). The attachment between female collectors and their collectibles was more emotionally centered than their more academic and detail obsessed male colleagues. Female collectors spoke of "loving" their collectibles, emphasizing their personal connection to the toy, and the "feel" of a bear (Julie, interview with author, April 2007). For the most part they did not authenticate their collectibles on the basis of rigid hierarchies but on the basis of narratives of attachment and discourses of aesthetic appreciation.

Despite the fact that female collectors are avid historians and researchers in their collecting fields their collecting practices were consistently distinguished from their male counterparts. Henry's comments highlight how these different modes of collecting were often judged within the community:

I mean the bear people are very different. My ex-girlfriend she was, she still is a bear collector, and I mean she could max out every credit card in one sale. And you know a lot of it is there's something to hang on to. I think it's definitely a child, a very emotional, you look at bears, and the oldest Steiff bears they want to know what its name was, they love to have the photos with them in the 1920s (interview with author, May 2007)

The connections Henry makes between bear as child and collector as mother as well as the emotion guiding their collecting choices were implied numerous times throughout the interviews. These distinctions and the values attached to these modes of collecting are an indication of the extent to which collecting is a field of cultural positioning. Indeed Helen has her own views of train collectors: "I think

the train people are a little obsessive and more everything has to be perfect, whereas with bears, it doesn't have to be perfect, it has to speak to you and that's all" (interview with author, March 2007). Although this is not specifically a study of gender and collecting, the discourses around gender that permeate ideas of authenticity, value and practice are important. They are exemplary of how difference is negotiated within collecting communities. Issues of gender are highlighted throughout the project as they surface.

Collector's value judgments are based on a combination of the collectible's condition and physical composition and the attendant meanings assigned to these properties such as its provenance, its cache in a given milieu of collecting as well as its relation to other related collectibles. As such collectors' practices of distinction conjure a constellation of cultural, social and material values associated with the collectible. The ambiguity and complex weave of these hierarchies of value makes the act of distinction a social practice upon which reputations can be made and remade. Valuing a collectible is an argument and always a form of exercising power. As Slater reminds us, "battles to legitimate particular criteria and hierarchies of cultural value and taste are central to the exercise of power" (in Anderson et al. 2003: 155).

It is on the basis of small variation and detail that wider hierarchies and value systems are set within collecting communities. The object adds a visible, tangible form with which such hierarchies can be negotiated. There is a great degree of pleasure involved in ordering a collection and in bringing together pieces of the past. The collection represents a form in which historical values and

meanings can be fixed, thought about and presented to others. Hierarchies of value are negotiated by mobilizing the collectible in particular ways. In establishing these valuations collectors often find themselves playing off, or weighing up one collectible against another, for example, horrible condition but significant provenance, mint condition but no cachet. Working through minute variations and asserting value judgments are all part of the process in which collectors become *invested* in their collectibles, whether financially, emotionally or intellectually. What is more, the assertion of these value judgments requires constant reinforcement, as object meanings are exceedingly mutable, tenuous and open to multiple readings. One collector underscored how the ease with which toy train collectibles can be systematically collected contributed directly to his level of engagement with them:

You don't ever see the passion for art as you see in the passion for old junk. You just never see that depth of engagement that you get with collectors, and the reason is because collectors of contemporary art are normally working in the dark...art can't supply the hindsight, so you know, [with train collecting] you've got it all in front of you, how rare it is, how good a copy it is. You have no idea when you go out and buy a Damien Hirst spot painting is this a good Hirst or a bad Hirst in fifty years...it's very hard to draw those boundaries, but with Hornby you can say I want this line, I want that... (Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

The ability to compare between a series of similar toy train collectibles is central to the thrill of collecting for Derek. Describing the benefit of having "it all in front of you" Derek highlights how the train collectible is used to make value judgments and stake one's reputation.

Building hierarchies in a collection is about establishing relationships between constellations of collectibles. Hierarchies as such have less to do with a particular item than where that item sits in an overall pattern. Collectibles as objects are prized not as isolated things but in relation to an already existing value system. Loïc Wacquant working from Bourdieu concurs, “cultural practice...takes its social meaning, and its ability to signify social difference and distance, not from some intrinsic property it has but from its location in a system of like objects and practices” (in Fowler 2001: 115). A collectible becomes a complex tangle of presences, immediate and distant, both part of where it has come from and where it is currently placed in a collection. The assessment, play and negotiation of these values and hierarchies are the very stuff of collecting.

### **Consuming Collectibles – The Consumer Culture Literature**

Studies in consumer culture have long been intrigued by the interconnections between subjects and objects. As such they contribute a great deal to our understanding of how collectibles come to hold value for collectors. Consumption is viewed as a practice in which subject and object become connected (see Gell 1998 for discussion). In theorizing the interconnections between subjects and objects consumer culture theorists advocate consumption practice as the moment in which object meanings are culturally constructed. They thus adhere to the position that:

Consumption is central to social and cultural reproduction. All acts of consumption are profoundly cultural...and reproduce those structures of meaning and practice through which social identities and institutions are maintained over time...The study of consumption cultures [such as toy collecting] leads us to examine the construction of object exchanges across a wide range of

interconnected sites and processes (Slater in Anderson 2003: 147, 148)

As we saw in the preceding section, the consumption of cultural goods “fulfill(s) a social function of legitimating social differences” and as such is important to the assertion of identity and social positioning (Bourdieu 1984: 7). Later contributions to the consumer culture literature emphasize the need to move beyond conceptualizing consumption as a purchase to consumption as a sustained and ongoing relation with consumer goods, or a relation developing over time (see Dant 2000, Miller 1987; Noble 2004; and Zukin 2004). As Noble notes “consumption still tends to be approached as a series of singular acts” (Noble 2004: 234).

These critiques emphasize that consumption is instead, an amalgam of activities, and a negotiation of a network of relations between multiple forms of commodities, consumers and markets. Purchase may be one activity associated with consumption but consumption in collecting is equally to do with meaning making, assigning value and tracing an object’s path. Rejecting a position he deems “predicated on reducing consumption to the nature of the commodity, and the consumer to the process by which the commodity is obtained” Miller encourages us to focus instead on “the long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it” (1987: 189, 190). Collecting is exemplary on this point as an extended relation with consumer goods wherein each collectible in the collection shifts in meaning and significance over time as a collection develops. A defining point of a collection is that it is perpetually a work in progress. Contrary to a regular consumer commodity which

is the outcome of an intentionally temporary meaning system so to propagate further consumption and profit, the collectible is a particular kind of consumer commodity which is attributed value and circulates within the market on the basis of cumulative history and meaningfulness that only strengthens in value over time. The collectible as commodity is sedimented with layers of meanings which the collector consumes and mobilizes to various ends in their collecting activities.

Consumption is, above all, a moment of connection between the consumer and the consumer good. Its importance to the maintenance of social networks, identities and ways of seeing the world underscores the necessity of studying objects and people's relations to them in order to grasp social processes. “Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things people make themselves in the process. The object world is thus absolutely central to an understanding of the identities of individual persons and societies...without the things – material culture – we could neither be ourselves or know ourselves” (Tilley 2006: 61). Consumption then is a merger between persons and objects according to a weave of communities, markets and social meanings. As Marina Bianchi argues “collecting, far from being a form of idiosyncratic consumer behaviour, is its paradigmatic case” (1997: 275). Aside from making links between and exploring material goods, Bianchi asserts that collecting is to impose patterns and continually reframe objects into meaningful relationships. Not unlike Noble, Bianchi is critical of the fact that “the strategies we have seen operating in collecting have been assumed away or considered already solved when consumption is analysed,” and suggests that a study of

collecting usefully widens our approach to consumption (1997: 280). Collecting is a sustained, complex, and focused practice of consumption. It is also, crucially, as we have seen in relation to Foucault's insistence on the historical variability in our ways of negotiating the material world, an evolving practice.

The literature on consumption is indebted to the work of Bourdieu and his illustration of how the material world is mobilized in wider struggles for meaning. In decisively theorizing the “interpenetration of cultural and economic power, processes and practices” Bourdieu’s theory of consumption simultaneously sketches a reciprocal relationship between social practice and social structure (Hinde and Dixon 2007: 401). This reciprocity lies in his theory of habitus as a continually negotiated set “of structured dispositions that shape our relation to ourselves and the material and social world around us” (Featherstone 1991: xxxiii). “Bourdieu treats social life as a mutually constituting interaction of structures, dispositions, and actions whereby social structures and embodied (therefore situated) knowledge of those structures produce enduring orientations to action which, in turn, are constitutive of social structures” (Calhoun 1993: 4). Bourdieu’s sketching of the interconnections between the worlds of culture and economy allows us to understand the use of collectibles by collectors in much wider networks of political, and symbolic activity.

Bourdieu figures heavily into my conceptualization of collecting as an activity, or a field of cultural practice in which material goods are mobilized to negotiate social structures. His particular focus on the act of differentiation, and its role in asserting one’s social position, rings clearly through the idea of the

collection as a juxtaposition of goods arranged according to their differences and similarities. As such it speaks to how the act of putting together a collection quickly becomes a jostling of social identities and a struggle for legitimacy.

Bourdieu helps me understand how the distinctions collectors make among their collectibles come to be deployed strategically in much wider assertions of expertise, economic might and in collectors' genuine commitment to collecting.

Receptions of Bourdieu have not been uncritical. Edward LiPuma asserts that "in sum, we might characterize Bourdieu's theory of culture as a kind of cultural functionalism...the issue is not the character of cultural symbols and categories, but their use as instruments of power – symbolic power" (in Calhoun 1993: 20). LiPuma argues that Bourdieu empties out the specificity of the material good in the face of its positioning in a wider economic and social struggle.

Versions of this critique, which are referred to as 'the vessel argument,' are a corner stone in the development of material culture theories of object agency. These critiques cast Bourdieu's theories as "historically arbitrary" arguing that he is, in a sense, over-relational (DiPuma in Calhoun 1993: 32). In focusing on the relation between two entities rather than the two entities themselves, the relation overpowers the very specific historical circumstances and materialities of such negotiations. However these critiques overlook Bourdieu's idea of the habitus being both constituted by, and constituting the world immediate to it. Equally they neglect Bourdieu's focus on the habitus as embodied, and the implications of this embodiment in that "cultural construction is achieved through action rather than simply conceptualization" (Meskell in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 2)

Threading together Bourdieu's outline of consumption as cultural practice with Foucault's ideas on the archive as historically variable I counter these critiques and argue that Bourdieu's theory of consumption aids rather than hampers our understanding how objects are used in social reproduction. The literature on consumption reiterates how in market exchanges meaning and value systems are continually negotiated and reworked. This literature provides the all-important link between the public world of the collecting market and the transmission of these market values into the private and personal spaces of collectors. Engagement in this way occurs across multiple sites, it's not just about private moments of reverie at home in one's loft. Bourdieu and Foucault illustrate how private moments with collectibles are tempered by wider networks of meaning that circulate through collecting communities and markets, such as those governing collector's reputations, and the shifting hierarchies of value against which collectibles are assessed. These insights are particularly pertinent to understanding how the collectibles in one's private collection are always imbricated within a wider cultural community and thus become crucial to processes of self identification and social location.

Both Bourdieu in his theory of distinction, and Foucault in his focus on the order of things and his fascination with modes of classification, underscore how what collectors do with their collectibles is every bit as important as the collectible objects themselves. For Foucault and Bourdieu it is the uses to which the material world is put that matter. Bourdieu and Foucault see our negotiations with material goods as productive and creative of something new. My use of

Bourdieu and Foucault thus cements my theoretical position on consumption and collecting as a constructionist practice in which “cultural forms and artifacts exist as expressions of underlying economic patterns, giving voice to them, but are not to be conceptualized as mere reflections in the forces and relations of production” (Gilloch 1996: 134). In concert with my understanding of collecting as a practice and my interest in how collectibles are used to political, economic and social ends, I understand consumption as a productive activity in which artifacts, such as collectibles, are crucial to the cultural construction of meaning.

Foucault’s outline of the archive is helpful when considering this productive character of consumption activity. Above all, Foucault emphasizes that the building of an archive, and the classification of the material record is an argument, and a particular way of making sense of the world and one’s place in it. Foucault underlines how the configuration of material goods is productive: “the archive is not just a passive collection of records from the past, it is an active and controlling system of enunciation” (Szczelkun 2002). Foucault demonstrates how the material world is absolutely bound up with a larger field of politics, community and knowledge. The material good is indispensable to the assembly of the archive along particular lines. Foucault’s ultimate concern was with power and its exercise through a complex network of persons, things, spaces and practices. And, as Alex Preda asserts,

If things, seen as materialized knots of practical knowledge, play an active role in the generating structures of social order and if we accept Michel Foucault’s (1979) thesis that the knowledge processes underwriting social order are also entangled with structures of social power, then we may rightly inquire about the part played by things in such power structures (1999: 356).

Foucault's theory of the centrality of material goods in the exercise of power provides ample justification for studying collecting as a particular negotiation between collectors and their collectibles. Conceptualizing the collection as an archive allows us to see how in the practice of collecting the collectible becomes a powerful form through which social power is exercised and reproduced. Once we understand collecting as an act of authentication, rejection and ordering we can begin to see how what is at stake in material negotiations attaches us to and endears us to our material goods in significant ways. It is the way that material goods are made to circulate through and negotiate social worlds that imbues them with value.

The literature on consumption also helps me position collecting as a very particular act of consumption and the collectible a particular form of commodity. Conceptualizing a collectible as a commodity is in direct opposition to theoretical considerations of collectibles as "inalienable possession[s], outside the usual system of exchange, un-exchangeable but still mediating social relationships" (Weiner 1992: 2). Work done in this vein draws on both Weiner's concept of inalienable possessions, and Mauss' theory of the gift to examine how objects such as mementos and heirlooms are used to transact social relationships (1992; 1990). I extend these components of inalienability to argue that collectibles are best conceptualized as a special form of exchange commodity, in contrast to everyday commodities such as food and shampoo. These latter everyday commodities have shorter commodity phases and are, for the most part, not actively consumed in a sustained and focused manner. The depth of attachment an

individual has with shampoo is not of the same order as that with a toy collectible. Collectibles are ‘inalienable commodities,’ if you will. They are exchangeable, and furthermore, in these moments of exchange their complex layers of personal, and cultural value are transacted.

Collectors do differ in the degree to which they commoditize their collectibles, however the collectors I worked with largely engaged actively with the collecting market. Collectibles circulated in and out of collections much more routinely than expected, and even those exchanged less frequently were assessed according to the values of the market. It is important to remember that commodification does not make items meaningless to collectors. Indeed as “Miller would argue...people actively reconstruct meanings and appropriate them in their consumption activities thus overcoming the alienating effects of mass culture” (Tilley 2006: 68). The financial value of collectibles and their circulation throughout these markets is an enhancement of their meaningfulness rather than a detraction.

The concepts of the gift and inalienability were indispensable in developing the extent to which material goods are used to negotiate social bonds and become a part of their owner’s identity as “objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them” (Mauss 1990: 31).

I draw heavily on the idea of material goods being used to navigate social relations to emphasize how collectibles become an extension of and a means of establishing collectors’ identities. This vein of the consumer culture literature on the use of commodities in the transaction of social relationships is central to

understanding how collectibles are used as tools in processes of identification. Working from a large body of work on consumption and identification including “Miller (1995) who identifies consumption as a main arena of struggle over difference of selves and values” I develop throughout the project the idea that collectibles come to be valuable to collectors for their use to stake our reputations, hierarchies of economic and social worth and assertions of expertise (Shankar 2006: 296). My concern with the valuation of things or what Miller terms “*the issue of mattering* not only leads to a concern with...consuming things...but an appreciation that the key moment in which people construct themselves or are constructed by others is increasingly through relations with cultural forms in the arena of consumption” (1998: 11).

Miller’s insight on the integrity of consumption to processes of identification is echoed in work done in studies of subcultures on how degrees of community membership are navigated and demonstrated via the employment of goods in particular ways. Dick Hebdige’s work on how objects come to “take on a symbolic dimension” in subcultures sketches not only the extent to which the cultural consumption of particular goods is used in processes of identification but describes “the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as ‘style’ in subculture” (1979: 2, 3). In fact using Hebdige we can argue that the toy collectors I spoke with and observed are a subculture. Although not countercultural they can be defined as subcultural to the extent that their re-appropriating cultural goods and reasserting them into new hierarchies of value as collectibles defines them as a group. What is important to the definition of toy

collectors as a subculture is not so much the objects they collect but the way they transact these objects as a community. Theorizing toy collectors as a subculture underlines that materiality or the role of material goods in sociality is “a quality of relationship rather than of things” (Pels 1998: 99)

Hebdige successfully illustrates the use of cultural goods as markers of social location following a long tradition of works in this area including Bourdieu on distinction, Veblen on conspicuous consumption, and Durkheim on totems. He also, crucially, reiterates the central role the very mutability of object meanings plays in their value. It is precisely that object meanings can be reconfigured and “made to mean and mean again” (*ibid*) that elevates their worth in social negotiations of membership and identity. Toy collectors may not be a countercultural force in our modern society like the punks Hebdige worked with, but they are experts in the repeated contextualization and re-contextualization of objects. The very essence of collecting is this continual construction and maintenance of meaning in commodities, which, as Hebdige reminds us, “arrive at the market place already laden with significance. They are, in Marx’s words (1970), ‘social hieroglyphs’ and their meanings are inflected by conventional usage” (1979: 95). In fact the use of collectibles in processes of identification is further amplified when we consider how they sit at a nexus of personal meanings, such as stories of acquisition, and wider culturally shared “conventions” (*ibid*) of meaning. As we will see in a later discussion on the rules of collecting, it is in the very process of negotiating between these personal and cultural meanings that collectors are able to establish their identities as collectors and in turn their

membership within collecting communities. As Appadurai reminds us: “in any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structures of commoditization and his own personal attempts to being a value order to the universe of things” (1986: 76).

Numerous theoretical works are instrumental in helping me situate collecting in a particular time and place, a space of late modern consumer capitalism and of mass produced commodities (Benjamin 1968; Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Lash and Urry 1996; Miller 2001). The consumer culture literature, far from historically arbitrary, has focused on the new relations between object and subject born of contemporary consumer culture and its mass production and dissemination of products. Conceptualizing the collectible as commodity allows me, crucially, to situate it in a wider economic network. Perhaps most importantly, the consumer culture literature has illustrated the mutability of the commodity, and its circulation through social worlds in an assortment of commodity phases (see Kopytoff in Appadurai 1986):

Commodities – objects produced for exchange, upon which various social meanings are bestowed – provide a unique window on the co-construction of the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural.’ Through production, circulation, and consumption, commodities shuttle back and forth between the poles of use value and exchange value. But commodities also embody emotional value in the meanings and attachments bestowed upon them by cognizant consumers (Bridge and Smith 2003: 258)

The toy collectible can be seen as a particular form of commodity by virtue of its circulation in multiple consumer markets and spaces. Collectibles may have been ready-mades at one point but they are no longer brand new. Instead they come to the collector sedimented with multiple histories, their surfaces bearing the traces

of their previous owners. It is exactly this multiple presence of the collectible that makes it engaging for the collector. The very stuff of collecting is about putting into play and studying the various phases of commodification and de-commodification of the collectible. In tracing product lineages, speculating about manufacture and researching the original consumers of the collectible, collectors are historians of commodity culture.

To study collecting as a practice of re-contextualization is to acknowledge how collectibles as “consumer objects are continually becoming...they are, then, neither finished or inviolable forms at the point of production and acquisition, but rather are better regarded as continually evolving, positioned within and affected by an ongoing flow of consumer practice” (Gregson et al. 2009: 250). It is important to remember however, that although the meanings of collectibles are mutable, their materiality is relatively stable and durable over time. This play between a collectible’s material presence at hand and the worlds of shifting meaning they are made to represent is important to the practice of collecting. Collecting is all about evoking particular moments of history, and authenticating these moments through the material presence of the collectible. Playing the mutability of object meanings against the stability of the collectible as material object, collectors are able to bring history to life at the same time as they “build and rebuild selves in various locations in various things” reinforcing their claims to reputation and expertise (Thomas in Gell 1998: xxi).

Despite the preservation of detailed consumption histories, collectibles are ultimately consumed in a manner distinct from their originally intended function.

As a collectible the material good is a commodity of a completely different order.

“Pomian defines such objects as semiophores – that is as objects prized for their capacity to produce meaning rather than for their usefulness” (Bennett 1995: 165).

In the passage of time the consumer of the toy collectible has shifted from a young child to an older collector and although a number of the latter do to some extent ‘play’ with their toy collectibles, the original function of the item has shifted. The pressures of time have made the collectible increasingly fragile, and require it be stored carefully. Collectibles have largely evolved in their use value. Their original functionality is residual, haunting their current consumption as collectibles. The history of an object as it was originally intended heavily influences the lines along which collectors structure their collections, as well as their assertions of authenticity. Collectors repeatedly emphasize the importance of their toy collectible by appealing to the special connection the original young owner had with it and pointing out any marks of wear and tear, as testament to its being loved. Emphasizing these marks of use, which will be discussed in much more detail later, is a collector’s way of building from the material object to establish a current regime of value.

The final contribution of the consumer culture literature is its work on theories of the fetish. According to my findings, one of the central processes by which collectors imbued their collectibles with value was through fetishizing them. A great deal of the collectors’ activities border on or are fetishism. These include: anthropomorphizing or personifying one’s collectibles and animating them into imaginative scenarios; researching and reconstruction a collectible’s

history; playing between a collectible's presence at hand and the world of meaning it conjures; as well as nostalgic practice. Fetishism taken broadly can be understood as any practice in which immaterial values are imputed onto collectibles, although more cautiously it should be considered as the moment in which collectors attribute their collectibles a certain power.

Consumer culture theory draws from a large body of literature on the fetish. The fetish has long been of interest to anthropologists studying cultures where particular objects are elevated to magical heights, and enacted in ritual. Fetishism concerns the process by which objects are animated and made to circulate as if they were active entities in and of themselves. It is concerned with the worship of objects and more particularly the manner in which this elevation of objects leads to them appearing to take on a certain power or magic. As such fetishism is about a moment of relation between person and object and specifically involves the worship of an immaterial force in a material form. Christoph Pomian would refer to this as using objects "to function as intermediaries for this world and the next, the sacred and the secular, while at the same time constituting, at the very heart of the secular world, symbols of the distant, the hidden, the absent" (Pomian 1990: 22). A fetish object accrues value because the essence of that thing it connects to, be it religious or not, is believed to be implicit in the very object itself. Fetishism is an immensely helpful concept in coming to terms with the myriad ways collectors animate their collectibles and engage in imaginative practice, and in turn, how within these practices collectibles come to have a hold over us. Fetishism is a matter of perception, a

process in which collectors actively attribute particular qualities to their collectibles.

Fetishism has been employed in divergent ways and has come under attack by anthropologists for its employment “as a vague synonym for things magical and religious” (Ellen 1988: 215). Against this charge and particularly pertinent to collecting is Ellen’s development of fetishism not as an object or as an attribute of any given thing but as a process (1988). The completion of the fetish process is that the object comes to stand in for that which it represents.

Viewed as a process fetishism closely relates to the processes of materialization (DeMarrais et al. 2004), objectification (Miller 1987), and concretization (DeMarrais et al. 2004; Ellen 1988; Pearce 1992), all concepts developed to account for how we fix the abstract and immaterial values onto material forms.

Although theories of the fetish have anthropological and psychological roots (Ellen 1988), the consumer culture literature draws heavily on Marx’s work on the fetishism of commodities. Marx posited that fetishism was one of the central processes by which objects were made to mean in the capitalist economy. In sketching out his definitions of use-value, exchange-value, and the commodity form, Marx underlined how it is not the inside of the commodity or its material form that makes it exchangeable and valuable. “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarse sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects...their objective character as values is therefore purely social” (1979 [1867]: 138). Marx saw fetishism as a result of a “mystical character of the commodity” noting how it is a

process completely “inseparable from the production of commodities” (1976 [1867]: 164, 165). For Marx then, values are the hidden element transacted in exchange. Therefore we need to look behind the way commodities such as collectibles are transacted to study the establishment of cultural values and the role of these values in social reproduction. To do this we need to take the “mystical character of commodities” and our practices of fetishism seriously (1976 [1867]: 164). As David Harvey points out, fetishism is not a façade, it is real in that it is something we do (2009). Despite his repeated reception as a figure preoccupied with the material components of society, Marx, as Stallybrass explains, actually “inscribes *immateriality* as the defining feature of capitalism” (in Spyer 1998: 209).

Theories of fetishism provide great insight on the hold collectibles some to have over collectors. Not only do they take seriously the practices in which collectibles are mobilized imaginatively and account for the seemingly “ambiguous relationship of control of objects by people and people by objects,” they reiterate how the value of a collectible is the outcome of perception or a particular way of relating to the collectible (Ellen 1988: 219). Layering such an insight over Foucault’s reminder that collecting is a variable practice - both a product of and productive of various paradigms of thought (1969) – provides the necessary theoretical framework for understanding collecting as an endless, tenuous play on meaning in which identities, authenticities, financial exchange and memory are transacted.

Employing theories of fetishism in ethnographic analyses of cultural practices like collecting, as a process, as an activity that *humans do*, is exceedingly worthwhile, taking seriously what Tim Dant refers to as our tendency to “experience objects as having an inside” (Dant 2000: 123). These theories allow us to consider how fetishes are able to circulate independent of the individuals who have constructed them. As a result of this circulation, Lynn Meskell notes how “Fetishes can communicate their own messages: this is animism with a vengeance...materiality strikes back...material objects, made by human hands, thus transcends their makers, albeit through human intentionality and artifice” (in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 253). Theories of fetishism demonstrate how it is in the process of collectors responding to, and tailoring their behaviour *as if* their objects were powerful that collectibles come to be imbued with value.

### **Working Forward**

Drawing on both the collecting and the consumer culture literatures in contrast to the material cultural literature this project endeavours to develop two central concepts: the extended artefact and presence. Both of these concepts are reflected in my findings on collecting, and propose an alternative way of understanding the hold objects come to have over us. Throughout the chapters that follow I work with the collectible as an extended artefact, that is, as an object sedimented with human meaning, culture and social relations. This concept of the extended artifact parallels Foucault’s work in connecting the material archive to “the whole system or apparatus that enables such artifacts to exist” (Bate 2007) and echoes Bourdieu’s positioning of material goods as extensive with “the fungibility among

economic, cultural, and social resources” (Lizardo 2006: 780). John Robb defines the extended artefact:

In archaeology, our operative unit is often the artefact. However, in social life, the operative unit is often the extended artefact – the shadowy entity which includes not only the physical thing itself, but also all the conditions, plans and meanings humans surround it with (Robb in DeMarrais 2004: 137)

Collectors never relate to an object alone but to all the meanings tied up in, or extending from it, that is, they respond to and collect extended artefacts. “The artefact is not a discrete entity but a material form bound into continual cycles of articulation and disarticulation” (DeSilvery 2006: 335). Collecting, in that it juxtaposes collectibles together in new ways and makes arguments about their position in wider value hierarchies, is just such a process of articulation and disarticulation. Playing on these extensions is a defining activity of collecting, especially when collecting antique collectibles. It is the very extension of the toy collectible through time that makes it interesting to collectors: a collectible is fascinating for its durability through time. Recognition of this durability means that collectors attribute their collectibles a presence.

A collectible’s extended existence is often the result of its being present in multiple time periods and its circulation through various phases of ownership. Collectibles have traversed multiple lifetimes, and as such, they occupy the past and the present, the here and the there, and are assigned a certain presence based on these travels. Furthermore collectibles have a tacit materiality, or what Walter Benjamin referred to as a “presence at hand.” It is a combination of a collectible’s physical immediacy, and its material durability through time that makes it so

compelling to collectors. A collectible is at once so much more and yet nothing less than the physical object standing before us. The very thing that collectors seek to engage with and possess in their collecting activities is the extended artefact, the collectible and all of its multiple presences. Pointing out the provenance of a collectible, its owners and history of consumption is a collector's attempt to possess and associate with all the meanings understood to extend from the object. In this vein collecting is much more than the mere accumulation of material goods. Most collectors see indiscriminate accumulation as the mark of an amateur, serious collectors work with the extended artefact:

When you're just acquiring stuff more or less as you see it, that's very different from when you start looking at things and 'oh I wonder where that was made,' and 'that's interesting' and you start delving through catalogues and start looking up all these minor differences in construction and so on, then the thing becomes collecting (Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

At a large collectors' fair I found myself at a loss during an interview. The interview didn't seem to be going anywhere, and the collector was content to speak to the specifics and intricacies of his collecting field. I was hoping to gain some insight into how the object came to enchant this individual, as a longtime avid collector he certainly had an intense relationship to his collectibles. Yet all my attempts to engage him in a wider discussion about his engagement with objects were fruitless. This was when I saw a man come up behind us and gesture towards a small white MG. He was asking the collector permission to pick it up. The collector nodded consent and turned to me and began talking again. But my attention was fixated on the somewhat unkempt man before me, in pants three sizes to big, who appeared to be cuddling the car. He was holding it very close to

himself, turning it over, rubbing his fingers over it. He held it for a good minute before putting it back and leaving with a quick nod. The collector then informed me that this man appears at his table at each and every fair and holds the same car. He speculated that perhaps he used to have that car in the past, or went on dates with a special girl in that car. I had witnessed an unspoken moment, testament to the intensity of our relations with objects – a merger of presences between the unknown collector and a favourite collectible, a moment about the meaning we make of our material goods. In his moment of reverie the unknown collector was able to make contact with another time and place and although he was unable to possess the car for unspecified reasons, he gained temporary possession in holding the car for a few moments.

When a collector approaches an object he is responding to an entity which is a combination of the collectible present before him and the traces of all other spaces and places in which it has been present – its sedimented meaning. He cannot relate to one without the other. The very stuff of collecting is about enlivening and immersing oneself in the extension of the object in place and time. This is why vintage collectibles with significant provenance are so desirable. From where has it come? Through whose hands? Which historical eras? The object's presence allows collectors to slip back and forth between a world of imagination and the physical materiality in which this imagination is invested. An imaginative engagement is absolutely vital to collecting as an activity. Collectors forge contact with other places and times on the basis of all the meanings they see extending from the collectible. The collectible's durable, material presence

functions as an access point to the distant. The immersion in and contact with these extensions or their fetishization is as much a part of collecting as the collectible itself. Speaking to the practices of fetishism and enchantment Walter Benjamin argues that ownership confers a unique proximity and contact with all that extends from the collectible. Drawing from Marx's fetishism of commodities by characterizing collecting as "a very mysterious relationship to ownership," Benjamin asserts how collecting is:

A relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is their usefulness – but studies and loves them as a scene, the stage of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is locking the individual items within a magic circle...everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership – for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object (Benjamin 1973: 60)

Collecting in particular, and its "locking" of collectibles into "a magic circle," is a form of fetishism that requires an extended period of consumption. Each piece in a collection relates to every other piece in the collection, and the meanings conveyed by the collection shift as new items are added opening up new imaginative possibilities. Collecting then, is not just about a relation between an object and a subject, the dyad that material culture studies works with most frequently, but about a relation between a collector and a *constellation of items* arranged in a meaningful way. As such collecting is a particular form of consumption. The extended meanings of each collectible are in a sustained, ongoing and evolving dialogue with every other collectible in the collection. Each item in a collection references other items just as an encyclopedia guides us

toward other related references. Collectors negotiate and imagine all the extensions of their collectibles. Running alongside the aesthetic pattern of a collection, and its assembly of like or related pieces, is an underlying historical story of the collection as a point of reference to other places and time eras. As the collection inevitably grows the range of potential for making meaning with the collection expands. The cumulative nature of collecting practice ensures that collectibles are imbued and made extensive with an ever-more expansive constellation of meanings.

One collector reflected on his own collectibles as extended objects, noting how in his collecting activities “the objects are just a starting point” from which he can establish larger historical trajectories and “see cross relationships between things” (Vincent, interview with author, December 2006). Thus the question of the value of the object, is as much about how an “object comes to signal or ‘be’ something beyond itself” as it is about where they allow us to go (Knappett 2002: 102).

Presence as a concept conveys the idea of collectors responding to a force that they locate within a material good. As a way of thinking about the fetishistic character of collecting practice the concept of presence is about accounting for the fact that objects come to have an effect in the course of our relations with them. This effect is the product of the collectors’ perceptions of the object’s presence in previous places and times and a construction of a hierarchy of values around the object.

It is important we duly consider this attribution of effect or fetishization of the collectible. Not only because it is a central way in which collectibles become imbued with value but because, as David Harvey explains working from Marx, “surface appearances are not simply allusions. [Fetishism] is real, it is what we do and we need to take account of this reality while accounting for underlying structures” (Harvey 2009). Pearce clarifies this point even further cementing the importance of looking at the role of fetishism in collecting practice and the value collectibles come to have for collectors: “of course the character of physical objects can only come by endowment from human beings. But this is not how any given individual at a specific time and place experiences the world of material things. For him, things, or some of them, have a power of their own to which he responds” (Pearce 2000: 170).

The term presence speaks to a force existing between collector and collectible that encapsulates both the effect of a collectible on a collector as well as the interpretation a collector has of a collectible. Collectors often had difficulty conveying the effect or enchantment a collectible held over them. One collector describes how “once you buy one you just understand they’ve just got *something*, a history and no two are the same” (Helen, interview with author, March 2007). Another collector how, “it’s just the character of the piece, to me it just has that something else, it’s not new, it just simply has a feel to it, I can’t describe what that is but it’s just, to me, it’s nicer” (Robert, interview with author, March 2007). In their difficulty delineating that special something of their collectibles Helen and Robert differ to presence as something felt and a function of the mystical

character of the object rather than something they have themselves imputed onto the object given their knowledge of its cultural importance.

Presence, as a concept has precursors in several works. This includes Baudrillard's consideration of the moment when "human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a 'presence'" (Baudrillard 1996: 16), as well as in Benjamin's concept of the aura which he employed interchangeably with presence. For the purposes of my project, the way the object accrues a presence or value in the activity of collecting, and the relation between individuals and physical objects *as they are experienced* is of primary relevance. Pearce's pronouncement on how a "given individual experiences the world" is an immensely helpful reminder that the more productive way forward is to examine just how collectors experience the material world (2000: 170). How do collectors talk about and relate to their collectibles? This project closely considers how collectibles come to be so significant, and collectors' relationships with their collectibles so intense. I work with the idea of presence as a moment of perception and look at how it is accrued, perceived and valued in collecting worlds.

In carefully considering an empirically based series of intense moments and relationships between collector's and their collectibles it is hoped that the significance of these moments will provide new perspectives on how we become enamoured and attached to the object world. Ultimately, the entity I am interested in is neither the collector nor the collectible but their interaction, for it is in these

moments of interaction that meaning is made. In keeping with my focus on collecting as an activity and a process by which collectors and collectibles become entangled, I line up with Chris Pinney who reminds us that “clearly things make people, and people who are made by those things go on to make other things. The central question, however, is not whether this does or doesn't happen, but in what kind of way it happens. What is the modality of this relationship?” (Pinney in Miller 2002: 256)

Both theories of fetishism and of the aura focus on how objects are accorded an influence in the course our relations with them. The parallels between these two approaches are worth further discussion. In his consideration of mechanical reproduction Benjamin develops the idea that fetishes circulate independent of their origins. From externalizing concepts into material forms, fetishes can be “culturally transmitted independently of the existence of individual persons,” that is to say they are capable of circulating (Ellen 1988: 222). In his theory of the aura Benjamin works with mechanical reproduction, a dramatic case of circulation, to demonstrate how the direct link between the object and the person who attributed that object a particular value has been complicated. Mechanical reproduction results in the “withering” of an original work of art. An original piece of art, the Mona Lisa, for example, is found no longer just in the Louvre but on coffee mugs, on aprons, on postcards and hung on living room walls around the world. The Mona Lisa depreciates in immediate presence, or in the very least is compromised by its circulating reproductions. Yet, in an artful twist, Benjamin explains that aura or presence emerges in new forms. In an era of

mechanical reproduction the aura of an object is both complicated and enhanced by its manifold reproduction. Our perception of the Mona Lisa as an art object extends its boundaries, all the coffee mugs and t-shirts reverberating in our relation to it as a piece of art.

The direct relation between perceiver and perceived is increasingly tempered by factors such as an object's cultural circulation, its history and values, the community within which it circulates, and the wider politics surrounding it. In introducing these factors into the picture, Benjamin's work corresponds with the idea of the extended artefact. Benjamin demonstrates how the aura of an object includes factors not immediately present to its tacit form, such as markets, value systems and cultural histories. In Benjamin's framework subjects use objects to navigate the world. Because of the way they are attributed particular characteristics, objects are able to impose upon us and be imposed upon. Not unlike Bourdieu's conception of social practice as both constituting and constituted (Calhoun 1993), "for Benjamin, the buildings, spaces, monuments and objects that comprise the urban environment *both are a response to, and reflexively structure* patterns of human social activity" (Gilloch 1996: 6, emphasis added).

Walter Benjamin's concept of aura and his theorizations on the changing juxtaposition of person and object in an era of mechanical reproduction provide specific cues to the enchanted relationship between collector and collectible. Benjamin asserts that aura withers in mechanical reproduction only to resurface in a new form, in a process that he refers to as "reactivation" (1968). I would argue,

following Benjamin that collecting is just such an activation of aura and the collectible just such a reactivated object. The form this re-enchantment of aura takes is fascinating. In building a case for a collectible's provenance, and tracing in detail the circumstances of its original production, collectors strive to make contact with and defer to the original. Yet toy collectibles are mechanically reproduced items, manufactured by the hundreds and thousands. They are copies and very few are original pieces except perhaps prototypes or custom orders. Those that are original are dearly cherished as the most valuable of all collectibles, but given the mechanical reproduction of the vast majority of toy collectibles, value is largely assigned not on the basis of originality, but on the construction of degrees of originality or rarity. Often, in an effort to forefront the economic value of rarity, collectors devise ever-new prerequisites for rarity. In an era of mechanical reproduction collectors often argue for the rarity of their collectibles on the basis that it is the only one of hundreds of identical items that has survived the ravages of time. Evidence that mechanical reproduction is not exact and that errors were made during production can also lend the collectible a rarity. So called 'mistake pieces' figure high in collectible hierarchies of value. Only a very select collector is able to locate and afford these special pieces: the ultimate collectibles. Douglas describes such a collector:

Now if you talk to John Edwards you will know what an elitist is. He has unique items, only one was ever made of some of the objects he has. He's about collecting variations that were mistakes, they come out of the factory and they were made by someone who wasn't paying attention, they put the wrong transfers on it, painted it the wrong colour, or it was a unique thing that was actually requested to come out of the factory by a wealthy person, and he collects these sorts of things. That's a serious collector. He has one

of everything that was ever made and one of everything that was never supposed to be made! (interview with author, May 2007)

Benjamin's theory of the reactivation of aura highlights how value, and in this case rarity, is culturally constructed and argued for by the collector through the development of the collectible as fetish.

Benjamin's theory of the aura adds to our understanding of theories of the fetish, by speaking to the historically variable nature of the relationship between object and person. In collecting rarities collectors collect variations, grouping identical objects so they contribute to the completion of the historical puzzle of the production of one collectible. The puzzle is always shifting as new pieces are added. Value assertions require continual maintenance. Walter Benjamin's theory of aura in an age of mechanical reproduction confirms that the relationship between people and objects is historically variable, continuously made and remade.

Collectors are true genealogists in Foucault's sense of the term, focusing on "the lofty origin" and "listen[ing] to history" in all of its "disparity" (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 79). Variations are combined together to argue for the ideal, original train as it was meant to be, which collectors define as true to the essence of the toy, or as if it had just left the shop. Authenticity in mechanical reproduction is increasingly ascribed, on the merits of an argument made by the collector about a particular piece and its historical importance. The reactivation of aura in mechanical reproduction places further demands on the perceiver. As something constructed, fabricated, and something which needs to be argued for, it creates a powerful engagement between a collector and their collectibles. The

collector delights in this challenge, seeks to promote the appreciation of his or her carefully constructed collection against an array of other possibilities.

## **Conclusion**

Working from the collecting and consumer literatures and in thinking about the toy collectible as an extended artifact with multiple presences, I argue that understanding collecting as an activity in which collectors playfully engage material goods in the creation of social, financial and cultural meaning is key to grasping the value they come to hold for collectors. In the chapters that follow theories of identification through cultural commodities; subculture studies; nostalgia; fetishism; and consumption as a cultural construction will be enlisted to explore the processes in which collectibles are imbued with meaning in collecting communities. Working from the patterns of collecting practice across the group of collectors I spoke with, the chapters will sketch collecting as its own particular form of consumption and the collectible as its own form of the commodity.

Collecting is a fascinatingly intense relationship with the material world. Walking around massive toy fairs watching hundreds of collectors conversing, bargaining, eyeing, touching, rejecting, observing and picking through scores of collectible goods, the thrill of collecting is palpable. Collectors devote decades of their time and energy to accumulating collectibles, arranging and rearranging them, dusting them, and reminiscing with them. The collecting drive, as it is commonly referred to, goes far beyond a mere urge to accumulate objects, and to complete a set. Collecting is about making sense. Making one's way through complex and often unknown histories, and the minute material details of a Corgi

car is equally as much a pleasure as owning the collectible itself. What on the surface appears as nothing more than tinkering with a set of toy cars is upon closer examination, part of a much wider social process in which reputations, economic stature, political and cultural position are negotiated. Looking at a collection of material goods alone tells us very little about collecting. Looking instead at how material goods are mobilized in collecting communities to social, cultural and economic ends is where the parameters of collecting start to take shape.

Working with the theories outlined above, and delving further into the collectors' own experiences in more detail, I examine how collectors, collecting communities and collectible markets endow objects with meaning, and the extent to which the relationship between collector and collectible is then tempered by these meanings. I build on the idea of presence, and of collectibles as extended artefacts to consider how collectibles' "meaningfulness is constituted" (Kiendl 2004). How do collectors relate to their collectibles? How do they characterize their importance, or the grip they have on them? How does a fascination with objects develop? What metaphors do collectors employ to describe collecting? When and where does the intensity of the collecting relation break down and what does this disenchantment tell us?

Analysing the dreams, stories and explanations of collectors, as well as my impressions and observations on the sites, practices and communities of collecting, the chapters that follow will reflect on the relation between collector and collectible as it exists in collecting worlds. These analyses address what it

means to be engaged with commodities in late consumer capitalism, developing our understanding of collecting worlds and what exactly collecting entails, at the same time as offering new ways of thinking around how we engage material goods for social purposes. These chapters peel back the layers of meaning with which collectibles are imbued, to take a closer look at the complexities of how they become meaningful.

The chapters are organized thematically according to the wider patterns of engagement observed between collector and collectible. All chapters examine the paradigm of collecting as an activity and develop the idea of presence and the extended artefact. Together they evoke the world of toy collecting, and bring to life collecting as an active negotiation of the material world.

The chapter that follows works through the theme of possession. The possession of collectibles remains a central component of collecting. This chapter presents the surprisingly complicated ways collectors negotiate and consider possession. In investigating collectors' various narratives of possession it uncovers what possession entails and specifically what other kinds of activities it allows. It considers the hierarchies of access that exist in collecting communities and recognizes that collectibles are objects which circulate throughout these communities undergoing various different phases of possession. In considering what possession tells us about the relationship between the collector and their collectible I emphasize the indicative moments in which possession is severed and a collector finds herself letting go or selling off a collectible.

The third chapter details collecting as a nostalgic exercise. Nostalgia, of many different varieties, figures prominently in the interviews with collectors. The impact of nostalgia on the relationship collectors have with their collectibles is assessed by comparing and contrasting nostalgia's various manifestations. This chapter examines how collectibles function as intermediaries between the invisible (the past in this case) and the visible (the collectible as material witness). It engages with how material goods are mobilized in the production of memory and considers nostalgia as a form of animation. Focusing on nostalgic practice it explains how collectors employ their collectible to access the otherwise unattainable past socially locating themselves in the process.

Chapter Four focuses on the toy collecting market. This chapter considers how the toy market, in its various guises, influences the meaningfulness of collectibles, using observations made at market sites and spaces of collecting including: auctions, fairs, as well as the Internet, in concert with the myriad comments of collectors on those markets. The circulation of collectibles as commodities reveals a great deal about how the political debates over value that permeate the market are negotiated. What role does the market play in fostering the value or magic of the object? This chapter considers a particular type of collector – the collector-dealer and engages with the contradictory ways in which collectors think about the idea of collecting for investment, and ‘playing’ the market. Working from sentiments of disdain to celebration, I consider how the financial valuation of collectibles occupies an uneasy place in many collectors’

philosophies. The economic evaluations collectors make of their collectibles is a continual jostle of emotional, cultural, financial and social factors.

Chapter Five addresses the complex manner in which authenticity and value are negotiated in collecting communities. As a facet of a trio of financial, cultural and material values -- often in direct confrontation with one another -- authenticity is negotiated on the basis of constantly evolving hierarchies against which collectors and collectibles alike are slotted. As commodities, first and foremost manufactured in factories of Europe and intended ultimately for play, surviving toy collectibles accrue authenticity according to very different parameters than other collectibles, like stamps, or fine art, for instance. These differences will be considered and the toy collectible located as a *particular* type of collectible object. Chapter Five similarly contrasts collectors' ideas of authenticity and in-authenticity, with a discussion of forgeries, debates on restoration and the basis for authentication. In the fragility of authenticity lies a wealth of information about how the value of the object is eminently social; constructed by and argued for by collectors.

Chapter Six considers collecting as a practice of control and ordering, and collectibles as particular objects for the manner in which they are placed in relation to a wider collection or series of objects. A collectible is ultimately used to contribute to a statement greater than itself, and the enchantment of each collectible is a virtue of its potential contribution in relation to the wider collection. The theme of ordering and control surfaced throughout the interviews in the form of an obsession with variation, classification and in the collectors'

appreciation of the miniature as particularly friendly to manipulation. Control also surfaced in the interviews in terms of how collectibles were seen to have a certain hold over collectors. Very few collectors would admit to anything but an intense relationship to their collectibles, yet they delighted in telling of other collectors who had gone off the deep end, so to speak. These narratives provide a fascinating insight into what it means for collectors to lose control, and details the changing relationship between collector and collectible implicit in this loss of control.

Chapter Seven concludes by engaging material culture, consumption and collecting theories to present a final argument for the idea of presence and the object as extended artefact. Finally, it reflects on my overall experience of doing research, pointing out how Vincent's comment that the "object is just the starting point" resonates not only in relation to the paradox of possession but in the wider methodological and theoretical implications of the project. This concluding chapter pays homage to the collectors who took the time to speak to me, to open their homes and their treasured collections, enthusiastically and reflectively.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Possession**

Somebody told me that story about an old British Model Society member who had a fabulous collection of toy soldiers and it had been known for a considerable amount of time that this obsession he had with soldiers split the marriage and he got divorced. And as a part of the settlement the wife got the collection of soldiers. And she squirreled it away and I'm not sure if this is true but it's too good. It's said that the bloke killed his wife because of it (Robert, interview with author, March 2007).

Collecting is a tale of possession taken to its most intense extreme. To collect is to possess items in a sustained, ongoing and cumulative fashion, and the common thread uniting all collectors, no matter how diverse their collectibles, is their drive towards possession. To possess is to own but also inevitably involves a focused appreciation, immersion in and ritual of care for one's compulsion. The sustained nature of this relationship is what sets collecting aside as a particular form of cultural consumption.

Possession in collecting is constantly renewed, necessarily so, because as items are added into the collection the relations between each component of the collection shifts. The possession of collectibles is defined by their location and subordination to a wider governing series – the collection. As Bourdieu notes in *Distinction*, “the very meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed” (1984: 88). Collecting, as a form of possession, is not only the placement of an object in an already existing system, but an attempt to contribute to and make statements on the very system itself. As this chapter will explore, possession is the point in which collectors negotiate between the personal meanings and values surrounding their collectibles and the

much larger socially shared conventions and meanings governing these collectibles. This negotiation of the personal and the cultural is central to the process in which collectors deploy their collectibles in processes of identification. Baudrillard reminds us how “through objects, each individual and group searches out his/her place in an order, all the while trying to jostle this order according to a personal trajectory” (1981: 38).

Possession seals a new level of connection between collector and collectible. Ownership signals a particularly intimate level of interaction with material goods, that “gathers things momentarily to a point by locating them in the owner...effecting an identity” (Strathern in Miller 2005: 88). Ownership, to work within Foucault’s framework of the archive, ensures that the archivist is not only able to make statements with the archive, but that these statements come to be associated with the archivist him or herself. As Belk notes, “a key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as parts of ourselves” (1988: 139). Collectors use their collectibles to reinforce their reputations, and to navigate the established rules within their communities governing and legitimating certain forms of ownership as “serious” collecting.

The tensions collectors negotiate between a personal realm of meaning and a wider cultural one is manifest in the struggles over definitions of originality, restoration and in the stories collectors tell about each other. This chapter will work through such examples to demonstrate how debates over value are integral to the establishment of status within the collecting community, and have direct

implications for the identities of those collectors involved. A collector's efforts to locate their own personal meanings within a wider cultural regime of value are integral to the process by which they socially locate themselves. Within every argument for the originality of a collectible piece, or for the necessity of restoration lies not only a statement on the value of objects, but on the collectors transacting them.

Ownership occurs in myriad ways but only specific instances of possession are considered central to the collection. Complicated social and cultural boundaries are drawn around what constitutes proper possession. Collectors are continuously judged within the community on account not only of their collectibles but according to how they collect, what statements they are able to assert with their collectibles, and what importance their assertions come to have within the wider community. These rules or "systems of classification," as Bourdieu points out, are based on "ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society" (Bourdieu 1993: 2). These categorizations come to define both the collector and the collection. For toy collectors, ownership, and the proper possession of a collection, involves the mobilization of a collectible according to community conventions. Boundary work such as this is a cultural practice, it is not just something collectors decide on but something they actively negotiate, whether in bidding for specific items at auction, or in displaying a particular collectible in a particular way. Collecting is all about making statements about the world by talking about, buying, caring for and juxtaposing collectibles in strategic ways. Bourdieu's theory of classification provides the crucial link

connecting the practices of possession to those of political negotiation. “Aesthetic confrontations, in Bourdieu’s eyes, are ‘about the legitimate vision of the world’ and are thus ‘political conflicts (appearing in their most euphemistic form) for the power to impose the dominant definition of reality, and social reality in particular” (Ferguson 1999: 114). Collectors are not ‘free’ to construct social and cultural meanings with their collectibles as they may, but instead subject to community constraints, and battles for legitimacy.

A study of possession quickly underlines the extent to which a collector’s reputation and identity is completely bound up with his collectibles. What is more the judgments made within the community are tenuous, evolving and mutable. As we will see in the debates over originality and restoration, the values assigned to collectibles are never fixed despite collectors’ best intentions. What this means is that the relationship collectors have with their collectibles is continually evolving, and changing as the collection develops. The intensity of this relation, as we will see in examining narratives of letting go, is not given but produced and maintained by collectors. Collector’s engagements with their collectibles are diverse. Ranging from absolute passion and elevated levels of excitement, imaginative engagement and fetishization, to a less passionate, somewhat mechanical and lackluster effort, they are engagements tempered by issues of financial access, and status in the community.

The first section of the chapter explains the idea of possession as personalization. Drawing from consumer culture theories’ investigation of how we internalize consumers goods in the process of establishing our self identity,

this section assesses possession as a point of merger between collector and collectible (see Ilmonen 2004; Giddens 1991; Hoskins 1999). Possession is a relationship where, according to Tim Dant, the object and the object's owner become entangled:

There is a link between the person and the object which is physical and spatial which signals the beginning of possession...Material objects might not accurately be described as having 'a life of their own' but once possessed, they share the life of their owner (Dant 2000: 145)

Possession as personalization is a coming together of sorts. It is about how the collector mobilizes their collectible in particular ways and specifically, how the collectible's value is an outcome of the depth of investment a collector has in their collectible. Investment involves collectors building their expertise, and often struggling to repossess items or reincorporate collectibles into their collection that are already heavily sedimented with the histories of their previous possessors.

Looking at the specific case of the auction of an infamous collector's collectibles, as well as some examples in which collector's animate their collectibles, this section of the chapter will demonstrate the extent to which the possession always involves a negotiation of the personal and wider cultural valuations of collectibles.

The second section of the chapter examines the larger ongoing narrative of possession collectors locate their collectibles within. Collecting practice is often a completion of, or response to a larger history of possession. "What turns a piece of stuff into a social object is its embedment in a narrative construction" (Harre 2002: 9). This section is predicated on the notion that collectibles come to hold a

value as collectors construct narratives around them. It pays special attention to how in building these narratives collectors locate both themselves and their collectibles in a wider social order. As Rochberg-Halton notes “valued material possessions...act as signs of the self that are essential in their own right for its continued cultivation, and hence the world of meaning that we create for ourselves, and that creates ourselves, extends literally into the objective surroundings” (in Kroger and Adair 2008: 6).

The third section of the chapter explores how the possession and subsequent valuation of collectibles is often inflected with a concern for and association with origins. The various negotiations of collectors on the status of their collectibles’ connection to an origin are evident of the struggles for legitimacy taking place within the community. Such practices, and the diverse range of characteristics collectors make reference to when distinguishing their collectibles as original, also reiterate the mutability of the meanings invested in collectibles.

The fourth section of the chapter returns to collectors’ narratives of possession to examine two narratives helpful in considering the character of the relationship collectors have with their collectibles. The first are narratives of letting go, those moments that surfaced in fieldwork when collectors are unable to possess, when they sell things on, or when the enchantment they have with their collectibles has ended. The second set of narratives, at the opposite end of the spectrum, are those of collectors who have gone too far and become possessed by their possessions (McCracken 1998). These narratives, for the most part, are of

other collectors' collecting practices and idiosyncrasies. Collectors were much more comfortable telling stories of collectors they knew who had fallen off the edge, rather than speaking to the intensity of their own relations with their collectibles. Such social positioning evokes Bourdieu's theory of cultural struggle and how taste judgments, in this case on what is and isn't a 'proper' relationship to the material world, structure social hierarchies. Collectors displayed strong opinions about what constituted 'serious' collecting; how collecting was compromised; and what form of motivation was acceptable. Parallel to the tension between intense engagement and letting go, was another tension between collecting for passion and collecting for investment. These layers of debate, which inform a great deal of collecting practice, help to sketch out what is at stake in negotiating a collection.

The fifth section details the myriad rules of possession circulating in collecting communities. This section conceptualizes collecting as a cultural field in Bourdieu's sense of the term, as a "site of struggle over 'symbolic capital'" (Reed-Danahay 2006: 11). Working from Bourdieu it explores how the rules governing possession are an arena of cultural, social and political struggle over the reputation, financial worth, and merit of both collectors and collectibles. This section also examines how the collecting drive is a reflection of that fact that "the boundaries of fields are imprecise and shifting" thus requiring continual maintenance and reassertion (Jenkins 1992: 85). The rules of collecting examined include debates on restoration, the extent to which collectibles should be played

with, and the basis on which expertise is assigned. They underscore how possession is at once a socially governed yet expressive activity.

### **Possession as Personalization**

Possession is the point in which a collectible becomes personalized or incorporated into the life of a collector and where the collector becomes attached to their collectibles. In the process of assembling a collection over time, and making sense of it piece by piece, collectors become heavily invested in their collectibles, and as such, they come to hold a value for them. Baudrillard explains the process of investment noting how “no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they [collectibles] become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become the things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion” (1996: 85). In personalization object collectibles circulating within the market are simultaneously made sense of by, and linked to a specific owner. This “incorporation of the consumed items into the personal and social identity of the consumer” is crucial to the weight collectibles come to hold for collectors (Gell 2001:461). The association of collector with collectible means they can be mobilized to assert one’s social location within collecting communities. In this process collectibles are used to establish a social and cultural authority. The exchange of collectibles then, is far more than a mere material transaction.

When personalizing their collectibles collectors assign new values to their acquisitions, and place them within the wider paradigm of their collection. These moments of incorporation are carefully negotiated to legitimize the collector’s

authority. As heavily invested objects like collectibles “move in time and space, [they] become the carriers of more information and greater authority than other kinds of things. Control over their meanings and transmission from one generation to the next accords authority to their owners” (Weiner 1992: 10). One way that collectors assert their authority is in building up a sustained chain of association with their pieces, such as on the basis of a story of acquisition. These stories of acquisition are often ‘glory stories’ in which a combination of luck and the collector’s expertise result in a miraculous find:

One Hornby locomotive I found in an antique dealer’s shop was in such fine condition, with its original box, the black enamel paint having such a high gloss that I was positive at first that it had just been repainted. But no, it was virtually in factory mint condition!  
(Patel May 2007)

Patel’s discovery in the shop was a personal triumph born of an expertise to source particular collectibles, and an ability to cultivate contacts with the wider collecting community. At the same time as he is reinforcing and celebrating his expertise according to wider social requisites by telling his glory story, Patel is reinforcing the depth of his own personal connection to the toy train. Jarvenpa refers to these stories as “acts” which “become part of the social construction of value,’ defining the rightful owners of property and reaffirming the moral order” (2003: 570).

Examining the process by which collectibles are personalized is instructive to the various intersections of the personal and the social that comprise collectors’ relations with their collectibles. Incorporating collectibles into a collection involves a merging of the collector’s personal interpretation of the

collectible with the meanings already attached to it by virtue of its previous circulation. The collector finds himself negotiating between the multiple meanings present in his collectibles or the “tension between personal possession and the place of the object within the system of objects that varies over time” (Dant 2000: 131). Personalization is not always straightforward and involves the careful negotiation of the multiple meanings associated with the object.

This tension was apparent in the collectors’ efforts to delicately balance their possession of a collectible with the traces of all previous possessors, some of who may be notable figures in collecting communities. One such example involved an auction viewing I attended, where the goods up on the block came from the estates of three collectors who had passed on. One collector in particular, Jim MacKay, had achieved a level of notoriety within his collecting community. Although Jim was no longer alive he was very much present in the manner in which the other collectors responded to his collection. As Bourdieu reminds us, it is in practices of consumption that social positions and hierarchies are established and re-established (1984). The object is integral to the establishment of authority in collecting communities. Not only how the object is consumed, but also how it is *perceived* to be consumed by the wider community affects the claims to status and identity that can be made. Jim MacKay was widely recognized as a committed and expert collector, someone who knew what he was doing. Out of respect for Jim McKay, and crucially, for the values that his collecting practice represented, those who acquired his pieces at the auction were scrutinized according to similar hierarchies of value.

Jim MacKay's case provides an insightful example of personalization. His notoriety stemmed from the size of his collection, his expertise and also due to the fact that he was known to "intervene" with his collectibles. Jim's process of personalizing his collectibles and ordering them into his collection involved materially adjusting them, whether changing their wheels, or repainting their parts. Aside from personalizing them on the basis of stories, working with their attendant meanings and categorizing them, a number of collectors not unlike Jim McKay, physically alter their antique collectibles in ways that bear testament to their possession. On this list we can include Bill's coding of his trains according to where they fit into his catalogue. One collector described Jim MacKay's mark of possession:

Although lots of people wouldn't know it, you can tell on the style of the intervention. All the things in that room have been intervened by Jim MacKay. Jim MacKay's got a certain way he works on objects...tweaking it up, you know, and restoring it and stuff like that...if he got anything less than mint condition he would repaint it horribly (Derek December 2006)

Jim's personal signature, which Derek was readily able to detect, shows how collectors come to be associated with their collectibles within the wider community. On the basis of a shared history, proven expertise, and the successful mobilization of his collectibles Jim MacKay was capable of influencing other collectors' readings of his collectibles, and most poignantly, their definitions of mint condition and authenticity. Jim McKay had successfully negotiated the field in which he collected.

Collectibles provide an avenue of identification for collectors, a way of achieving some notoriety and importance within a given community. As Bourdieu explains,

Every material inheritance is, strictly speaking, also a cultural inheritance. Family heirlooms not only bear material witness to the age and continuity of the lineage and so consecrate an identity...they also contribute in a practical way to its spiritual reproduction, that is, to transmitting the values, virtues and competences which are the basis of legitimate membership (1984: 76)

Derek's bitter reflections on the 'heirlooms' left by Jim McKay emphasize how transmitted values are always open to revision. With Derek's critique the cycle of power negotiations starts anew: "you know it's an actual disadvantage for it to be Jim, but that's not how most of the punters will see it, they'll see it as somehow legitimating the object cause Jim was a well known collector" (interview with author, December 2006). Positioning himself as a purist who sees any form of restoration as tarnishing the original state of the collectible, Derek places himself above all the other "punters" in his opposition to Jim McKay's collecting practices. As Derek sees it he is one of few who clearly understands and is expertly capable of recognizing what is and isn't an authentic Hornby train. Nonetheless, Derek does acknowledge the power of Jim McKay's reputation, and how firmly it remains tied to his collectibles after death.

Repossessing items then, for those able to acquire a bit of Jim MacKay's estate at the auction, is indeed a struggle and a negotiation of the tension between one's personal relationship to a collectible and its circulation in wider cultural networks. It is in a combination of both personal and cultural networks that

collectibles come to have a value. Upon, and leading up to acquisition most collectors do a great deal of research, revisit the known history surrounding the object, and fill in the gaps through imaginative reconstruction. They also trace the provenance of the collectible, often involving elaborate chains of possession and exchange that could last years or merely months in duration. It is in these activities of re-enchanting and widening the magic circle again through revisiting histories of possession that the new owner is able to include himself in the possession narrative, and to forge his own personal relation to the collectible in question. This echoes Benjamin's ideas on the reactivation of aura. Collecting provides opportunities to repeatedly re-contextualize objects into new frameworks and according to new juxtapositions. Thus it allows for a re-enchantment and re-personalization of collectibles that moves forward from, but remains capable of paying tribute to, previous owners such as Jim MacKay.

The re-enchantment of collectibles into a “magic circle” (Benjamin 1999: 204) can also involve the collector attributing a collectible certain animate characteristics. These re-enchantments are evidence of how collectors’ negotiations with their material goods slide back and forth along lines of animacy and inanimacy. As we saw in the preceding chapter, we should take these moments of fetishization seriously. They are a significant means by which collectibles come to have a hold over collectors. What follows are examples when collectors spoke of their collectibles as if they were animate. These animations are moments of *relating to* collectibles in specific ways to specific ends. They are a function of the collector’s perception of, and interpretation of the

collectible in any given moment. Considering when these moments occur, and do not, how they are policed and the ends these moments ultimately serve for the collector provides insight into the social, cultural and imaginative work collectors undertake using their collectibles. Looking at the distinctions between ways of relating to the material world provides clues as to the variety of ways in which the collectible is made valuable.

JR: We moved to this house when we got married 52 years ago and there was nothing here, there was just a field, and so I planned the garden as a miniature world. The garden is an accident, it's grown up around this, so the grass is the sea, and the reason the garden wanders about is because they're countries.

RM: The flowerbeds are countries?

JR: they're countries...the paths are rivers and there's twelve countries out here....England, Germany, France, ah Turkey...Austria and Italy is here. And then you've got a huge Indian one which runs along the bottom because I'm a great Indian army buff, and then there's Arabia and Africa, and that's about it...This is a miniature world, the world lives for me...out here there's eight thousand [toy soldiers] who live in these buildings. And so every building has got a purpose, and so that starts to bring it alive, all the officers have got names, and I have religious problems...and I rotate divisions, they rotate every two years, I take them all out and they go somewhere else...All the big wigs, all the generals have their own farms and retirement when they get too old (Joe, interview with author, April 2007)

This is how Joe Richards introduced me to his magical garden, a project of his for over sixty years in addition to a very sizable vintage soldier collection and his workshop where he casts soldiers himself. The garden is a fitting example of how Joe animates his toy soldiers in a sustained manner. The relationship Joe Richards has with his soldiers is complex and extensive. Under his mastery his soldiers live out active military careers, and advance among the ranks to eventual

retirement and death in which case Joe has been known to bury them in the garden.

Joe's garden is a valuable example of fetishism, the curious process by which things are related to as if more than matter. We see in this process how collectibles are made to evoke a much wider world of meaning. As Joe describes his miniature world in detail it becomes increasingly apparent that the garden represents much more to Joe than an amalgam of lead soldiers. It is an entire world for him, complete with religious strife, politics, nationalism and the cycles of life. Joe Richards' garden speaks to much more than boxes of 1/32<sup>nd</sup> scale soldiers because he animates it. He constructs buildings that exemplify each country; focuses on details so much so that he's able to remove the roofs of these buildings to show me a dinner table set with miniature food and wine goblets; and contextualizes his entire construction within wider historical battles and stories.

Using history and detail Joe embellishes his soldiers. The toy soldier is key to Joe's ability to lead himself elsewhere. His relation to his soldiers allows him to open doors to vivid imaginative spaces, and to extend into the realm of the ephemeral with a certain finesse. As Joe himself quips "half of it's mental." In this process of animation, of taking simple lead soldiers, extending their cultural significance to an extreme, and enlivening them to epic proportions, Joe Richards becomes heavily invested in his garden. So much so that he becomes a part of it and extends into it. As Joe himself remarks "it's in, it lives for me" (interview with author, April 2007). Joe is invested by virtue not only of the years and

energy he spent building it up, but on the depth of his imaginative engagement with the lives and trials of his soldiers.

Joe's garden is an exemplary case of possession, and more particularly of personalization. In building his miniature world, Joe places himself as master of its domain, deciding when battles will happen, the outcomes, and reverberations of such skirmishes. In his mastery Joe is able to reroute the extended meanings of the artifact toy soldier, the nationality of the soldier, military history, and biography, to suit the needs of his larger collection. His soldiers come to life on the basis of Joe's engagement with his garden, a deliberate construction, and a world very much of his own making.

Joe also has a substantial collection of vintage lead toy soldiers in his home. Displayed behind glass as in a museum, Joe does not animate these soldiers. Only when he's in his garden does Joe allow himself to let go, to play as a child again, in short, Joe makes a choice to animate a particular subset of his collection. That one collector can have two collections, one that is animated and enacted into an entire miniature world, and the other that remains static and preserved behind glass is important. It underscores the variability of ways collectors relate to their collectibles, and that the value collectibles come to be imbued with are the outcome of a particular mode of relating to material goods. The soldiers Joe places in his garden and bangs about in his fabricated wars are not rarities nor particularly valuable. His upstairs attic collectibles, on the other hand, are recognized within the community as rare, often one-of-a-kind, complete sets in mint condition. Joe would never dream of burying these in the garden, or

leaving them outside in the rain. The values Joe assigns to each group are telling, and reflect how even his fetish practices are mediated by a larger system of community values. Joe's manner of relating to each collection of soldiers (in the garden and in his attic) is an amalgam of their positioning in wider community hierarchies of authenticity and of his own impression of what is a playable and non-playable soldier. It is thus the outcome of a social negotiation.

Joe's fetishization of his garden poses interesting questions on why Joe feels compelled to build up his garden and how it is that such a complex world, both material and immaterial, is built up around regiments of tiny lead soldiers. This question encourages us to examine how collectors negotiate and even play the boundaries between the material properties of collectibles and the immaterial values assigned to them in the process of meaning making. Joe's garden demonstrates that part of the answer of how an object accrues value is to be found in examining the histories and worlds of fantasy that they evoke.

Doll and teddy bear collectors provide additional instances where otherwise inanimate collectibles are animated. In the process of personalizing their toy collectibles, teddy and doll collectors have a tendency to personify their collectibles, to see them as little people, and to interact with them as such. When asked how she chooses which doll to purchase while shopping at a doll fair, one collector insisted that it was not of her design for "the doll picks you" (Julie, interview with author, April 2007). Another explained that her main criteria when purchasing a bear is that "they have to talk to you" (Helen, interview with author, March 2007). In both these examples the collectors defer to personification as a

means to communicate the connection they have with their dolls and teddies. Collectors find articulating this connection, and how collectibles come to have a certain presence, exceedingly difficult. To underscore their depth of engagement they convey the extent to which their interaction with their collectibles constitutes a meaningful interaction not unlike between humans. Helen, for example, genders her bears, “most bears I think are boys” and notes how they speak to her, “you just sort of look at them and not all the time but bears sometimes will speak to you...they’re not just the bear they’re actually a person. They become a person” (interview with author, March 2007).

Another collector describes what he termed “the more extreme side of collecting” detailing collectors who, in attending auctions, would “bring their bears, *their* bears to the viewing to introduce them to the other bears to see if they like them, to see if the bear likes them” (George, interview with author, March 2007). It is unclear how the collector would determine this connection but it is clear that some collectors do animate their collectibles giving them powers of judgment, communication and awareness. In these animations collectible bears are personified. The mobilization of toy collectibles into imaginative scenarios and fantasies plays an important role in the intensity of relations collectors develop with their collectibles, lending the toys an alluring quality.

George’s comments on a “nearly perfect English bear” describe the captivating qualities of some teddy bears, and what I will refer to throughout the project as their *enchanting* character. His comments also capture how imagination influences the tenor of a collector’s consumption of particular bears:

I mean his eyes are nicer...it's a lot to do with how eye contact is made with the object I think, whether they're feeling a really human expression, which I think, you know if you can see a little kinked smile and you know you can almost imagine, maybe, you can almost imagine what they're thinking. And it brings them to life. And if they haven't got that look then they're not alive and they don't make as much (interview with author, March 2007)

George's use of the term "eye contact" to explain the connection some collectors have to their bears is significant. To establish eye contact assumes a reciprocity between perceiver and perceived, and a form mutual recognition. It reiterates that in their possession of bears some collectors perceive or act as if there was a degree of interaction between themselves and their bear.

Furthermore this draw of the teddy bear, and its capacity to be perceived as animate, is financially lucrative. It is something that can be cultivated and sold to others in the wider community. Throughout the interviews various collectors detailed leveraging the character of a bear or doll for financial gain by naming it, dressing it and describing it as if it was alive. What is crucial here is the wide variety of means through which this animate character is conveyed, whether through personification or imaginative historical reconstruction. Some collectors like their bears worn, to show the lives they have lived so to speak, others find naming them and dressing them in little suits makes them come to life. Those who collect toys less easily personified, such as toy trains, animate them nostalgically by reconstructing their histories, and running them along tracks, using detail and imagination to bring them to life. As we see from the examples above, and will see in the section that follows, the idea of the toy as animate is eminently social

and furthermore, contested. It is also a social practice grounded in a longer-standing narrative of possession.

### **Ongoing Narratives of Possession**

Understanding how collectibles come to have a hold over collectors involves more than the assessment of the moments in which collectibles are animated. The enchantment of the collectible for its collector is also bound up in an ongoing story of possession, which is an ever-changing combination of the collector's past relations with such objects (generally more personal in scope), and the history of the object itself (its provenance and cultural resonance). My overall impression following the interviews was that almost all collectors are able to articulate a longstanding history of relation to their chosen collectible. In this way collecting activities can be understood as one phase in a larger, extended history of possession, including narratives of possession not directly related to collecting. A large number of collectors built collections of the toys that were around them as children. The collectors either possessed these toys themselves or looked on enviously as the boy down the street was given a toy they could never hope to have, for reasons ranging from financial limitation to war:

I did have the Hornby O series trains but my friend Elka had a posh little green engine with little levers that worked in reverse as a brake and I didn't have one of those cause we weren't rich enough, and you know, here we find ourselves... (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

Well I grew up in the war, and you couldn't get new things at all, but the boys who were a bit older than me had huge collections... (Nick, interview with author, March 2007)

I did have a teddy bear when I was a child and when I was fourteen I left school and my Mom said to me "now you don't need toys," I

was too old to play with them so she gave it away (Larry, interview with author, December 2006)

These narratives of jealousy and envy establish the pre-existing relationship collectors often have with their collectibles long before they are collected as such. A sense of loss permeates these three narratives. Gross drawing on Rilke notes how “losing contact with historical objects meant losing contact with memories” which would suggest, given the interdependence of memory and identity, that to lose one’s objects of the past is to lose a part of one’s identity (2000: 147). Kroger and Adair concur noting how the “loss of such a treasured possession may be associated with loss of identity, relationship, family tradition, status, or life era” (2008: 6). Collecting in this framework is a move to re-possess one’s cherished possessions, and to return and rewrite the material and emotional gaps in one’s past. In collecting teddy bears Larry is repeatedly replacing the teddy he lost, returning to the time before he became a grown man and was free to play. Both Bill and Nick gather the toys they could never ever have had as children, their collection activities a continuous reparation of the past.

This return to the past will be elaborated in much greater detail in Chapter Three on nostalgia, however such connections display how the collectible is made meaningful according to an extended personal history of possession. Collecting is a particular form of consumption activity as it is a sustained, yet evolving and mutable relation with material goods. The relationship collectors have with their collectibles extends far beyond the point of purchase. Bill’s trains are both the focus of an intellectual rigour as he codes them into his catalogue, and a means of redress for the trains he was never able to afford as a child. As soon as collectors

find themselves with enough capital and time to obtain these items they so desired, their hobby starts to take shape. The promise of revisiting the past is an important influence on the collecting drive. Collectors have an ongoing relation not only to a particular set of objects, but in a more general sense, to what it means to possess, and to the emotions and values attached to possession. That collectors gather objects in a sustained manner, over time, suggests that the return to the past promised by possession is an important motivation in collecting practice.

Another common narrative among collectors detailed their collecting activities in light of a family connection to collecting, shared moments between parent and child, and the effect of growing up in a house already possessed by possessions.

I started because my mom was an antique dealer, and I started going around when I was a young child buying and selling things. Going to antique fairs on the weekend and then selling so I think there was a certain, it was a slight financial drive initially and then I started learning about the stuff... (Lewis, interview with author, May 2007)

My parents weren't well off but within their limits of a sort my mother collected things. I was brought up in a household where you collected things (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

I'll tell you something nobody else knows but my Dad is a big collector, a massive collector but it's of different things. And maybe I've learned it from him you know, it's an acquired trait, and I think there's something to be said that my great grandfather had clutter he would never thrown anything away (Henry, interview with author, May 2007)

These familial connections and contextualizations underscore the depth of resonance a collectible may hold for a collector and help to explain how beneath

the layers of a toy collectible lie a wealth of memories, and ways of being. What is more, it is apparent in these three reflections that collectors actively try to locate themselves in wider ongoing narratives of possession. Objects are made valuable as they come to be associated with familial histories. Going to a car-boot sale becomes an activity infused with memories of trips with dad, and a particular collection piece echoes of a Christmas long ago. Actively trying to contextualize their collectibles within larger narratives of possession is a central activity of collecting and is integral to how collectibles become meaningful.

Ongoing narratives of possession do not always have to be explicitly personal in nature. A central facet of collecting is to locate one's collectibles according to their provenance. If no personal history is available collectors readily gather information according to previous owners, emphasizing significant historical relevance, and, in some cases, a more recent history of collecting itself and stories of acquisition. In her study of how travelers maintain their identities and connections with the world Susan Digby comes to the same conclusion noting how the stories attached to objects "are those from previous lives as well as those newly made, such as the story of find and acquisition" (2006: 175). As they are *ongoing* narratives of possession they include not only the past, but current stories of the successes and challenges of building a collection. Lewis' comments on a friend's special set is exemplary of how narratives emphasizing a collectible's wider historical situation, rather than a direct personal connection, are used to locate a collectible:

It's about so big and the box is about so big, of Britain's soldiers that were actually made for Queen Mary's doll house in Windsor

and they were specially commissioned for the doll house in Windsor, there's only two sets in the world, one in Windsor and he's got the other set...they had two made in case something went wrong with the first one (interview with author, May 2007)

Swirling around the collectible are multiple narratives: personal narratives; narratives of collecting, a wondrous find at a car-boot sale, outbidding a rival; and narratives of provenance. As well narratives relating to the object in general, the history of trains in British history for example, and of doll hospitals in Victorian England play a role in a collector's attachment to their collectible. The object is made to embody these narratives, and as it is consumed, so too are they. The collector does not consume the object alone but the object in the context of particular social histories and stories of acquisition. It is in this moment of association that the object acquires a social and cultural value. "An object is transformed from a piece of stuff definable independent of any story-line into a social object by its embedment in a narrative...material things have magic powers only in the contexts of the narratives in which they are embedded" (Harre 2002: 25).

Collecting is fascinating because it is an activity in which individuals continually juxtapose one object with another, playing between their own personal readings of the object and wider culturally held conventions surrounding the object. In doing this collectors are, in fact, negotiating and renegotiating their social location within their community. There is much going on "behind the scenes" that the material configuration of a collection does not evince. This has led Chris Kraus to conclude, that the object is merely a medium or a façade of the true collection:

The object forms a link between the collection and its origins. The prairie child holds a conch shell to her ear to hear the ocean roar. There is a tactile thrill, embroidered by imagination. The imagination requires a certain literacy – *history is like the ocean* – an accumulation of references, dreams, and stories unleashed by contact with the object. In this sense, the object is just a trigger to the real collection, which is totally internal (Kraus in Kiendl 2004: 111)

### A Concern for Origins

I started it off with artists, modern bears, and I used to go to fairs and see old bears and think ‘God how do people pay that much for these!’ You know a bag of rubbish. But once you buy one you just understand they’ve just got something, a history, and no two are the same, so that’s really how it started (Helen, interview with author, March 2007)

As a particular form of possession involving a series of objects placed in relation to one another, collecting lends itself to a sustained enchantment with collectibles.

While the previous section located the collectible in an ongoing narrative of possession, this section examines how collectors make claims to a sense of origins when authenticating their collectibles. It is an illustration of the seemingly contradictory fact that while collectors are unable to untangle their collectibles from the webs of wider meaning in which they circulate and are constrained by the conventions of their collecting community, the meanings with which they work are increasingly mutable and subject to an evolving set of political and cultural struggles. Arguments over the value of collectibles, whether of its authenticity or originality, are always a claim made by the collector. “Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do” (Crewe and Sims in Karp and Lavine 1991: 163). Drawing on a wide range of cultural and personal meanings from the history of the collectible, its

previous owners, the location where the purchase was made and even the stature of the collector themselves, collectors seek to argue for the authenticity of a collectible - that is to make it intelligible to others in a particular way. Their argument is as much about the object itself as it is about what authenticity should be based on and who is allowed to deduce it from an object.

Collectors are continually trying to associate with the histories, authenticities and origins that lay behind their collectible, by seeking more proximate objects, and collecting in ever-greater detail. Often the collection ascribes to a particular ideal or point of origin. Collectors build their collections with an ideal in mind, and given that their collecting is driven by a fascination with the history of toys, and a nostalgic tie to the toys of their childhood, the collectors' ideal is a collectible as close as possible to its original state as a toy. Foucault explains the cultural assumptions at work in an appeal to origins:

The lofty origin is no more than ‘a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are more precious and essential at their birth.’ We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first moment” (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 79)

Although there are a number of collectors who argue for the authenticity of worn toys and the traces of possession they bear, there is an equal if not greater authenticity assigned to the item as it was unwrapped on Christmas day, or in the moment the box was first-opened. In constructing the value of origins collectors spoke in terms of factory newness, straight out of the shop, and displayed just as a child would have it.

Making a clear link to the past bestows authenticity on the collectible. Stewart, in outlining the difference between the souvenir and the collection, points out how, “the collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past *is at the service* of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection” 1994: 151). Actively emphasizing the proximity of collectibles to their ‘pure’ state and to their untarnished original essence as toy is a collector’s way of arguing for the authenticity of their collection. It is also an active construction that takes many forms and reflects how certain characteristics, such as originality, come to be elevated to epic proportions within collecting communities and thus the source of battles for legitimacy.

The wide range of qualities and historical factors against which authenticity can be established and its mutability as a value means it is a negotiation requiring continual maintenance. Appealing to factors as diverse as previous owners, histories of production and material condition, the basis for collectors’ assertions of authenticity are ever shifting. As Featherstone working from Foucault reminds us, ordering the remnants of the past to particular ends is an argument: “Each classification system opens up new avenues in to the material, yet it also closes off others. It is impossible to approach the data in a way which can be ‘made to speak’ neutrally, objectively and once and for all” (2006: 593). Indeed within the collecting community new collectibles are always being uncovered. Finding an undiscovered box of trains in an attic is a classic example. These finds and their implications reverberate throughout the entire

hierarchy of values assigned to a group of related collectibles. Just as a collector's consumption of their collectibles extends and evolves beyond the point of purchase, so too does the value of each collectible.

Speculation on and appeals to the production history and minutiae of activity on the factory floor were replete throughout my transcripts. Toy collectibles as outlined in Chapter One are not pieces of the natural world but mass-produced commodities, and the factory floor is the site of their inception or birth, where the object is thought to be at its most 'pure' and fresh, yet to accumulate years of human use and meaning. One collector explains,

That's great, that's wonderful if you find an item which is absolutely perfect and it has never been unwrapped, that's like 'wow I was on the end of their construction line and getting it off.' It's like getting that bread that just tastes fantastic that's just come out of the oven (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007)

Just as the previously discussed collectors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would locate their specimens according to a taxonomy of the natural world, toy collectors also seek to locate and grasp the origins of their commodity. Making contact with and familiarizing oneself with the origins of the collectible is to simultaneously glimpse the 'essence' of the object in question and to account for the totality of what it is today. These activities of contact and contextualization contribute to what Weiner terms a symbolic density, wherein cultural meaning is invested in objects: "some object become so symbolically 'dense' with cultural meaning that people covet them as prized collectibles, 'art,' or ancestral relics. Such density accrues through an object's association with its owner's fame,

ancestral histories, secrecy, sacredness, and aesthetic and economic values” (in Myers 2001: 9).

The cultural and social power at stake in claims to origins means that the possession and preservation of ‘authentic’ pieces is a tenderly guarded subject. Collectors continuously debate issues of restoration, or “intervention” as it is tellingly referred to (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). Within these squabbles collector’s interpretations of originality vary. One collector describes her disdain of another collector’s attempt to have “absolutely pristine” dolls:

Some people buy dolls and then immediately, like I have a friend who’s a collector, and even if the doll’s wearing her original clothing she’ll strip it off and dress them in white and cream. And that’s what she prefers, although to me I think it’s absolute sacrilege (Linda, interview with author, April 2007)

These tensions display not only the sacredness attributed to original pieces, but the extent to which many collectors feel they are building their collections in contribution to a very important wider historical project. As one collector remarks “it’s a duty” (Bill, interview with author, December 2006), a project he devotes his time and energy to in order to share his expertise with a wider community at the same time as salvaging them from the destruction of history. Within this community there is a sense that some restoration is necessary to, ironically, preserve the state of originality:

There is a preference for leaving things the way they are but you just have to accept to a certain degree light restoration, mechanical restoration you can see the need, but it’s heavy restoration where you’re actually repainting and doing dodgy work we strongly dislike, what we absolutely cannot stand is forgery (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

The threat of over-restoration that Bill details may sever the connection or strength of contact a collectible is believed to permit with the past.

This threat of obscurity is evident in the connections Michael Taussig draws between the copy and the original (1993: 21). Taussig's work on mimesis or "the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power" is highly instructive when considering collectors' assertions that the collectible affords a proximity to histories not directly immediate to it in space and time (1993: xxxi).

In outlining how "things which have been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed"

Taussig speaks to the power of association collectors are attempting to draw on when constructing the origins of their collectibles (1993: 47). In evoking histories of consumption, and imaginatively reconstructing a collectible's travels on the shop floor, collectors are attempting to associate and imbricate their collectible into a wider history. This history is not immediately present but it is rendered palpable to the collector as they conduct research, tell stories, and use photographs.

Taussig's emphasis on the contact between perceiver and perceived also underscores the extent to which collecting is a perception of the world, a particular way of making sense and of constructing authenticity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the negotiation of the idea of the original in collecting communities. In collecting communities the character of originality is not a property of any given collectible, it is a negotiated and ascribed value. As one

collector confers “the collectors can only give their impression of what they think happened” (James, interview with author, March 2007). An argument for authenticity is an attempt by the collector to make contact with all the associations extending between themselves and their collectibles. However authenticity, as we saw earlier and as will be outlined further in Chapter Five is defined within collecting communities in exceedingly variable and ambiguous terms.

All toy collectors, whether they collect plastic Star Wars figures or interwar Hornby Locomotives went to great lengths to impress the merits of their chosen collectibles on the basis of a sliding scale of originality. Derek, for example, spoke of a particular set of locomotives as being a “true representative of the period,” as the “genuine article” and as “encapsulating locomotiveness” in contrast to other, equally collected, “plastic double O gauge nonsense” (interview with author, December 2006). The distinctions Derek draws provide insight into the qualities that shape authenticity. Derek describes how the very material quality of his collectible mirrors the actual locomotives on which the toy trains are modeled: “it’s built of metal and it’s painted and you know it’s got all these chemical qualities which are more train like” (interview with author, December 2006). In Derek’s estimation plastic items are inadequate representations without the metal heaviness and sturdiness that define the ideal locomotive of the past. This deficiency hampers their ability to contribute an authentic historical statement.

Another collector of Hornby, in describing the thrill of the original, reiterates the extent to which the original collectible is valued on the basis of its

proximity to the past. Douglas describes a scenario of a collector finding something in its original box, “you look at the box and something falls out of it and oh look, it’s the price tag that used to be on it. You’re looking at it and thinking you’ve almost taken a snapshot of history by buying that or picking up that item” (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007). Douglas’ choice of the word snapshot conveys how an original item in its original box is considered by collectors as a slice of history, untarnished and tempered by time, and providing almost unmediated contact with the past. Henry, talking not of trains but of bears, takes this assertion even further, underlining how a strong provenance is oftentimes capable of making the past so proximate it is brought to life. Access to an original history is seen to enhance the depth of attachment and engagement a collector has with their bears, “you know when you see those stories or you have a picture of the girl who originally had the bear or you see that it’s been loved or held, that’s when it begins to have a soul” (interview with author, May 2007).

The extreme value placed on collectibles which are “absolutely perfect” and which have “never been unwrapped” (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007) is one of the many paradoxes of collecting. Collectibles accrue a value and a certain presence on the basis of their untarnished, undisturbed journey from shop floor to the current collector; *and* on the basis of their provenance and the many hands they have passed through. These two manners of accruing power are in direct tension with one another. On first glance Douglas’ appreciation of the untouched original snapshot of history, seems at odds with Henry’s bear with a soul. Yet both appeal to the value of the original, in the first case on the basis of

condition and in the second on a proven provenance and the ability to make contact with and bring the past to life.

Collectors' belief that the tacit materiality of a collectible affords a form of contact with a wider history is firmly rooted in a perception of the material as testament to the past. It is a faith, by virtue of a piece's presence in the past and its bearing witness to a particular time era, that the collectible bears the traces of history making it accessible to us. It is also a particular argument about practices of remembering that effects the economic value of the collectible and forefronts the importance of historical knowledge in the assertion of expertise. The stronger a link to origins is made, the more robust a collectible's testimonial will be.

Collector's faith in the material as a solid testament to past events and experiences was replete throughout my interviews. It was also apparent in the detailed examinations collectors would submit their collectibles too, and in the degree to which a tiny physical alteration in a collectible was seen have major reverberations in their historical assessments of the past. In this way the collectible was approached as if it was something that history could be read off of, each material detail yielding insightful clues. Admittedly collectors are positioned along a spectrum of commitment to the idea of the material as testament. One collector referred to his detail obsessed colleagues as "rivet counters" (Harold, interview with author, May 2007), or those collectors who examine the fastenings joining the metal pieces of a toy car or train together in detail, counting how many there are against how many are expected and drawing conclusions based on any discrepancies.

“Rivet Counter” is a title that has evolved within collecting communities as shorthand to describe any collector preoccupied with detail. Another collector commenting on the extent of his fellow collectors’ faith in material detail notes how:

There are anoraks and there are anoraks...people get into the level of detail like ‘well they wouldn’t have done this because...’ and you say to them well, what a load of rubbish, it was a toy factory...where these guys get this from I don’t know (John, interview with author, September 2007)

This criticism of the inferences some collectors draw from their collectibles relates to a larger struggle over expertise, and how the production history of any toy collectible is presented. Collectors may disagree on what can be drawn from their attachment to their collectibles but they are all attached to and engaged with them just the same. However, in some very telling and fascinating cases the magic of enchantment and the grip the collectible holds on the collector does break down. Although for the most part collectors are engaged with their possessions there are cases when the drive to possess and their infatuation with a set of collectibles wanes.

### **Narratives of Letting Go and Holding On**

When my daughter was getting married, she got married fairly late in life, and she was going to buy a house, could I borrow the deposit on the house, you see, and I mean I have several sets of the same thing, you know, is it an obsession? It is you know, and so I thought really, do I need three of these so I went upstairs and I bring five sets down and then I take them all back up again (laughs) it was very difficult, very, very difficult (Joe, interview with author, April 2007)

This fourth section of the chapter will examine what I term narratives of letting go and of a loss of magic. This loss of magic can be considered part of a collector’s

ongoing narrative of possession, largely a terminal narrative in which collectibles are no longer personalized, the spark of interest and enchantment has died and collectors find their collectibles no longer resonate for them. This section will consider what these instances tell us about the value of the object, when it is reinforced and what factors contribute to its decline. Alternatively this section will also contrast these narratives of letting go with narratives of collectors irrevocably possessed by their possessions, those individuals at the opposite end of the spectrum for whom the collectible has an extraordinary resonance.

In contrasting these two narratives I will pay special attention to the form they take. In the case of those who are possessed by their possessions or who have gone off the deep end so to speak, these narratives are largely of others, someone's friend, or a story long circulated within collecting communities. Framing both forms of narrative, of disenchantment and enchantment, will underline the shared understandings collectors have about possession and the borders they draw around what constitutes 'normal' possession. In defining these borders there is a parallel tension that surfaced repeatedly between collecting for passion and for profit. Exploring the somewhat ambiguous and often contradictory views collectors have on this tension will further define the boundaries or parameters through which collectors approach collecting as an activity. These boundaries are implicit in the myriad rules of possession, which emerged throughout my interviews, and will be discussed in the fifth and final section of the chapter.

The trouble is that I work with an auction house now, I work with the largest auction house in the world and I catalogue things. The

trouble is in the days before I did that there were things I would have counted as being rare or unusual, or very, very difficult to find, and now I don't because I can go there and I can see. Well I haven't seen one of those for ten years and you can see ten of them lined up there, you know. They're not rare any more, do you know what I mean...because I see so much of it now, I wouldn't say it's getting boring, its getting more commonplace...therefore the interest is waning or there's a lack of it (John, interview with author, September 2007)

John's description of his waning interest and the loss of magic of his preferred collectibles has elements in common with all the other narratives of letting go. For John the magic is gone because his position cataloguing for an auction house has destroyed the promise and the thrill of the hunt. Put simply, John has been exposed to too many collectibles. They have been made present to him not as a result of his engagement with the field, his research investment and hunting them down, but by virtue of walking into an office on an occasional basis. John's disenchantment illustrates how the possibility of the ideal, daydreaming, and the exercise of expertise in trying to locate a sought after collectible is integral to the value of the object. As a result of his employment he has been given extraordinary access to a massive collection, an amalgam of many collectors' labours. All of the collectibles that occupy the daydreams of Hornby collectors, that spur them on and tantalize them, are at his fingertips. And it is a hollow experience. John reflects that initially it was exciting to see all the items in the auction house but given the sheer quality and quantity of items this excitement quickly wore off.

The seduction of the object lies in an amalgam of the object and the activities, labours, and processes of acquisition. As will be discussed further in Chapter Five on authenticity, the scarcity of collectibles, and the challenge of

finding rarities, plays a central role in motivating and engaging collectors. Without such challenges, in which the collector gradually becomes ever more invested in his sought after item, the collectible is dull, and all extending from it impersonal and distant. What is intriguing about John's disenchantment is that it stems not from direct possession but from repeated exposure to a series of desirable objects. John assured me that his position forbid him to possess any of the objects he catalogued and as such his moment of exposure remained fleeting, one of temporary possession. This indicates that possession is a cumulative and extended relationship with an object that develops over time. John was unable to personalize these locomotives, to insert them into his own collection, nor to revisit them. By virtue of his position, his relation to the toy collectibles was clinical, meticulous and efficient, an orientation leaving little space for reverie, or nostalgic longing. Moreover, John was a collector who felt very strongly about the necessity of play, remarking "if I can't see it, I don't want it" (interview with author, September 2007). Engaging his trains tactically in imaginative scenarios, and placing them into the miniature world he had assembled in his playroom, was the very stuff of collecting for John. The magic of collecting lies in the surprises, the triumphs and in filling in the gaps bit by bit, that is, in taking time to see each component in all its significance.

John's narrative of disenchantment and temporary possession is directly linked to his position as a particular type of collector, the collector dealer (see Bonnian's "the collector-reseller" in in VanderGrijp 2006). John's employment with the auction house was a direct result of the skills he built running a

successful online business selling collectible toy trains all over the world. As a result of my interviews with collectors at toy fairs I spoke to a significant number of collector dealers whose position necessitated a substantial amount of letting go. Collector dealers are individuals who sell collectibles yet maintain their own personal collection. They range from individuals for whom dealing is their primary income, to individuals who deal collectibles to supplement their income, to individuals who deal to maintain their collection. Some collector dealers I spoke with were raised within families which dealt in antiques of one sort or another, but the vast majority got involved as the outcome of building their own collections. These collectors spoke to how they gradually discovered they could support their collection by selling off pieces they came across which they knew were of interest to other collectors. In this way their dealing activities were a natural outcome of their growing expertise and exposure to collecting spaces. Unlike the dealer collectors (as opposed to collector dealers) at the other end of the spectrum, for whom the collectible “becomes a commodity” (Charles, interview with author, October 2007) and whose collection takes a backseat to making a profit, the collection remains the central focus of collector dealers. Dealing is, for collector dealers, a means of supporting their more important collection.

Derek’s case underscores how the vast majority of collectors can be considered collector dealers because, as their collections invariably change and develop, they sell the pieces no longer important to the trajectory of their collection. As opposed to Lewis, a very serious longstanding dealer who explains

“I do this for a living. I’ve got to make a living out of this so if I bought everything I wouldn’t live,” Derek’s approach is much more collection centered (interview with author, May 2007). Speaking in an almost sacrificial tone about the evolution of his collection, how he began narrowing it down and learning about the various gauges and lines of Hornby, Derek reflects on how “in a way I’m forcing myself to have the object lose their grip on me” (interview with author, December 2006). Derek found himself severing his attachments to particular collectibles for the greater good of his collection.

Derek and Lewis pass on their collectibles for different reasons. Lewis is a collector but he is primarily a dealer. The collectibles which pass through his hands are personalized into his private collection less often than those which Derek might acquire. For Lewis collectible items are prized for their ability to draw a profit over their personal value and meaningfulness. His possession is of a different level and we might say that the collectibles in his presence are “his” only marginally. Nonetheless, Lewis’ appreciation for William Britain’s Soldiers and the spark of his original passion for the toy collectible, remains. His soldiers have not become commodified to the point of being everyday commodities. Lewis still maintains an attachment to toy soldiers that is constituted outside the realm of the profit these soldiers bring to him. Unlike everyday commodities being exchanged wherein personal value and attachments are largely arbitrary, the toy soldiers he sells have not been totally stripped of their personal resonance. Although Lewis frequently references “making a living” he notes how he has “favourites” and details how he needs to control temptation: “I’ve got to make a living out of this

so if I bought everything I wouldn't live" (interview with author, May 2007).

Both Lewis and Derek speak of their struggle to detach themselves from particular collectibles.

Rather than taking the notable extent to which collectibles move in and out of a collector's hands in the course of collecting as indicative of a compromised attachment to their collectibles, my findings on these circumstances of letting go reveal instead the intensity of attachment that remains. A substantial level of engagement with the object is maintained in those who deal, whether for motivational purposes, in order to relate to other collectors, or simply as a result of their passion for the collectibles. Even Lewis, a dealer by trade, struggled to resist the temptation to add to his collection, and Derek a collector who prided himself on his particularly intellectual objective approach to collecting spoke of having to control his attachments.

This complicated tension was perhaps nowhere more evident than in my discussion with Helen. Helen, not unlike John, has established a business online and attends numerous toy fairs as a dealer in order to maintain what is a very expensive taste for German-made Steiff bears. The bears she collects regularly go for upwards of two or three thousand pounds. Helen's interview was steeped in details of her passion for, appreciation of and level of connection to her teddy collectibles. Helen detailed how each of her bears takes on their own little personality, so much so that she can't bring herself to stitch or restore them herself, and how she revels in thoughts of all the times and places they have been. "There's just something magical about them...you know they've just got this, you

know if only they could talk...where they have been and what they have done, it's sort of a mystery I suppose" (interview with author, March 2007). Helen is enchanted and needs to have a healthy business in order to continue this enchantment. To cope with the necessity of passing on bears to others Helen has developed a philosophy of shared pleasure, which was replete throughout her interview. This "pleasure of seeing it and then selling it on to someone else who loves it" has become the modus operandi of her collection (interview with author, March 2007). Yet, and again evident of the depth of attachment collectors cultivate with their collectibles, this development of a new philosophy of collecting was not without its hiccups. Helen spoke of unsuitable owners and a time when, in letting go of a bear "it was really hard, I mean I actually sold a bear and bought it back again because I missed it!" (interview with author, March 2007).

Helen's case is emblematic of the negotiations between desire and necessity that comprise collecting. Although she spoke warmly of the pleasures of selling on to a good home, given the choice Helen would like to have all the bears, to be able to place them permanently in her collection and to be unlimited by her finances. Despite a myriad of dealer collectors' rationalizations, from Helen's sharing the joy to Derek's for the betterment of the collection, the discomfort and difficulty collectors have in letting go of their collectibles, and even their need to rationalize this letting go, are testament to their depth of attachment. Even the most established dealers spoke of a profound appreciation

and fondness for the collectibles they sell, their dealing activities having stemmed from a collection of some form.

Narratives of letting go also indicate how collectibles are extensive with a wider network of meaning. Letting go of a collectible in many cases also entailed a letting go of these webs of meaning in which the collectible was enmeshed.

Possession is

the phase of the cycle in which goods become attached to personal referents, when they cease to be neutral ‘goods’ which could be owned by anybody and identified with anybody, and become attributes of some individual personality, badges of identity and signifiers of specific interpersonal relationships and obligations (Gell in Appadurai 1986: 113).

Extricating the collectible from the set of relations, activities and meanings in which it is embedded is very tricky indeed. As Paul’s account of selling some of his Star Wars collection demonstrates, letting go of a collectible requires much more than the disposal of an object.

The overwhelming narrative governing Paul’s Star Wars collection was his relationship with his son. Newly divorced, collecting Star Wars figures, as Paul explains, became an activity shared between father and son on a casual basis at weekends, and then later as partners in a surprisingly lucrative business. Paul told me about his collection in overwhelmingly nostalgic terms; about the beauty of the original Star Wars merchandise, the enjoyment he got from seeing his son’s delight, and of his fond memories of attending fairs and auctions on the weekend as a father and son team. Paul’s relationship with his Star Wars collectibles lines up with Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s description of how things come to represent us: “Belongings, singly, but also composed into sets or ensembles,

express our meanings or feelings, encode our values, reinforce our conformity or uniqueness. Our things remind us who we are and tell our story to others (in Ekerdt et al. 2004: 267). When I spoke with Paul he and his son David were selling off a great deal of what they had accumulated together. Paul's son had his own family now, his own bills, and a mortgage. For Paul letting go of these collectibles, as he described it, was also a letting go of all the memories held within them, and of the times past they came to represent. As Paul details:

that's a beautiful thing I can remember as a kid he had endless pleasure with that and the original Millennium Falcon that he has as a kid that got played with and some years ago I managed to pick up the exact same one, same box, factory sealed. I bought it and I put it away just like it had been bought in 83, and that has a lot of value, a lot of sentimental value, I mean there are times when you've got to move on from things you know...(interview with author, May 2007)

This idea of moving on ran throughout my interview with Paul and exemplified how his collection of Star Wars toys was conflated with his relationship to his son. This significance was transferred onto the Millenium Falcon his son had played with, the transference enhanced by the factory perfect condition of the item, and in the care Paul took in storing it. Paul, in obtaining such a collectible, factory sealed and untarnished, was thus able to seal away and hold onto an equally untarnished memory of his son as a child. In letting go of the Millenium Falcon Paul was letting go of the past, another place and time, of that "something we did together," as Paul puts it, and accepting that times were different now (interview with author, May 2007). Throughout almost the entire interview Paul spoke of the past, in a nostalgic reverie. He spoke as much to himself as to me about the need to move on.

All of these narratives of letting go, Paul's included, speak to what it means to possess and raise questions of what it is exactly that collectors are possessing. In clearing out the attic Paul is shedding more than a couple hundred kilograms of Star Wars memorabilia. Collectibles do not circulate in a vacuum; they circulate through social worlds, becoming implicit and entangled in these worlds to the extent that they come to constitute these worlds. Jean-Sebastian Marcoux's study of people moving house in to smaller apartments or nursing homes in Montreal, reflects on the complicated process of sorting things out (in Miller 2002). Marcoux points out that our things become valuable in the process of sorting, because we have consistently chosen, set aside and carefully guarded particular items. "Possessions are not simply given as mattering from the start, they come to matter *through* the sorting out" (Marcoux in Miller 2002: 84). Things come to matter to us because of the way we choose to care for them, and relate to them.

It is not only the nostalgic relations between loved ones that are associated with collectibles, but the more antagonistic relations of competition among collectors. Underhandedly using the term "frenemy," to denote a mixture of friend and enemy, Robert spoke extensively of his relationship to a fellow collector after much the same stuff as himself. Robert's narrative of letting go is one of resignation, and of accepting defeat:

A discovery so far as it turns up on eBay well its open season. You know it's whoever's got the deeper trouser pocket. And sadly some people have a much deeper pocket than I do. And there is the point where you've got to know you've got to let it go. And some times I have a little bit of difficulty with that because it's a piece I so desperately want. But then as my wife will say 'well yeah, you'd

go and spend out on all of this and then you'd put it away, what's the point,' and I'd say yeah but I've got it (interview with author, March 2007).

Robert and his “frenemy” both collect Bonzo the dog items. Whether bears, figurines or postcards Robert and his colleague consider any items based on the art of George Studdy, who created the Bonzo character, collectible. Robert’s detailed frustration of having to let go of a coveted piece and admit defeat is fascinating on many levels. Although motivated by decidedly different sentiments, both Paul’s comments on his son and Star Wars and Robert’s comments on competing with his “frenemy” exemplify how in letting go much more than the physical object is being released. Robert’s difficulty in letting go stems from an admiration for his collectible of choice that has been undoubtedly heightened by the competitive interest of his “frenemy.” As with Paul, Robert’s mention of “having to let it go” is double in meaning, referring as much to letting go of the actual object as to his place in the competition. Robert is letting go not only of an item but of an opportunity to learn more from the item, to display his expertise, and to keep a collectible out of his competitor’s hands. Robert’s comment “yeah but I’d have it” in response to his wife’s recriminations indicates the importance of possession in a competition between expert collectors.

These struggles for ownership indicate the extent to which possession confers capital. “Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with...competence in deciphering cultural relations or artifacts” (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993: 7). The material possession of a collectible gives collectors access

to a special knowledge and competence, and they fight over this access every bit as much as the collectibles themselves. Not surprisingly Robert concludes that his possession is more desirable than that of anyone else, especially that of his direct competition. Collecting is inflicted by a competitive bent usually less to do with the collectible itself than with the politics and struggles of expertise fought through and around it. This struggle over possession is part of a wider struggle over “the transformation of cultural into social resources” (Bourdieu in Lizardo 2006: 778).

At the other end of the spectrum are individuals possessed by their possessions, that is, totally overwhelmed by them. Not unlike the opening quote for the chapter about the collector driven to kill his wife, the majority of these narratives of possession take the form of a tale of an “other” collector, a friend of a friend, someone else who knew someone’s brother, etc. These narratives circulate through collecting communities and although they were employed by the collectors in interviews largely as a normalizing practice, the reverence with which collectors told these stories spoke to how they attributed a certain power to the collectible in its ability to make people lose their “priorities,” and to do extreme things (Neil, interview with author, May 2007). What follows are two of many examples of collectors telling stories about other “crazy” collectors:

I mean I’ve been at a show in California, two brothers I know...one’s a lawyer, I think, the other’s a doctor. I was at a show one day and the show had been on for two hours and they came round. One of them had spent ten and a half thousand dollars in two and a half hours. There’s guys like that and guys like me, who like soldiers but just buy occasionally (James, interview with author, March 2007)

J: I mean we don't come under that category but some of the collectors are really, really mad if you like. That they think they're real and they talk to them.

R: oh yeah

J: and some of the teddies they won't, I mean we sell dolls and teddies and they won't have them in plastic bags in case they suffocate. We don't come in that category do we, we're quite normal...

R: It's like those new babies, they push em around in prams and everything

J: yeah. If you come to the Birmingham Doll Fair there, there's an old blue pub (inaudible) and they all came on a coach the last night. And they've got them in prams and they've got rattles and bottles and they change em.

R: oh yeah women in their fifties and

J: and young women yeah

R: and they're talking to them

(Julie and Rachel, interview with author, April 2007)

These two stories are exemplary of what Grant McCracken describes as being possessed by possessions, a conclusion he came to following his interview with Lois Roget, a “keeper of her families possessions” whose home was so stuffed with things there was “little room” left for her (McCracken 1998: 51).

Incidentally, a significant number of the collectors I spoke with also detailed the ever present storage issues they dealt with and told stories of themselves and other collectors who were overcome by their possessions. “You know the collection is very large. I don't have enough space for it, that's another big issue in my life. I've got my parents house stock full of possessions and my own home is stuffed full of my possessions. And by stuffed, stuffed is the word” (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). The drive to collect and the depth of attachment to their collectibles is of epic proportions in those who are possessed by possessions. Aside from functioning as fascinating glimpses of the depths of engagement a collector may reach, these narratives are even more fascinating for how they are

told. The form they take and their delivery offer great insight to how collectors think around the hold objects come to have over us. They are told with a certain sense of familiarity, and with a sense of warning that they too would be close to the edge if they weren't careful.

Repeatedly, the collectors were unable to speak directly to the hold their collectibles had over them. It was often something they responded to and felt, but were unable to articulate. Their attempts ranged from trying to explain the ambiguous "something" about their collectible; to sketching out its embeddedness in relation to other things important in their lives; to a deferral to the stories of other collectors. I often felt that collectors told me these narratives to gauge my reaction, and to determine how comfortable they felt disclosing their own collecting activities. This is not to say that each and every collector is masking a hidden obsessive side, but instead an acknowledgement that collectors are sensitive to the stigmas attached to collecting. Collectors' narratives of others' obsessions were a way of conveying the potential power attributed the object by collectors, without implicating the collector who was sharing this information with me. The boundaries of obsession and a collector's relation to their collection and its collectible parts are continuously negotiated. Just as collectors strive to maintain a healthy motivating passion without allowing that passion to overwhelm their rationality, collectors are also well aware that being too rational doesn't result in the finest of collections either, nor the most enjoyable process of collecting.

Counterpoint to stories of collectors possessed by possession, are narratives of disdain around those figures in collecting communities who are seen to collect primarily for investment purposes. These individuals were seen by some collectors to have lost the magical spark or connection to their toys, and as motivated by financial ends that often trumped their concern or dedication to the toy collectible. The tensions between collecting for profit and collecting for passion ran throughout my interviews. Although central, this tension and its impact on the idea of the collectible as commodity will be considered in greater detail in Chapter Four on the market. I would like to briefly explore what collectors' negotiations of the tension between profit and passion tell us about their understanding of possession, and the extent to which the value of the object is tempered by the ends to which the collector is collecting. The assumptions made about the motivations of a collector greatly impact the value of the object in their possession, and point out the degree to which this power is a negotiation between the more private relationship a collector has with his or her collectible and the more public, community based ideas of authenticity and proper collecting.

Collectors were heavily divided on the merits of profit and those of passion. They contradicted themselves numerous times in the course of a single interview, their allegiances muddled, and indicative of the ongoing negotiations taking place over the meaning of the collectible. Exploring these tensions is suggestive not only of the role of the market, and its ability to temper the presences of the collectible, but of how different modes of possession were understood by collectors to confer a drastically different relationship to the

collectible. The arguments against collecting for profit saw collectors' investment interests in direct contradiction with those of the object. A collector in it for investment has not the object, its preservation nor its history as his primary concern but profit. Although these are often directly related, in that good preservation and provenance adds value, there is a decided suspicion of some collectors' commitment. This concern demonstrates how collectors embed the very collectible in the activities surrounding it, and believe that these activities impact the object itself. Collectors acknowledge the reciprocity between the collectible and its surroundings, through whose hands it circulates, and to what ends it is consumed.

One recurring description, in different interviews, of a collector who collected for investment, proved highly valuable. The collector, whom I have come to term the "invisible bidder" based on the fact that he was never present at any of the auctions he bid in, was worth an extraordinary amount of money. He burst on to the scene within the past two years and promptly began outbidding all the other collectors. His invisibility and the fact that he hires an individual to attend auction viewings and do his bidding for him only fans the flames of speculation and the undercurrent of jealousy among the other collectors.

They're hated...there is one in trains....there's a big venture capitalist financier, who, I can't remember what his surname is, and he doesn't turn up much in person. He works through an agent called Donald who was drifting around there as we spoke. And he has a vast amount of money, in toy train terms he's up there, you know he could be collecting big name art, you know multiple million pounds a year. And so the problem with people like that when they enter the market place is, unless they enter knowing, if they enter and they'll buy anything it can really screw things up...and the way that this man works is he wants everything in

triplicate...he doesn't have the in-depth knowledge... (Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

R: There is one collector and we're not quite sure what his motivation is actually. It's not entirely obvious but he's fantastically wealthy, and he has no interaction at all, as far as I'm aware of, with any other collectors.

B: Yes, he's not involved with the Hornby world at all. Is he a collector or is it an investment?

R: so we all like to think he's an investor to make us all feel better

B: we feel more virtuous, but we're having an inkling that he may actually like the stuff which is depressing (Roger and Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

The above are only extracts from much longer speculations about the invisible bidder. Hornby collectors were compelled by the invisible bidder, specifically by his tactics and his allegiances. They positioned him as the archetypal investor, underlining his profession, his wealth, secretive behaviour as well as his odd bidding patterns. The invisible bidder's supposed focus on collectibles for investment was seen as bad taste. Bourdieu's comments on how distinctions in taste function to reinforce social differences could be productively applied to this community of collectors: "class endogamy results in large part...from aversion to and intolerance of different styles. Taste operates, therefore, in the boundary maintenance between social classes, and acts as a system of classification" (Reed-Danahay 2006: 110). In Bill, Roger and Derek's frameworks, the invisible bidder's lack of integration with the community and profit focus compromised his capability and knowledge as a collector. As Bourdieu reminds us "each social space...functions both as one of the sites where competence is produced and as one of the sites where it is given its price" (1984: 88). Thus the invisible bidder's neglect of the community in his collecting activities was seen to compromise not

only his expertise, but also the overall indispensability of the collecting community itself. Bill, Roger and Derek's framework also displayed how the oppositions made between collecting and investment, as well as between liking a collectible and investing, position collectors. The invisible bidder did not "enter knowing" as Derek put it, and as a result everything stemming from his transactions not only upset market balances but tainted the value of the very objects he bid for.

Ironically, disdain for the invisible bidder was a matter of degree. Bill, Roger and Derek also attend auctions, bid on locomotives and even sell collectibles in the pursuit of their ideal collection. The very act of collecting necessitates some engagement with the market and thus judgments of who is a passion based or profit based collector become notably subjective. Bill, Roger and Derek delineate their own set of criteria that mark a collector as profit driven, at the same time as other collectors would define even going to an auction as being party to a particularly profit driven community.

What is shared between these subjective assessments is the suspicion and disdain of those who collect because they are motivated by profit. Although collectors unanimously and repeatedly told me of the monetary value of their collectibles, they were all exceedingly uncomfortable around the topic of collecting and profit. Very few collectors were open about playing the market, and those who were tended to be collectors who found a space where profit and passion could be reconciled. Speaking about profit was a largely dangerous territory. The vast majority of collectors impressed upon me their passion for the

toys, underlined their interest in their history, and asserted that their activities welled up from a passion for the very object itself. Although many detailed the market, speculating on prices, and estimating the value of their items, they failed to acknowledge the market and profit as a factor in their collecting. Unless a matter of financial limitation, against which they struggled to feed their passion, making profit as a collector was seen as dirty work, somehow tainting the very quality of engagement with one's collectibles.

Following a long discussion of the invisible bidder, and a retraction that perhaps he was unable to pass judgment seeing as he knew so little of the guy, Derek aptly captured the tension between passion and profit for collectors. He noted candidly

I think it's fair to say that every collector is interested in the market, just most of them aren't willing to talk about it. They think that somehow being interested in it somehow diminishes their genuineness. Because they're just in it for investment. But if you're not interested in the value of the stuff that you buy you must be damned stupid that's all I can say" (interview with author, December 2006)

The ongoing debates around passion and profit continually asserted and retracted, only to be reformulated anew, exemplify the extent to which collectors avidly feel that certain modes of possession are integral to the fortification of the relationship between collector and collectible. These debates also underscore the social constitution of value, and how it "is radically contingent on a very complex and constantly changing set of circumstance involving multiple social and institutional factors" (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993: 10). The possession of a collectible is inseparable from wider issues of leadership, expertise and hierarchies within the

community. Possession as a cultural practice is a field “in which battles to legitimate particular criteria and hierarchies of cultural value and taste are central to the exercise of power” (Slater in Anderson et al. 2003: 155). The tone of Bill’s revelation that the invisible bidder may be serious demonstrates that mode of possession, collectibles and expertise are interrelated. Strikingly Bill reflects on how “depressing” it is that they’ve begun to have indications that the invisible bidder may be genuinely interested in Hornby. This depression is intriguing, and a turn, given both he and Roger’s bemoaning of the investment driven collector. Bill’s depression is based on the fact that the invisible bidder looks not to be a blip on the radar, but to be here to stay. A figure with his wealth and an increasing level of knowledge challenges not only Bill’s ability to secure the locomotives he seeks, but his very expertise and ability to navigate the field of collecting classifications. The invisible bidder has the capability of driving a wedge between Bill and his collectibles. The archetype against which Bill contrasts his own passion, his intellectual fervour and tireless commitment is dissolving.

A range of hierarchies of value, and assessments of the collectible are entangled in these contradictory modes of possession, each a very distinct idea of the toy as collectible. One toy soldier collector even suggested that an unlimited budget went so far as to compromise the very activity of collecting, making it impossible.

I think there’s another value as well, you get to the point where you show off. If you had unlimited funds, you know you can’t be a collector unless you’re buying incredibly expensive things. But to me you can’t be a collector because you’re like a chequebook collector (Henry, interview with collector, May 2007)

The object is profoundly altered on the basis of whose hands it's in, and the wrong hands are capable of doing irrevocable damage, such as botching its restoration or storing it improperly. The object becomes the arena within which the politics of possession are forged. In consuming an object collectible in particular ways, collectors are also exercising their expertise and skills.

Throughout the interviews investment was a source of tension: in some cases a sign of expertise, demonstrating one's ability to make smart financial choices based on a depth of knowledge; and in others a serious compromise of one's passion and commitment to the toy collectible and community.

### **The Rules of Collecting**

The final section of this chapter delves further into the contradictory rules governing collecting. It examines the ambiguity in debates around restoration, expertise and care, and pays particular attention to how the idea of the collection as a finite set is employed as a basis for these rules of collecting. Aside from demonstrating that ideas of possession in collecting circles are exceedingly varied, it explores how the value of a collectible piece is tempered by a series of ambiguous and contradictory ideas governing its possession.

As such this section of the chapter will engage further with Bourdieu's ideas on distinction, classification and consumption as cultural practice (1984, 1993). The rules governing collecting are mode of classification in which collectors, collectibles and collecting practices alike are slotted into hierarchies and valued. A lot more is at stake in these rules than the mere ordering of collectibles. The rules dictate what statements can be made with collectibles, by

who and how. Bourdieu helps us to understand how a debate over how often wheels on a toy train should be replaced, or at what stage it is okay to sew up a tear in a bear, is of social and political relevance. The mechanics of power that operate through these negotiations and the debates they spur are indicative of how the reproduction of social positions and hierarchies, is a continually shifting field, requiring continual maintenance and reassertion. As Jenkins confirms “the boundaries of fields are imprecise and shifting, determinable only by empirical research” (1992: 86).

Two particular arguments from Bourdieu apply to the rules of collecting communities. The first is his concept of doxa and the second his emphasis on the role of the material goods in reproducing social relations. Bourdieu’s concept of doxa is an acknowledgement that although socially constituted, people’s practices, perceptions and tastes present as natural and are ultimately taken for granted. “What Bourdieu refers to as ‘doxa’ [are] the unquestioned and pre-reflexive ways of experiencing and negotiating the world” (DiMaggio: 1987). According to Bourdieu, this orientation to the world, often a function of one’s habitus, or “an internalized embodied disposition toward the world...[which] comes into being through inculcation in early childhood,” seems natural and instinctual (Reed-Danahay 2006: 46). The extent to which practices, perceptions and tastes are embodied and taken for granted goes a long way toward explaining why collectors find instances where the rules have been violated so distasteful and offensive.

Closely connected to the idea of doxa as embodied is Bourdieu's emphasis on the importance of material goods in the reproduction of social structure. Our orientation to the world is one of praxis, not just conceptualization. We move around our surroundings in interaction not only with other people, but with the material world. Bourdieu argues that although they are a part of a larger amalgam of institutions, values, individuals, and spaces, the mobilization of material goods is essential to the reproduction and expression of the habitus. The idea that cultural and social capital is expressed through the employment of material goods in particular ways is a defining contribution of Bourdieu's theory of distinction. Thus he helps us see how rules around restoration are based on assertions of expertise, the negotiations of access to and the pricing of particular collectibles. Not unlike Foucault, Bourdieu underlines how in studying our practices of classifying the material world we can begin to grasp wider social and cultural struggles for power and positioning. Bourdieu supplies both a purpose and method for our negotiations between the symbolic and the material, or what he refers to as "the transmutation of things" (1984: 174).

One area in which myriad rules and pronouncements commonly occurred was in reference to care, rules of touch and in ideas around restoration. Shared understandings within the community noticeably impacted how collectors related to their collectibles. Special distinctions, rules of collecting and value assertions of rarity were assigned to collectibles in mint condition. "Something which is pristine and from the First World War needs to be in a cabinet and not be handled" (George, interview with author, March 2007). Even collectors such as

John, who felt strongly that as toy collectibles Hornby Locos should be run, made exceptions and adjusted their collecting activities accordingly. John's playroom, for instance, had a glass cabinet holding a few key pieces. This impetus to preserve collectibles was debated over and raised time and time again in interviews. Collectors felt strongly about restoration and did alterations according to a strict set of rules weighing restoration against the need for preservation and maintenance. In an effort to justify his restoration practices John explains how:

One of the problems with the mechanisms is that the wheels are made of a metal called maysac...that breaks apart after a while, it's poor quality so to change wheels or put replacement wheels on is not a problem (interview with author, September 2007)

We have already been exposed to the problems caused by restoration in the case of Jim McKay a well-known collector, infamous for his "interferences" with locomotives. This complex tangle of positions on restoration with its various exemptions and adjustments demonstrates a pronounced concern with the physical integrity of the collectible. Good condition, un-chipped paintwork, and solid seams come to not only stand in for, but further the rules. The condition of any given collectible is a virtue of a host of value judgments made by collectors on gradations of physical integrity. In a telling moment Bill and Roger reminisce about a loco Roger had just bought, still wrapped in its original paper:

I haven't got it in my hands yet. I think I'll need to be physically restrained, but Bill said they had the debate in 1989, obviously it was worth debating, but the conclusion was you could not touch it...there are certain things you mustn't do. And I think it's post-war so it's sixty years, or sixty-five it's stayed in its brown wrap. And I have no right to take it out of its wrap" (Roger, interview with author, December 2006)

Here we see how the rules and morals of proper collecting practice implore Roger to practice restraint despite his curiosity and desire. The treatment of this object is indebted to the values assigned to that object by virtue of its rarity and mint condition. The rules of touch whether they involve who is deemed worthy of picking up particular collectibles, how collectibles should be cared for, or what restoration if any is acceptable, are formed at the intersection of community and collectible. They are tenuously held within collecting communities and the force with which these rules are enforced and the insult of their trespass is testament to the sacredness assigned to various collectibles. These rules circulate within wider collecting communities taking on different forms and impacting what are often very private relationships between collector and collectible.

The governing rules of possession are exemplified in the collectors repeated appeals to the right and wrong, or good and bad ways of collecting. It is often upon the line between these two that connoisseurs and amateurs are distinguished, and upon which ideas about what it means to collect are based. “What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization” (Bourdieu 1984: 479). Larry “belongs to Bins Teddy Bear club,” and collects based on a criteria of “if I like the teddy bear I buy it” (interview with author, December 2006). Henry, on the other hand, asserts that, “a really good collection is focused,” making sure that his own collection is “focus[ed] in on mandatory different things” (interview with author, May 2007). The distinctions collectors

draw between these two modes of collecting are telling. Larry is seen as an indiscriminate accumulator, an individual who does not pay attention to details or authenticity, nor collects what one collector categorizes as “the right things” (George, interview with author, March 2007). His collecting habits are viewing by the larger community as undiscerning. Larry does not have a natural doxa or aptitude for collecting as rigorous and refined. Henry, on the other hand, is seen as a meticulous collector, someone with a developing expertise and an awareness of the wider context of his collection. The idea that not only are there are right things to collect, but correct ways of possessing them indicates that collectors order individual toy collectibles according to a larger system, or an ideal collection to which they aspire. There is a sense that collectors who collect discriminately with a certain degree of expertise and knowledge are somehow able to forge stronger connections with their collectibles; that their ability to locate the collectible in relation to a wider array of goods privileges and enhances the depth of their attachment to that good.

The assumption that there is a greater system governing each collectible is the outcome not only of the modus operandi of the act of collecting but of the toy collectible’s original existence in sets and series. Both Hornby trains and William Britain’s soldiers were sold in sets, and their marketing further encouraged consumption of a whole array of other items - stations, trees, cargo - to complement the train set or the regiment. As one collector reiterates “you’ve got a definite number of things that you can collect” (Neil, interview with author, May 2007). The benefit of collecting vintage pieces and having an eye to the past is

that collectors are generally aware of what was produced and have some knowledge of their chosen collectible as part of a larger set of material goods. The seriality of train collectibles in conjunction with collectors' research into their production histories means that collectors are able to obtain "a feel for the game" (Jenkins 1992: 70). The passage of time allows collectors to look back and categorize the output of these companies into distinct phases and production lines. Collections develop according to these distinctions. Collecting in this way is to make particular statements or arguments about the significance of particular trajectories of the total output of a given set of objects. If we take the collection as an archive, the collector as researcher and the collecting community as archivist, then Featherstone's insistence, working from Foucault, that "the capacity for the archive to yield up significant material to the researcher depends upon the modes of classification adopted by the archivist" is salient (2006: 593). The collectible object always becomes valuable in concert with a wider series of objects and according to the drive to gather them. Collectors find themselves negotiating "a constant vacillation, between an ideal of wholeness and the anxiety of incompleteness" (Cardinal as quoted in van der Grijp 2006: 7).

The idea of sets, series and systems as the driving criteria for a collection, as opposed to that of preferences or emotion, is the hallmark of an expert collector. Expertise is possession with a purpose and as Derek explains, without a governing framework it is not a collection:

To me a collection becomes a collection when you've got three objects and there's some sort of ancillary system that is assigned to them. I'm quite a purist in terms of what a collection is, a

collection is not an assemblage...you need to control...you've got to define... (interview with author, December 2006)

One cannot underscore the implications of the set and series, real or perceived, on the value of the collectible. The network of relations governing any collectible's presence in the collection is, for an expert, an exceedingly complex, detailed affair, and an integral part of how the collectible comes to be meaningful. It is precisely on the basis of these finite sets that collectors subscribe to particular modes of possession. Derek's ancillary system governs his collection but is very closely modeled on the output of Hornby in the era that interests him and on capturing the original essence of the toy locomotive.

An exploration of the myriad rules governing possession uncovers how the possession of a collectible may extend beyond its immediate owner to encompass a wider community possession. Collectors operate according to and continually negotiate ideas of proper and improper collecting, and the very activities comprising collecting contribute significantly to the assertions of the sacredness and value made of particular collectibles. As the collectors opined on restoration and on the care of collectibles it became increasingly clear that the proper care and possession of a collectible is a concern of the entire collecting community. These rules have become socially mediated discourses, which circulate throughout the community. "Where there is discourse, representations are laid out and juxtaposed; and things are grouped together and articulated" (Foucault 1979: 312). Collectors both produce and are constrained by these discourses. They appeal to abstract ideas of right and wrong, and the 'proper' way of collecting, which are always shifting, their meanings continually negotiated. The rules

governing possession exemplify how political collecting can become, and the extent to which collectibles become inextricably entangled in these webs of politics and judgment. As Douglas and Isherwood note “consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape” (1979: 57). Hierarchies within the community are enacted through toy collectibles.

On the surface possession is about ownership and the luxury of unfettered access to the object. However, looking more closely at just how possession is negotiated, the forms it takes and the tensions inherent within it reveals a complexity indicative of how collectibles accrue a presence as a result of a negotiated process of perception. Possession is the moment in which the collectible becomes resonant to the collector in particular ways, and is the point in which the collectible is made meaningful. Collecting is an exercise in possession precisely because it is about making meaning with objects, and coming to terms with them in a sustained, ongoing and cumulative fashion.

### **Conclusion**

A closer examination of toy collectors’ approaches to possession conveyed how the toy collectible is inseparable from the network of possession activities, labours and hierarchies in which it is embedded. The collectible object is truly extended in keeping with Robb’s encouragement that in understanding the value of objects “we have to see not their naked skeleton, the thing itself, but the extended artefact, the artefact with its extension into social space and time” (in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 133).

Possession is a field in which the value of an object is negotiated and shaped by intangible rules of restoration, care and display. It is also an arena in which the personal meets the cultural and the collector seeks to incorporate his collectible acquisition and all its attendant cultural meanings into his or her personal sphere. Possession is a moment of making meaning with the object, at once a moment of production and of consumption. Possession, as I have shown, is also riddled with fascinating moments of contradiction. So contradictory in fact that I could use the same collector's statements to make opposing arguments. Whether a debate over collecting for investment, as in the case of the invisible bidder, acceptable levels of restoration or the appropriate manner of relating to one's collectibles, these tensions show not only how the value of collectibles are mutable and constructed, but the extent to which collectors draw varying lines and play with the boundaries between animacy and inanimacy.

Examining possession in collecting communities provides invaluable information about how objects come to be valued in specific ways. By examining in closer detail the different tensions and manifestations of possession among collectors I was able to consider how the possession of collectibles provided a platform on which expertise, arguments of authenticity and value systems could be effectively communicated to others, reworked and revisited. Possession, in short, is an exercise of skill, and a working demonstration of the depth of one's engagement with toy collectibles.

Chapter Three on Nostalgia draws on this chapter's instruction on the process in which collectors become invested in their collectibles. This chapter will

move beyond possession to examine what form of contact with the past the collectible object is believed to allow. This move is in line with Kiendl's assertion that "collecting, beyond mere acquisitiveness, is invariably a means to an end. To explore an ethos of collecting we need to look beyond the ownership of objects to the experience that objects can create for human beings" (2004: 8). One of the experiences objects seemed to foster or bring forth repeatedly in collector's accounts was that of nostalgia. Collectibles in particular, were used to afford collectors a certain proximity to moments of the past and memories. Although by no means the only experience collectibles created for the collectors, the depth and frequency with which it surfaced in the interviews warrants closer examination.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Nostalgia**

It is nostalgia, it always is. I remember steam engines, you know I'm not into diesels, I'm not interested because they're not steam...I don't collect diesels. I'm not interested in diesels. It's nostalgia, I remember Christmases when we were given train sets and things like that when I was a boy and you know it's just like reliving that childhood really. And I can afford it you know" (John, interview with author, September 2007)

Nostalgia figured heavily into collectors' accounts of their engagement with their collectibles. It surfaced time and time again in different forms, from sentimentality, to fond memories, to a general reverie for an era, as a central facet of the connection collectors felt with their particular set of chosen collectibles. This chapter examines the role nostalgia plays in collectors' attachments to their collectibles and the subsequent value these collectibles come to have. It juxtaposes the literature on nostalgia with statements made by collectors. In comparing and contrasting various manifestations of nostalgia in collecting practice it examines how the collectible is made to foster a nostalgic connection. The nostalgic tendency illustrates how collectors view their collectibles as connections to the past using them not only to access memories, but to actively shape these memories and situate themselves in relation to them.

My work with collectors indicates that nostalgia should be viewed as an activity. It is productive, and something collectors *do*. Memory, in fact, is a practice: "Memory cannot be confined to a purely mentalist or subjective sphere. It is a culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects" (Seremetakis 1994: 9). Nostalgia is the outcome of both a particular collector's and more widely held communities perceptions of the

collectible in which a reverie for the past is experienced. “Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise” (Pearce 1992: 47). It is in nostalgic relations that collectibles accrue a presence. A collectible’s presence, as outlined previously, is the direct result of a conflation of perceptions of the sedimented meanings of the collectible. Collectors nostalgically play on their collectibles’ multiple presences. A collectible’s immediacy in the present, but also its presence in various eras of the past or its extension through time, makes it especially conducive to nostalgia. As tools for remembering collectibles offer formidable contact with the past. Viewing nostalgia as a process allows us to consider the very specific circumstances around nostalgia and collecting, namely that collecting is less about moments of reverie and sense making with one special sentimental item, than the juxtaposition and interplay of a series of items in the construction of memory.

Almost all of the collectors I spoke with mentioned nostalgia at some point or another in their interview. Nostalgia was raised as a significant factor in their and other collectors’ connection to their collectibles. Various patterns surfaced and collectors’ nostalgic reflections centered on common themes. Because they collected toys, reminiscences of childhood and memories of play figured the most heavily into the collector’s nostalgia. As one bear collector reflecting on his colleagues notes, “apart from [the fact] that they’re reliving their childhood through them you know they’re not really similar people or similar

collectors, but it's that whole childhood thing that I think stimulates modern people to collect things" (George, interview with author, March 2007).

As a result, collectors' current location as working adults who are able to afford what they could not as children was also prominent in their nostalgic accounts. Patel expresses the sentiment, held by other collectors as well, that "I feel all this stems from my boyhood, when my parents could not afford to buy the items I wanted, I certainly could not, and it was a sense of the deepest frustration to me not to be able to get the Meccano parts that I needed to build a particular model" (interview with author, May 2007). In this way collecting can be understood as a form of revision and a reconstruction of the past. Access to previously unattainable objects provides toy collectors the opportunity to return imaginatively to an idealized past.

Nostalgia, in this way was, for many of the collectors, a form of completion, or a rewriting of the past. In retirement, with some income and time to spare, many of the collectors intentionally gathered the toys they longed for as children. These collectors are trying to revisit the past, albeit in new terms. They are able to recapture the fascination and wonder these toys once held for them as children by building a dream collection. In describing the emotional impact of a particular collectible, Dean Shepherd, editor of TV Film Memorabilia Magazine, conveys how nostalgia is a revised journey back in time:

The joy about collecting is the chase and where it leads you. It starts when, out of the blue, a conversation, article or something as simple as a piece of music or a smell, ignites something inside you that you haven't felt since you were a nipper. Pretty soon that inner child within us all begins to make its demands and long lost, or longed for, pieces of memorabilia are back on the agenda; only this

time there is no judicious mother figure standing in the way of those coveted items..." (Shepherd 2007)

There is a large body of literature on nostalgia and memory (Gross 2000; Grainge 2002; Lowenthal 1985; Pickering and Keightly 2006; Connerton 1989; Huyssen 2003; Stewart 1994) – a smaller part of which speaks directly to the use of material goods in nostalgic activity (DeSilvery 2006; Liss 1998; Digby 2006; Forty and Kuchler 1999; Hirsch and Spitzer 2006). The literature is evidence of the myriad approaches to nostalgia. Each of these approaches manifests a different relation to time, to the past and to the role of nostalgia in our engagement with objects. Yet the general tendency is to view nostalgia as a practice, something mutable and transient. In this vein Jones argues that nostalgia, as a practice of memory, is in the relation: "memory does not exist in a discrete internalized container (either the mind or material objects) rather remembrance occurs in the dialogic (and bodily) encounter between person and world" (in DeMarrais 2004: 174). Likewise, Forty and Kuchler emphasize how the relation between objects and memory is less straightforward than would first appear (1999). Pointing out that objects are far from receptacles for memory, they work from DeCerteau who wrote "suggestively that 'memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable'. For de Certeau, the principal feature of memory is 'that it comes from somewhere else, it is outside of itself, it moves things about.'" (in Forty and Kuchler 1999: 6). Nostalgia in these contemporary works is elusive. It develops in concert with a complex network of social ties, objects, places and practices. It must be studied by examining the transactions between collectors and collectibles. There is nothing inherently nostalgic about a toy collectible from

one's childhood. The collectible only becomes nostalgic because it is related to in a specific way.

Much then, depends upon the substance of our practices of remembrance, practices that constitute which traces of the past are possible for us to encounter, how those traces are inscribed and reproduced for presentation, and with what interest...practices of remembrance are questions of and for history as a force of inhabitation, as the way we live with images and stories that intertwine with our sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, identities and distinctions (Simon 2005: 3)

This view of nostalgia as an amorphous process developed in response to a tendency to view nostalgia as regressive, as a retreat from the onward march of time and a disdain for the present. Nostalgic individuals as they are commonly presented in this view, seek to return back in time to when things were “done properly,” as if stuck in the past, and completely out of touch with reality. Nostalgia “was originally seen and treated as a physical affliction,” something to deal with, and a turning inwards rather than a potentially creative activity and a form of engagement with the world (Lowenthal 1985: 10). These limited presentations of nostalgia focus on how the “hypertrophy of memory can lead to self-indulgence, melancholy fixations, and a problematic privileging of the traumatic dimension of life with no exit in sight” (Huyssen 2003: 6).

Such approaches have been addressed by more contemporary process-based takes on nostalgia which see nostalgia as a productive, forward looking activity intertwined with the present. Lowenthal, for example, argues how nostalgia can be seen as festive and fun: “many seem less concerned to find a past than to yearn for it, eager not so much to relive a fancied long-ago as to collect its relics and celebrate its virtues” (1985: 7). Likewise, nostalgia can be “the desire

not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as a basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future...a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead..." (Pickering and Keightly 2006: 921). These latter approaches do not neglect that there is a melancholic and sentimental side to nostalgia but argue that nostalgia is multiple. In these views nostalgic activity is productive of social values, meanings and identities, and a way in which collectors can locate themselves in the present. Such approaches encourage us to question the processes by which this happens or "*how we apprehend the past as much as what is drawn from it*" (Grainge 2002: 32).

Pickering and Keightly's reappraisal, nicely summarized in the abstract of their paper, typifies the need to approach nostalgia as manifold:

Nostalgia has been viewed as the conceptual opposite of progress, against which it is negatively viewed as reactionary, sentimental, or melancholic. It has been seen as a defeatist retreat from the present, and evidence of a loss of faith in the future...the authors argue that it has numerous manifestations and cannot be reduced to a singular or absolute definition. Its meaning and significance are multiple and so should be seen as accommodating progressive, even utopian impulses as well as regressive stances and melancholic attitudes" (2006: 919)

My conversations with collectors elicited evidence of nostalgia's "numerous manifestations" (*ibid*). These manifestations include not only the regressive or productive qualities of nostalgia, but the variety of sources of, and forms that nostalgia took among collectors. Although a few of the collectors did speak in melancholic terms of the good old days, I found that from their evaluations and reveries of the past did not necessarily follow a disdain for the present. When asked if his collecting activities involved a definite nostalgia, Vincent was quick

to point out that yes, there is a “very definite” nostalgia at work but that it was not regressive or “to the extent of like hey wasn’t it wonderful back in the fifties and hasn’t life deteriorated...” (interview with author, December 2006).

Nostalgia can be creative, and a source of pleasure. Nostalgic individuals are far from lost. They are able to locate themselves in the present because of their activities. Nostalgia is a productive field of practice, in Bourdieu’s sense, where identities are negotiated and asserted.

Nostalgic memory...sets up the positive from within ‘the world of yesterday’ as a model for creative inspiration, and possible emulation, within the ‘world of the here-and-now.’ And by establishing a link between a ‘self-in-present’ and an image of a ‘self-in-past,’ nostalgic memory also plays a significant role in the reconstruction and continuity of individual and collective identity (Spitzer in Bal 1999: 92)

Far from an emotive retreat, nostalgic practices are an argument for the continued value of particular communities and identities. “The struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted among the conflict and interplay of social, political and cultural interests and values of the present” (Thalen in Radley 1990: 3).

A suspicion of nostalgia was present in the opposition some collectors drew between those who collected based on nostalgic motivations and those who were less nostalgically inclined in their activities. These lines, largely drawn between young and old collectors, were insightful as to how the emotion and sentimentality of nostalgia were taken in turn by collectors as both absolutely necessary and completely compromising. As we will see further on in the chapter, tensions and debates existed in the collecting community over how much

nostalgic attachment was appropriate. These tensions demonstrate how much more is at stake in nostalgic practice than emotional reverie for the past. “Individually and collectively we revise the inherited past to enhance self-esteem, to aggrandize property, [and] to validate power” (Lowenthal 1985: 325). Many collectors felt too much nostalgia was the signal of an un-objective collector unable to develop a rigorous and discerning collection because of his or her emotional attachments. Too little nostalgia, on the other hand, was the mark of a cold, calculating, profit driven collector with little genuine passion for the toys. These tensions, present throughout the interviews are evidence again of how memory is a field in Bourdieu’s sense, wherein collectors classify and negotiate ideas of proper and improper collecting and collectibles. Not only what collectors get nostalgic about but *how* they are nostalgic is subject to judgment. “Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize and classify the world around us” (Lowenthal 1985: 210). Nostalgia as a value is mutable in meaning. What is nostalgic to one collector is not for another yet there are shared conventions within the collecting community, however tenuous and evolving, on proper practices of memorialization or how, when and by whom a collectible should be mobilized nostalgically.

Reading further into the literature on the use of material goods in nostalgic practice, a central debate emerges. It is reflective of the shift to approaching nostalgia as a process and a productive activity. The debate, which reverberates

throughout the material culture studies literature and that of nostalgia, centres around the role of material goods in remembering. A key point of this critique is the extent to which material goods have been treated as receptacles and storage containers of memory. As Forty explains, “the Western tradition of memory since the Renaissance has been founded upon an assumption that material objects, whether natural or artificial, can act as the analogues of human memory. It has been generally taken for granted that memories, formed in the mind, can be transferred to solid material objects, which come to stand for memories and, by virtue of their durability, either prolong or preserve them indefinitely” (1999: 2). These assumptions have an impact on how we view memory, and the extent to which we believe it can be fixed, and held in place. Here I concur with Grainge (2002) and Kwint et al. (1999) that rather than mere containers of memory, as Forty outlines, artifacts are instead *mediums* of memory, components of a process in which the past is evoked. This is to view “remembering as a form of constructive activity, emphasizing that memory is not the retrieval of stored information, but the putting together of a claim” (Radley 1990: 46). Rather than viewing objects as receptacles into which memory is somehow fixed we need to examine how material goods are used by collectors to bring forth and represent social and cultural memories.

I consider the implications of this debate by looking specifically at collecting, and collectors’ use of a series of objects to foster nostalgia. Consequently, I propose that nostalgia is a way of *relating to*, where meaning inheres in a moment of perception between collector and collectible, and consider

how “the impossibility of memory” and the unreliability of the object (Forty and Kuchler 1999) is a substantial motivating factor in the cumulative and ongoing character of collecting activities. Here the prevalence of collectors’ attempts to fill in the gaps of history with their collections is scrutinized, and the metaphor of reaching towards, which surfaced repeatedly in my findings, will be developed. The metaphor of reaching towards, my own take on understanding the collector’s use of material goods nostalgically addresses how collectibles are treated as if they afford a particular contact with or proximity to the past. Working from my findings on the nostalgic activities of my collectors and engaging with the debate over the role of material goods in remembering, this chapter reviews the varied ways collectibles are used in the negotiation of memory, as well as the wider cultural and political struggles this practice involves.

### **Forms of Nostalgia**

Pickering and Keightly’s reminder that nostalgia “has numerous manifestations and cannot be reduced to a singular and absolute definition” was supported in my findings (2006: 920). Nostalgia of some form or another was present in almost every interview to varying degrees. My analysis of the role of nostalgia was based to a great extent on collectors’ own nostalgic reflections, and on their comments about nostalgia as a concept. It is of interest because it was one of the central activities through which I theorized that objects become valuable to collectors. I sought to explore how, in a process of nostalgic engagement with their collectibles, collectors become invested in their collectibles, their collectibles in turn, accruing a sentimental, personal and cultural resonance.

Nostalgic practice involves a certain degree of animation or fetishization whereby the collectible is imagined into scenarios and situations of the past, or in the least, used as a means to evoke these reveries. Pearce underlines the integrity of imaginative work, such as nostalgia, to wider practices of collecting:

The work of imaginative construction is immensely significant to collectors, because it is the fire out of which come the relations between objects which make every collection more than just the sum of its parts. We habitually talk about forging links between disparate things in order to reveal hitherto obscure unities, and here we touch at the heart of both the creative and the collecting process (Pearce 2000: 358).

Animation in this sense entails an emotive and passionate engagement in which the collectible becomes more and more resonant and valuable as the collector further imagines and daydreams. To animate an object is to use that object to mobilize a memory. In this way animation is central to nostalgia, as a mode of perception bringing to fruition and evoking memories. In animating their collectibles collectors construct a “coherent story” in Lowenthal’s sense of the term (1985): “Historical intelligibility requires not merely past events occurring at particular times, but a coherent story in which many events are skipped, others are coalesced, and temporal sequence is often subordinated to explanation and interpretation” (1985: 223). In this way nostalgic reflection is an argument, and a selective statement put forth by collectors, testifying to what elements of the past they believe are and aren’t worthy of notice. Vincent’s description of running his train in the dark underlines the centrality of his collection in animating such historical narratives:

The most provocative thing in the train image is, and I think certainly what a lot of collectors do, more than they probably will

admit is run a train in a darkened room with the headlights and the carriage and a few lights in the station and somehow it's a different world. And that's completely evocative, it's evocative of a past age when the station was like an airport, it's about journeys you did as a kid or probably more likely read about or fantasized about and all the literature you read subsequent, stories you read about stations (interview with author, December 2006).

Nostalgic animation is the means by which Vincent transports himself elsewhere, moving swiftly from a moment spent running a train in the dark to memories of train stations and journeys he took as a child. Nostalgic reverie is a reenactment of a long history of relating to trains, train journeys, and travel based on personal experiences and things read, culminating in a moment of reverie. Considering the role of animation in nostalgic practice, and particularly the imaginative affordances collectors allow their collectibles, as well as where objects are capable of taking us provides great insight into the enchantment the collectible comes to hold for the collector.

I was consistently surprised at the various forms nostalgia manifest for collectors and the challenges of grasping the depth and meaning of this process. Collector's nostalgic practices destabilized my own conception of nostalgia as a personal, private, unstructured dreamlike longing. The nostalgic activities of the collectors I spoke with can be loosely grouped into two main camps (though some collectors notably manifest aspects of both activities). As these two types of nostalgia surfaced in my findings I began referring to them as primary and secondary nostalgia. Primary and secondary accounting for the specific relationship the collector had with their collectibles, and the effect this relationship had on their nostalgic activities. Primary nostalgia refers to the

nostalgic activities of those collectors, typically older in age, who collect the toys they once had as a child. That is they had a direct relation to what were, but not restricted to, very personal memories of play and contact with their prized object.

Secondary nostalgia, typically found in younger collectors, refers to the nostalgic activities of collectors who didn't actually have any personal contact with the toy they collected and came to their collectibles later in life. In the case of my collectors, secondary nostalgia developed as the result of a younger collector being hired at a toy company and in another because a collector was given his father's train set. It is worth emphasizing that, despite a less direct and personal initial relationship, these collectors too engage in nostalgic activities. Secondary nostalgia, in fact, challenges our tendency to see nostalgia as exclusively personal and demonstrates the extent to which it operates along more generalized lines, as in an overall wistfulness for an era. This form of nostalgia surfaces repeatedly throughout the interviews as a wider historical fascination with history. In this vein Helen, a bear collector, tells me how "it goes back to the history of, you know see when I was young, these bears that I go for are very early, I wouldn't have even been born then, 1900, but it's just the history" (interview with author, March 2007). Although often an intellectual engagement, and a curiosity for the manufacture and original circumstances in which the toys were consumed, I argue that this interest in history is an engagement nonetheless, and that it is a nostalgic one.

These variable forms of nostalgia confirm how it "is not all of a piece. It is subject to circumstance, motivation and interests, and over both time and space, to

degree, variation and change” (Pickering and Keightly 2006: 928). More specifically, the tensions between these two forms of nostalgia, and the way they tend to split collectors into generational camps, laid bare the extent to which nostalgia was viewed by collecting communities in exceedingly contradictory terms and somewhat stigmatized. “Remembering and forgetting” as Radley reminds us “are inherently social activities” (1990: 1). Having much in common with the tensions between collecting for profit and for passion as discussed in Chapter Two, older collectors are somewhat suspicious of those they see as having no substantial link to the toy, viewing these collectors as driven primarily by profit. Again we see how nostalgia, not unlike possession, is a field of cultural practice: “These ongoing struggles over classification, practice and use are the very stuff of cultural fields. Indeed logics of consecration, succession and subversion are essential to the positioning of cultural agents as the game moves on” (Prior 2008: 310).

Older collectors worry about the future of their hobby given the fact that fewer children today play with trains, dolls and soldiers underscoring the extent they feel nostalgia is fostered through a connection with particular material goods. A lack of direct contact with the toys as children is understood to threaten their collection. George explains: “people collect things that they remember from their childhood, that nostalgia thing...so if there’s no one having dolls or trains in their childhood...they’re still having bears which is good news” (interview with author, March 2007). Young collectors on the other hand tend to see the older collectors as more emotionally driven, less rational and expert in their collecting habits,

collectors not motivated by an intellectual pursuit but by the pleasure of “relishing” their childhoods.

If you look at the people who are more expert. They tend to be of a younger age group, And that's because they are not driven by nostalgia, they're not, so they can stand back a bit, observe it slightly from a distance. From a historic position (Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

As I said particularly for the guys who had these as kids, it's a nostalgia aspect, they probably come at it from the opposite direction than the younger guys. They come at it from a nostalgia point of view, recreating their childhood (James, interview with author, March 2007)

However, these same younger collectors, who saw nostalgia as a particular “point of view” governing older collectors’ activities, also had their own moments of nostalgic reflection (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). Although their reflections were more generalized they involved a degree of reverence and appreciation for a time past common to all nostalgic activities. There was a sense of excitement and curiosity as these collectors described how with collectibles “it's like opening up a piece of history” (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007) or a moment in which the past reveals itself. The tone of these reminiscences are evidence that these more generalized sentiments are undoubtedly nostalgic, yet of a different register: secondary nostalgia.

I think it's just the age, it's the nostalgia, it's the period, it's the 1930s was a period of great discipline, plenty of work ah, I mean you could say that people were very poor and that the regular wage wasn't very regular and all sorts of these things you know, but from a perspective of what the railways were doing in the 30s, it was elegant, it was fast, it was quality and that was reflected in the toys. The toys were very expensive and not many children had them (John, interview with author, September 2007)

John's reverence for the thirties and the extent to which he has immersed himself in imagining and extrapolating about a particular time era using his toy collectibles is abundantly clear. Collectors' work towards figuring out the puzzle of the past was a primary form of nostalgic reverie in my findings. Although younger collectors may not have had a direct "association" with the toy as young children, they did use their collectible to actively pursue and bring the past to life (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007). The fact that even those who disdain nostalgia, and see it as compromising one's intellectual rigour take part in nostalgic activities is testament to the value of nostalgic activity in negotiating social meanings despite its wider cultural stigma. Lowenthal's comment that "the prime function of memory, then, is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present" (1985: 210) speaks to the negotiations taking place between collectors in the field of nostalgia. Collectors use nostalgic practices to build arguments of authenticity around their collectibles, and to reinforce their genuine commitment to the hobby.

The ever shifting boundaries between primary and secondary forms of nostalgia, and the assumptions made about collectors and their collections on the basis of their engagement means that the field of nostalgia is something collectors engage in for personal, as well as wider social and political reasons. It is then, in many ways, a productive activity, something capable of motivating collectors further and of engaging their intellectual curiosity, as well as being manipulated for political and social gain within the community. No matter how personal a collector's nostalgic reflection may appear to be it is always refracted through

culturally prescribed norms around what is worthy of remembrance and how it is to be remembered. In this way nostalgic practice is where the personal meets the political, a central platform on which collectors identify and locate themselves according to their constructions of the past. In this vein Grainge working from Huyssen insists that “Memory represents a battle...the battle for memory, in Huyssen’s view is a question not simply of negotiated political meaning, but of the need, *the imperative*, to live with a sense of temporality” (2002: 33).

Whether primary or secondary, nostalgia is referred to as the source of the collection or “where it all came from” (Harold, interview with author, May 2007). “The objects are just a starting point” in a much wider negotiation of identity, memory, politics and expertise (Vincent, interview with author, December 2006). This speaks to the extent to which nostalgia is indeed an activity, and in the case of the collectors, a way of relating to the past using objects. Vincent’s comment about the collectible as a “starting point” helps us understand the way in which a commitment to authenticity, and to the value of provenance figures into collectors’ activities. It is important to note that gathering and desiring the provenance of a collectible is also part of how collectors foster a nostalgic connection with their collectibles when a direct association is not available. Although the construction of provenance may not be based on a direct personal experience of consumption, collectors repeatedly expressed the value of knowing their collectibles “have been a part of someone’s life” and how “when you see those stories or you have a picture of the girl who originally had the bear you see that it’s been loved or held, that’s when it begins to have a soul” (George,

interview with author, March 2007, Henry, interview with author, May 2007). As Weiner notes, “what gives these possessions their fame and power is their authentication through an authority perceived to be outside the present” and therefore untainted and beyond critique (1992: 42). Provenance makes the collectible resonant for the collector, adds that extra special something, and its pursuit is evidence of the depth of nostalgic attachment collectors build with their collectibles.

It is important to reiterate that not all collectors can be easily grouped as taking part in primary or secondary nostalgic activities. We cannot say, for instance, that all older collectors are only driven by emotion and tend to be less discerning in their collecting. Collectors of an older generation often do have a direct association with the toy they collect but their possession or attachment to a set of collectibles soon develops into a considerable intellectual engagement. In this way their primary nostalgia functions as a sort of spark often diverging into other types of nostalgia. Primary and secondary nostalgia can work in tandem, where, for instance, an initial attachment to a train is transformed into a larger interest in all things transportation related. Frequently, the assumptions circulating through collecting communities were exaggerations. They were more useful for what they said about collector’s negotiations of the norms of “proper” collecting than for specific cues on how nostalgia plays out in collecting communities.

Bill is a clear example of an older collector whose initial flash of nostalgia developed into a considerable intellectual pursuit. A widely revered, expert collector, with an infamous interest in cataloguing and intellectual pursuits, Bill

nonetheless spoke to his primary association with Hornby trains and how this nostalgic relevance sparked his interest in collecting them. He detailed his jealousy of the boy down the street with his “posh” lever operated train in comparison to his own lesser train and tellingly quipped “and you know here we find ourselves” (interview with author, December 2006). Vincent also described the various “elements” that come together in his nostalgic attachments to Hornby:

I need to step back a bit and think, hey, I’m still six or seven again. I mean I sometimes feel my collection’s a bit of a security blanket you wrap around yourself and if you can sort of go in there and set up things around you you’re really in short trousers and all the rest of it again. So I think there’s an element of that. I think that’s the half of it, there are other things, like the historical understanding of it, the fact that you can see how things have evolved, how things have developed (interview with author, December 2006)

Bill and Vincent’s cases are exemplary of the extent to which multiple nostalgic reflections coalesce in a single collector’s activities. Vincent’s use of “still” being six or seven at the same time as being six or seven “again” is telling and demonstrates how nostalgia is at once a temporal continuance and a return. The distinctions drawn by Vincent between his use of his collection as “a security blanket” he wraps around himself to escape to his childhood and his historical engagement with collectibles indicates that Vincent, does not consider any reflections on the past outside of personal ones nostalgic. This is not unlike Derek who earlier distinguished between being driven by nostalgia and observing from a historic position. However, despite such distinctions, Vincent does speak in reverent tones, imaginatively reconstructing and speculating on the wider historical situation of his collectibles. His reflections are in keeping with secondary nostalgia yet his reluctance to see this historical reconstruction as

nostalgia hints at the assumptions made about the opposition between intellectual rigour and nostalgia in the collecting community.

These multiple forms of nostalgia are further complicated when we consider the different relations to time collectors have depending on what type of collectible they are collecting. This variance in the relation to time based on the object being collected points to the mutually reinforcing relationship between collectors, nostalgia and collectibles. Collectibles aren't just a response to nostalgia rather they are used by collectors to actively structure its development. "Objects do not just 'remind' people of past events, they are material settings, which *shape* memory construction because they symbolize cultural categories, social groups, ideologies and so on" (Dittmar 1992: 110).

A different relation to time is displayed in the contrast between those who collect antique or vintage toys and those collecting newer toys, still in production. In my study this contrast was best observed between the group of Hornby train collectors who focused on the war and interwar years of Hornby's output, and Star Wars collectors who collected very recent memorabilia. Train collectors showed a marked interest in filling in the gaps of Hornby production and in uncovering the stories of their original consumption. These activities for the most part involved looking back in time, and using the fragments and details of their collections to construct a sense of that past. The past for these collectors was a mystery, a puzzle, something yielding itself to observation given the careful use of vintage collectibles. Star Wars collectors, on the other hand, were often collecting toys in current production. Although there are collectors who limit

themselves to the vintage figures based around the release of the original Star Wars trilogy, there was a significant group of collectors who focused on the newer lines of merchandise, released within the last ten years. These collectors' relation to time is characterized by a need to keep on top of time. For Michael this involved "pretty much collecting everything that was coming out. Mainly ordering from the state side cause you usually get it quicker" (interview with author, October 2007). For the Star Wars collector the output is not only well known it is ongoing. Their world is not being reconstructed from a fragmented knowledge as in the case of the Hornby collectors, but ever expanded in response to a continuing production output.

One group of collectors looks back to history and dwells there to make sense and find cues to guide their collection. The other group looks forward, collects for the future and constantly speculates about the latest products. Yet crucially, this is not to say that the Star Wars group is not inspired by moments of nostalgic reverie, which foster their attachments to their collectibles. Their reverie is for the wonder of the original trilogy; for moments spent playing with the Millenium Falcon on the living room floor as a child; and an appreciation for the groundbreaking business savvy of George Lucas' merchandizing plan. Max, a Star Wars collector described how the cache of original personages and artifacts on display at a Star Wars show he attended was "mind blowing":

A lot of the original stars were there, the original set was put on display, you know, the actual set that they actually had on screen was there. In the beginning when the storm troopers come through the glass doors, they had it all set out (interview with author, October 2007)

Despite the fact that Max, in collecting what are newer toys, may have a different relation to time and the past, his reverence for an ideal origin is characteristic of nostalgic activity.

The multiple forms of collector's nostalgia are further extended when we consider that nostalgia may not even directly relate to the object (such as in the difference between primary and secondary nostalgia) but rather to the activity of collecting itself. In this way we see how the very process of collecting tempers the attachment collectors have to their collectibles. A nostalgia for collecting, for past fairs, the old shops, the market before the Internet, and for the moments when the collector was young and just beginning his collection, was present throughout the interviews. This is part of what Susan Pearce describes as how collections are "a means of structuring [a] lifespan" and "give a tangible form and content to the experience of time passing" (2000: 235). Collecting activities as a sustained practice often spanning decades are central to collector's processes of self-identification and their social location within the wider community. Indeed collectors frequently accounted for the passage of time, and major milestones in their lives; births, deaths, and marriages with reference to their collecting activities. Collecting, and more particularly nostalgic practices of collecting, intertwined with collectors' very lives in keeping with Lowenthal's observation that the "ability to recall and identify with our past gives our existence meaning, purpose and value" (1985: 41). In this way the collection is the mobilization of material goods is an assertion of one's connection to the past:

'Since time and space are intangible and dauntingly infinite, we cling intellectually and emotionally to our experiences and

memories of the material world that is so reassuringly solid' (Adams et al. 2001: xiii). Souvenirs are not generally objects of need but items gathered, signified or created in response to nostalgia for other and past places. Souvenirs are metonyms for places and events; they act to trace a traveler's trajectory through the world. Through them, places and actions can be revisited (Digby 2006: 171)

The collection is far more than an amalgam of significant objects, it becomes a series of past events, shared activities with loved ones, and accomplishments.

Using objects to foster nostalgic connections collectors quickly traverse from a world of valuable objects to a world of personal and social meaning. Collectors' nostalgic attachments to their collectibles form part of a wider current of meaning in their lives.

The interesting thing is we've got a whole new nostalgia because we've been collecting in Hornby for thirty five years and of course, we remember the old meetings that we went to and we get very nostalgic thinking back on the people we knew, the people we met, the things we bought, the things we found, and so there are whole new areas to get nostalgic about just because it's been a part of our lives (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

I would say that when I was seven or eight I first started collecting with my Dad...we started going out every Friday or Saturday...we'd get in the car, we'd drive down to dealers shops and antique shops... (Henry, interview with author, May 2007)

The collectors' nostalgia for collecting, I was privy to, ranged from a disdain for the state of the market today to a story of connection between father and son. All collectors had stories about the moment they got their first collectible, and the amazing find they came upon years back at a fair. What all of these reminiscences have in common is that they are focused on the very activity of collecting itself.

These multiple manifestations of nostalgia from those related to an association with the object, to a nostalgia for collecting are exemplary of the

manner in which the collectible is extensive with a host of activities, ways of being, personalities and events. The complex web of meaning which emerges when one begins to try to account for collectors' nostalgic attachments to their collectibles reiterates Robb's assertion that "an artefact thus, cannot be considered as a simple physical thing, but rather possesses a culturally-attributed extension of beliefs, practices, contexts and extensions in time; and it is this extension of the artefact that gives it the power to structure human lives" (in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 135). Bill's comments in particular about "whole new areas to get nostalgic about" are instructive on how the object is merely "a starting point," to return to Vincent's prophetic statement, upon which collectors are able to construct webs of meaning. What, in many cases, is an attachment to a particular object develops into a whole structure of meaning, encompassing not only further objects, but activities, people and places. As Bill noted what was a small attachment opens up vast possibilities of meaningfulness. In this way we could argue that collecting is a practice steeped in nostalgia, using objects to engage with and make the surrounding world more immediately resonant.

### **Reaching Towards**

Throughout my interviews, whether in nostalgic reflection or in comments on nostalgia itself various terms were used to describe nostalgia. These included: "linking up with one's past" (Edward, interview with author, March 2007); "being transported back" (Roger, interview with author, December 2006); "revisiting" (Max, interview with author, October 2007); "recapture" (Henry, interview with author, May 2007); "reliving childhood" (John, interview with author, September

2007, Douglas, interview with author, May 2007); “happy memories” (John, interview with author, September 2007); and “hanging on to the past” (Edward, interview with author, March 2007). What these descriptions of nostalgia as part of a wider trajectory of collecting activities convey is the sense that collecting and nostalgia are a form of reaching towards. The metaphor of reaching towards surfaced throughout my interviews and observations and captures the extent to which the collectible is often eclipsed by a collector’s larger project or purpose, be it academic, market based or nostalgic. Perhaps nothing describes this eclipse better than Kiendl’s recognition that “the object is just a trigger to the real collection which is totally internal” (2004: 111). The overwhelming impression that surfaced time again was that the collectors were reaching towards something, always trying to get closer to a point in time, gathering and accumulating more and more collectibles in hopes of reaching it. Collectors’ nostalgia was characterized by an attempt to achieve a certain proximity and untarnished access to a time era, or distant memory, and in this process of reaching they negotiated registers of authenticity, origins, the ideal and mint condition. In reflecting in his Arcades Project that “collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all of the profane manifestations of nearness it is the most binding” Walter Benjamin highlights the proximity to the past achieved when collecting (1999: 204). This proximity is apparent in the enchantment and the dreamy reveries collectors were able to enact through their special collectibles. As detailed in Chapter Two, possession in collecting is an appeal to origins, and an attempt to stop the ravages of time on fragile collectibles. As a result, the value of vintage, or provenance and

the cache of the original were replete throughout the interviews. How collectors attempt to approximate the past and the hierarchies of value guiding their approximations raise important questions “of what is chosen from the past and why – how and in whose interest the past is made to relate to the present” (Grainge 2002: 21). As we will see, in reaching towards the past collectors repeatedly appeal to ideas of realism, contextualization and provenance.

Joe Richard’s construction of his garden world of soldiers illustrates how a great deal of collecting is an attempt to collapse the distance between representation and reality or an approximation of the past. It is when this collapse is complete that Joe loses himself, or in his words the point at which “this world lives for me” (interview with author, April 2007). The proximity and degrees of authenticity Joe appeals to in the construction of his garden fosters his imaginative engagement and contact with the past. The completeness and detail Joe seeks in building and contextualizing his collection is replete throughout other collectors’ collecting activities. Another toy soldier collector, Edward, described how, in an effort to “produce realism...we’d take a lot of photographs and the concept was if you took a photograph and somebody could tell the image was not the real thing it was a failure” (interview with author, March 2007). Edward’s goal was realism, or an approximation of the original, a goal if negotiated successfully, reinforced his expertise and competence.

There are various factors guiding the consideration of collectibles as realistic – some collectors are drawn to historical authenticity but a significant number emphasize how historical inaccuracies and discrepancies of scale are part

of the object as a toy. This reminds us of the extent not only to which collectors' interpretations of collectibles are socially constructed but how mutable they are given the context of interpretation, the collector involved and the point they are trying to make. "It is very, very important that a toy soldier is something that is made, mass produced for children to play with. That is a toy soldier, none of these (gesturing beyond) are toy soldiers. None of this modern stuff are toy soldiers because they're made for collectors" (Jeffrey, interview with author, March 2007). For these collectors a faithfulness to the origins of the collectible as a toy is the greatest measure of resemblance, or proximity. Whether a fixation with how the collectible was consumed as a toy, a desire for provenance, or a preference for mint condition, all collectors seek to evoke a sense of the past when authenticating their collectibles. Evoking the past as closely as possible, they subscribe to "the idea of representing as a re-presenting, as causing to reappear that which has disappeared..." through nostalgic travel (Connerton 1989: 69). In this nostalgic travel a toy collectible is made to "take you back to being eight or so on the carpet in the sun room, with a gun fire match between soldiers" (Henry, interview with author, May 2007). Collectors' repeated reverence for degrees of authenticity and the extent to which a proximity to the past is able to augment their appreciation of a collectible supports the integrity of nostalgic practice to the negotiation of social value.

Joe Richards explains the process involved in constructing the buildings in his garden, emphasizing how they are replicas of models of actual buildings not unlike the lead toy soldiers who occupy them:

I've reduced the architecture down to the point where I can actually reproduce a building which looks like, well it's not actually the same, but if you've got a building and you've got the roof and the windows right you can give the impression of the building you're trying to do...if I actually look at pictures and actually draw it out, it seems like the character comes out a bit then (interview with author, April 2007)

Joe's attempts to draw out "the character" of a historic building, which then stands in for a historical place, are part of a wider set of collecting activities oriented towards achieving a degree of proximity to the past. Although in constructing miniature buildings Joe is not collecting per se, his efforts to build and contextualize his lead soldier collection are nonetheless part of a host of activities which can be considered collecting. My findings were full of collector's attempts at realism, of approximating the past and working with their toys under the most authentic conditions possible. In this vein John explains how many Hornby collectors want the original Hornby transformers alongside their tracks even if they have been disabled due to the risks of old wiring and electrocution. Contextualization is integral to how Joe animates his soldiers and to his garden world coming to life for him. In his collecting activities Joe travels elsewhere. Nostalgia is integral to this form of sentience, or a "taking one outside of oneself" however brief and fleeting (Taussig 1993: 39).

### **The Role of Material Goods in Remembering**

"Memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable...A memory is only a Prince Charming who stays long enough to awaken the Sleeping Beauties of our wordless stories" (DeCerteau in Forty 1999: 6)

The role of material artifacts in remembering is a central debate in theories of nostalgia. It is a debate focusing on how objects are used to remember rather

than what is remembered, or on nostalgia as a practice. The tension hinges around various theoretical assertions of the “capacity of material to carry experience” and the extent to which the past can be read off of material goods (Pearce 2000: 235). Critics of this view charge that to see material artifacts in such a way is to see them as “storage containers” for memory as if “material culture somehow freezes or fixes memory...” (Jones in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 173). These considerations point out that approaching the material as a receptacle of memory is based not only on assumptions about the relation between material goods and meaning, but also on memories, that they remain the same, and frozen in place. Critics such as Andy Jones (2004), DeSilvery (2006), Forty and Kuchler (1999) and Grainge (2002), to name a few, argue instead in favour of seeing artifacts as mediums of memory that are used to evoke a sense of the past. Memories are not inscribed in objects, rather objects are used to access memories by providing a portal through which memory can be constructed and reconstructed. Memory is not out there waiting for our consumption but actively constructed. Jones agrees: “objects do not so much preserve distinct memories in fidelity, rather artifacts evoke remembrance (Kwint et al. 1999), and they often do so in an unexpected and partial manner” (Jones in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 174). This partiality of memory speaks to the collectors’ repeated attempts to reach towards and approximate the past. As noted in Chapter Two, the collectible functions as an “intermediary,” or a “go-between” the visible and the invisible (Pomian 1990: 22). Despite the challenges posed by memory in this pursuit, collectors continuously strive for origins, rarity and authenticity. These efforts, a collector’s attempts to make

contact with as unmediated a past as possible, are an argument for and reinforcement of the value of their collectible. A collector's contributions to collective memory only serve to reiterate their expertise and convey the value of their collection.

Instead of viewing collectibles as containers for memory a view of nostalgia as an activity in which collectibles are used in particular ways by collectors to remember sees collectibles as a means of access to and a portal to the past given their location in a current of activity. This has everything to do with how the artefact gets taken up by the collector. Jones confers, "memory does not exist in a discrete internalized container (either the mind or material objects) rather remembrance occurs in the dialogic (and bodily) encounter between person and world" (in DeMarrais et al. 2004: 174).

Hennion's work furthers this position of memory as the outcome of a particular moment of relating to the world, and discredits the presentation of material goods as receptacles for memory. His piece uses the example of a climber and a rock "to better take into account action's situated, improvised character" and to develop the idea of "co-formation" (2007: 99, 100). For Hennion "the 'object' is not an immobile mass against which our goals are thrown" as the memory receptacle idea would convey, instead objects become meaningful within a current of activity (2007: 100, 105). Nostalgic practice in particular is markedly situational, the outcome of a particular collector's social location, age, the whole of his past; and a series of objects they have collected

along particular lines. Nostalgia then is an ongoing, continuously negotiated, relation between a collector and their collectibles.

Collectors are well aware of what Forty and Kuchler, working from Proust, refer to as the unreliability of objects in remembering (1999) and what Andy Jones describes as the “partial manner” in which objects evoke nostalgia (in DeMarrais 2004: 174). Collections are memories in progress, tenuous and always in dialogue with other collections. They are subject not just to the whims of their collector but to a wider hierarchy of values negotiated within the larger community. It is the very elusive nature of the artefact in remembering (Huyssen 2003) as well as the promise of an evermore complete and valuable set and its resulting proximity to the past that spurs the collector onwards and becomes “all consuming” (James, interview with author, March 2007). This is the metaphor of reaching towards that surfaced in my ethnography, the continued effort of collectors to seek more proximate objects, to collect in ever-greater detail and find further connections. The driving engine of the collection is a combination of the inadequacy of the object in remembering and the possibility of making closer contact with the past, of being able to step a little further outside oneself.

Collecting is about a relationship between a collector and a series of objects, rather than only one special object. That collectors accumulate multiple objects, and arrange them into a specific order and systems of meaning is relevant to how they remember with objects. Collecting is about a succession of objects, juxtaposed together to continuously create new social and cultural meaning. It is a material negotiation of memory but it is a reconstructed, extrapolated memory

evoked across a number of items unlike the memories tied up in a single family heirloom. Collecting is a way of making sense of memories, of ordering and reviewing them, but it is always a fleeting exercise and a work in progress. Walter Benjamin recognized the fleeting nature of memory in his concept of the flash, pointing out that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up” (as quoted in Taussig 1993: 39). The extent to which collectors realized the tenuous, elusive and fleeting nature of nostalgia was apparent in how they construed their collecting activities as an attempt to hold onto the past and to grasp it as best as possible against obsolescence. However imperfect, collecting is an attempt to preserve and record the past allowing collectors to hold on to a piece of what was.

It's like opening a piece of history, it's pictures of the boys in their blazers and dress socks and shows and so forth, it's a bygone era really (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007)

You can't buy toys like this anymore, modern toys are just not the same, you can buy reproductions but they don't have the same charm (Ronald, interview with author, October 2007)

It's the hunt, I suppose it's the chase. It's suddenly discovering something that you hitherto didn't know was out there...so if you can't get it keep an image of it so you've got a record (Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

This impression of the elusive fleeting character of memory was further extended in various collectors' descriptions of their collecting activities as “a duty” (Bill, interview with author, December 2006) and their commitment to their collection as a worthy project uncovering important information; in their compulsion to share their discoveries with the public and common desire to have

their collection be a museum; as well as in a pride for the expertise they have developed. Although well aware of the impossibility of an untarnished visit to the past, and of the unreliability of the material artefact in getting there, collectors try nonetheless to use their collectibles to nostalgic advantage. Here we see how mobilizing a collectible to make statements and interpretations about the past, is a legitimization not only of their collection but also of their identities as collectors. The collection as archive “is a place for dreams and revelation, a place of longing where the world can turn on the discovery of an insignificant fragment: a place for creating and reworking memory” (Featherstone 2006: 594). This process of reworking memory and appealing to the nostalgic character of collectibles is very selective. In constructing a hierarchy of proximity to origins and provenance, nostalgic reverie becomes a field in which expertise is negotiated. Collectors employ “a fine, discriminating gaze that is able to isolate, on the basis of experience and example, items of significance out of a mass of detail” and appeal to nostalgia as a further cementation of an item’s significance (Osborne 2006: 58).

Part of the aforementioned attempts to collapse the distance between representation and reality was the prevalence of discussions by collectors on using their collections to try and fill in historical gaps. Filling in these gaps overwhelmingly involved filling in the production output of a toy collectible, and of the consumption histories of particular toys:

You’re constantly, constantly looking for logical patterns, the kind of sequence in which things change and that’s the kind of detail which is just completely unknown and which we’re trying to sort out and it’s frustrating and enjoyable when you get the sequences

which just don't perfectly fit (Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

For me it's really nice because I've built up a portfolio of his early work and you see how Bonzo [a cartoon creation of a dog] grew, developed, and became this almost, you know how he developed the idea (Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

Filling in the historical gaps was an attempt by collectors to construct and forward an accurate picture of the past. This filling in of gaps parallels Featherstone's observation how:

'The archive is also a place of dreams' (Steedman, 1998). It offers the delights of discovering records and truths that have been hidden or lost, of resurrecting the past. Here the archive is a place for the researcher to be along and at home. A place where the researcher can seek to find his or her identity through the process of historical identification... (Featherstone 2006: 594).

At the same time as reiterating their social location as experts, collectors were explorers of the past and sleuths of the invisible, bringing history to light. Filling these gaps was a combination of the collector constructing meaningful landscapes around their collectibles and then using their knowledge and imagination to conjure a picture of what was. Collectors who speak of "items that have been discovered that people didn't know about" are situated at the juncture of expertise and nostalgia (Roger, interview with author, December 2006).

Speculating about, identifying and investigating these gaps is a form of nostalgic reconstruction by the collectors. Paradoxically it embodies an acknowledgement of the unreliability of the material "record" at the same time as it professes a certain faith, on the part of collectors, in the ability of material artifacts to yield clues about the past. The gaps were a constant project for collectors an ongoing puzzle in which the deeper one dug the more gaps would

surface. Their commitment and constant pursuit of gaps in the historical record of their collectibles contributed to the idea that in mobilizing their collectibles in nostalgic practice collectors were reaching towards something, always grasping. Robert's use above of the word "almost" in describing his attempt to grasp the output of the artist he collects is telling, an acknowledgement of the unreliability or partiality of collectibles and of his collection as just short of a perfectly accurate history. So too are Bill's comments of how filling in the historical gaps can be, at once, frustrating and enjoyable. Examining historical gaps may go some way towards explaining why a certain temporal distance between collector and collectible is desirable. James, along with being a William Britain's soldier collector also works in the industry, explains how "if you look around today you wouldn't see many companies doing anything since WWII. Because it's too close, people that are here could well have served in Korea. At the American shows people served in Vietnam...Vietnam was too close to the bone for a lot of Americans" (interview with author, March 2007). The enjoyment of filling in the gaps of the Korean or Vietnam War is diminished, because it is both too close temporally and emotionally.

The challenge and mysteries of the past opened up by a vintage collection is a central point of engagement for collectors. It is the very partiality of memory, and the promise of a possible complete picture that propels their collecting forward, every addition to their collection providing a further clue to a fragmented history. In our discussion of the similarity between collecting and completing a

puzzle, Bill reflected on how much his interest is based around this partiality of memory and on historical mystery:

It's completing the story, we know we'll never get there which is great, if there was a definitive list that Meccano made and every single variation they've got and it's there in black and white I think the interest would be far, far less, it's the fact that you don't know what's there (interview with author, December 2006)

The partiality of the record on Hornby means that collectors can piece together their collections in such a way that they contribute to a wider overall project. As an archive the collection provides a platform upon which collectors can potentially “operate with their own dominant classifications and value hierarchies to produce their own official history” (Featherstone 2006: 592). Bill’s efforts to construct a list of Meccano’s production piece by piece, is exemplary of the central role filling in the gaps plays in collectors’ attachments to their collectibles.

In order to contribute to a larger historical project, collectors agree that a collection must be focused, and based on the detailed variations in manufacture among pieces. Osborne concurs, “Archival reason is a form of reason that is devoted to the *detail*...an ideographic attention to bodies, deposits, traces, signs or clues that require expert interpretation, which is to say, differentiation” (1999: 58). Indeed many of the collectors I spoke with collected items of a particular train line within a given decade, focusing on the colour of a train’s paint, for example, or the rivets holding it together as well as the tiny details revealing the extent of its restoration. As will be examined in Chapter Six on ordering, there is no shortage of distinctions collectors will make between collectibles. In the pursuit of filling in gaps in the historical puzzle no detail goes unnoticed and ever

more specific lines of differentiation become the basis of collections. Although, as Bill notes, the story will never be complete, collectors do use their fantasy of, and nostalgic reverence for such a possibility as a motivation to try nonetheless. Each of the collector's descriptions of using their collections to identify and investigate historical gaps illustrates how material collectibles are "points of memory" (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006).

Hirsch and Spitzer's concept of objects as "points of memory" or "points of intersection between past and present" draws on Roland Barthes notion of the punctum to convey the extent to which intangible memories are made to coalesce around tangible objects (2006: 358). Their use of the word point is multifold:

The term *point*...highlights the intersection of spatiality and temporality in the workings of personal and cultural memory. The sharpness of a point both pierces or punctures; like Barthes's punctum, points of memory puncture through layers of oblivion, interpellating those who seek to know about the past. A point is also small, a detail, and thus it can convey the fragmentariness of the vestiges of the past that come down to us in the present – partial recipes on scraps of paper...And points of memory are also *arguments* about memory – objects or images that have remained from the past, containing "points" about the work of memory and transmission. Points of memory produce *piercing insights* that traverse temporal, spatial and experimental divides (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006: 358).

Not unlike Pomian's work on objects as intermediaries, Hirsch and Spitzer conceptualize the manner in which we relate to objects as if they were points of memory. Objects, given their multiple presences, having both a present material immediacy, and past material trace, are points around which "history," in the words of many collectors, and the past coalesce. Hirsch and Spitzer's use of the idea of a "piercing insight" also speaks to the role of perception, and captures how

collectibles come to resonate with the past only in conjunction with a collector, or one of “those who seeks to know about the past” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006: 358). The idea of a point of memory conveys how in using objects as “points” on which meaning can gather, the object is made powerful and culturally resonant. Often, as reflected in Hirsch and Spitzer’s interpretation of points as “piercing,” nostalgia is experienced as a rush, or a strange moment of attraction. Confirming nostalgia as a moment of instant resonance Henry noted how “just one object, something can just do something to you. And you have to have it” (interview with author, May 2007).

Aside from emphasizing how nostalgia is a process wherein the collector mobilizes a series of collectibles, the idea of a point also underscores the back and forth negotiations occurring between the use of objects and memory practice. These negotiations surfaced in my interviews when collectors explained how nostalgia was not the straightforward result of their possession of objects, but evolved instead in concert with these possessions, sometimes in response to them, other times preceding them. One collector explained how “sometimes the nostalgia comes afterward, once I’ve discovered it [a particular collectible] I realize that what I wanted to do is to be born in 1915 or something like that” (Roger, interview with author, December 2006). Roger’s point is important because just as we cannot approach nostalgia as a response to the activity of collecting antique toys, nor can we see collecting as the natural outcome of nostalgic sentiments. Hirsch and Spitzer point out the role of the punctum in “unsettling assumptions,” and “exposing the unexpected” (2006: 358). Viewing

nostalgia as an activity, that is, as a continued, tenuous and evolving negotiation with material goods, goes some distance in avoiding a simplified view of how nostalgia tempers collectors' attachments to collectibles.

Hirsch and Spitzer's concept is very useful when we think about the collection as a series of points of memory, drawing from and in juxtaposition with one another. In keeping with the use of point as an argument, we can see that as collectors build their series they are making particular personal and historical statements. Hirsch and Spitzer's use of point to convey the partiality of memories we are able to access through objects, in keeping with all their other interpretations of the idea of the point, reinforces my earlier assertion that although the memory collectors are able to make contact with through their collectibles is fleeting, they are nonetheless drawn in and their interests piqued. This fleeting but lasting resonance speaks not only to their curiosity for the details of a past but of a fascination with the passage of time itself and recognition of the weight of time. As Stuart reflects "the nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself" (1994: 154). This necessity of some degree of distance in nostalgic reflection was echoed in James' comments on Vietnam and how it was "too close" to be produced by William Britain's Company. Both Stuart and James' comments highlight that nostalgia develops as the result of a certain historical opaqueness and mutability. This opaqueness, affords collectors a degree of imaginative and expert input into the pieces of the puzzle.

Collectors repeatedly spoke with appreciation of the distance between themselves and their collectibles. They never failed to impress upon me the age of

their collectibles. Collectors avidly gathered any details or evidence of provenance that could further underline the temporal and spatial distances their given collectibles had traveled. Helen the bear collector expressed wonder that the bears she collects have survived the passage of time:

Again it goes back to the history of, you know see when I was young, these bears that I go for are very early. I wouldn't have even been born then, 1900, but it's just the history, you know the whole thing about them, it's just amazing that they're still around after a hundred years (interview with author, March 2007)

Other collectors detailed the added value of, and spoke in terms of a generalized history. Derek commented how, "what's interesting is that it is old, and it has that quality of age, it has a quality of being of a certain place and time which is not the present" (interview with author, December 2006). These collectors' efforts to fill in the gaps of history are enamored as much with marveling over the distance of the past as dwelling in it.

Collectors' use of their collectibles to fill in historical gaps speaks to their faith in the use of collectibles for remembering. However, as a juxtaposition of a series of objects, and a continual grappling with the past, collecting is bound up in the very recognition of the partiality of material goods in remembrance.

Collecting engages with a series of objects, and requires constant material evidence to fulfill its intentions emphasizing the extent to which memory and historical perspectives are in progress, tenuously held and always subject to re-visitation. Collectors too are well aware that collectibles are only evocative in the right hands and given the right circumstances. Lewis explains how collectors "would love if another collector came round because there's nothing like looking

at another person's collection and where you both know that that's your collection and that's the rare piece" (interview with the author, May 2007). It is in the hands of an expert, and someone privy to particular knowledge that collectibles come to offer glimpses of the past. Bourdieu's comments on a work of art and the extent to which its perception and "presupposes a practical or explicit mastery of a code," also applies to collectibles. "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu 1984: 2). Bourdieu's observation explains how "cultural competence" and expert appeals to provenance when authenticating a collectible are a part of the very process in which collectibles are made powerful and resonant. The nostalgic resonance of a collectible can be seen as an argument, and an assertion reflecting as much about the collector's status as that of the object they possess. As Lowenthal reminds us, "no physical object or trace is an autonomous guide to bygone times; they light up the past only when we already know they belong to it" (1985: 238)

Following my argument that collectors' use of their collectibles allows them a form of contact with the past, I propose that they approach collectibles not as containers for memory, but as traces of the past. The idea of the trace complicates the surety of objects as evidence, making the object less solid by conveying a sense of both faint presence and fleetingness. Traces, although evocative, are often partial and unfinished, capturing our imagination but failing to tell the complete story. Object traces are what pique collectors' curiosity and endear them to their collections. According to Susan Stewart, it is in the very

challenge of the project ahead and the gaps between reality and representation that nostalgia arises:

The childhood is not a childhood as lived; it is a childhood voluntarily remembered, a childhood manufactured from its material survivals. This it is a collage made of presents rather than a reawakening of a past. As in an album of photographs or a collection of antiquarian relics, the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces. There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in their gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgia arises. The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself (Stuart 1994: 145)

Stuart deftly underscores the extent to which again, nostalgia is an activity, something done by collectors in concert with their material goods. “The act of memory” as Stuart refers to it, involves embroidering material goods with imagination, extrapolating from the faint traces they offer and drawing on their material immediacy. This material immediacy highlights the distance between the referent and its presence in times past. Stuart’s reflection on distance parallels what others term the partiality of objects in remembrance, and allows us to think about collecting as a continual practice of playing on resemblances in an effort to conjure up a faithful identity. It also speaks to the metaphor of reaching towards and how it is in the very gaps which exist between representation and reality that nostalgia arises. As an activity then, nostalgia is an embroidering of the material with imagination, or a play between fact and fiction.

Caitlin DeSilvery’s piece on decay affirms how memory “is based on chance and imagination as much as evidence and explanation” (2006: 328). Using her reflections on a decaying homestead in Montana, DeSilvery questions the assumptions we make about material remains as evidence proposing instead that

decay can foster new ways of remembering. Reviewing our attempts of preservation, conservation and musealization she is able to illustrate our common approaches to memory, and the extent to which it is seen to reside in objects. The idea that in preserving material remnants we too preserve memory is challenged with an appeal to the “mutable character of material presence” and an emphasis on the role of imagination in the workings of nostalgia (2006: 328).

DeSilvery’s work underlines how nostalgia operates for collectors. Collectors occupy themselves, down to the last detail, with the “mutable character of material presence” and “the transformative powers of decay and revitalization” (2006: 328). The transformative power of decay is, at once, something collectors embrace and reject. Decay of some order marks an object as a collectible and a valuable pursuit, at the same time as it threatens that very value. To resort to a cliché, collectors have a love/hate relationship with decay. It is a physical embodiment of the passage of time in the object, desirable and conveying authenticity. Yet collectors devote a great deal of their time to halting it, preserving the collectible to “mint condition”. The tensions between decay and preservation abound in my empirical research between those who profess that “condition is everything” (Ronald, interview with author, October 2007) and others who stress that “if you want mint you might as well buy a new bear” (Helen, interview with author, March 2007). Collectors are collecting much more than a static object fixed in time. They are collecting the object in its very transience, and their collections are a reflection of the object’s passage through time. “The object is just a starting point” for collectors, as Vincent remarks, and it

is the object's very mutability that makes it collectible. In possessing collectibles, collectors play on the multiple presences of the collectible, opening up and revitalizing the extension of the collectible through time.

As DeSilvery points out revitalization, or bringing a toy to life is an imaginative transformation fostered by a collector's assessments of a collectible's authenticity and condition. For DeSilvery memory is as much about imagination, a sense of letting go, animating and immersing oneself in the past, as it is about evidence, filling gaps and maintaining a tight relation to the material record. The degree of respect accorded to, and the value drawn from both evidence and imagination is a central tension in collecting communities. The physical integrity of collectibles and the infallibility of the material as evidence are at times suspect in collecting communities. Mint items often seem too good to be true and many collectors, as discussed in Chapter Two, are adamant that a degree of wear adds its own form of authenticity. In these moments collectors appeal to the collectible's origins as a toy, as an object that was played with and treasured.

Some people love them wrecked. I can't cope with that but I like them, you know that they've been loved (Helen, interview with author, March 2007)

You know they're not pristine they're worn, they've got one wrong eye...you know, they can be their own character again. And people collect them like that sometimes the more battered the better (George, interview with author, March 2007)

I quite like them when they're played with. So chips worn, you know, paint faded you know, it reinforces for me that fact that it's a toy and also when you're talking about things from the mid 1890s, 1900 or the very rare 1930s, 40s, if they're mint there's a very good chance they're not right (Henry, interview with author, May 2007)

This push and pull displayed by collectors in navigating cultural ideas about toys and play is also at work in the nostalgic activities of collectors. Perfectly preserved collectibles do retain important details that are attributed a nostalgic value but then so too do collectibles battered by children that bear the trace of their original consumption. Wear also testifies to the collectible's passage through time and is understood as a distinctive marker of a collectible's unique survival and historical merit.

### **Conclusion**

In considering the role of nostalgic practice in collecting circles this chapter has concerned itself with the multiple manifestations of nostalgia, and the extent to which collectors' entire modus operandi can be understood as using material goods to reach towards the invisible, intangible and distant past. It has engaged with questions of where we allow objects to take us, and the various ways material goods are deployed in this imaginative journey. Nostalgia is largely the outcome of a collector's perception and construction of their collectibles as nostalgic. It is a variable practice: A study of collecting quickly reveals the variable ways collectors employ their collectibles to equally variable ends. It is also a political practice in the sense that one of the central ways collectors assert their reputations within collecting communities is in contributing to historical debates about the past. Nostalgic activity is the construction of the past in a particular light, and a legitimization of this past through appeals to such details as authenticity, provenance and a proximity to origins. As nostalgia informs every collector's activities it is a hotly contested arena of struggle for recognition. The

tensions between nostalgic practice and expertise existing within the community attest to this.

This chapter endeavoured to show that nostalgia, far from a personal and emotional retreat, is profoundly cultural in character. Indeed as I have shown, nostalgic practice, or more specifically the mobilization of collectibles in practices of remembering, lies at the nexus between the personal and wider cultural and political realms. Nostalgia as an imaginative practice is central to the field upon which cultural and political struggles over meaning take place. Struggles over not only personal identity and membership but over accounts of history, and by extension, the very conventions governing an entire collecting community's practices of identification. Examining nostalgia was an overwhelming indication of the employment of the object as extended artefact in collecting circles, not "a simple physical thing, but...a culturally attributed extension of beliefs, practices, contexts and extensions in time" (Robb in DeMarrais 2004: 135). In their nostalgic activities collectors do not employ objects as "simple physical things" (*ibid*) or as containers for memory, but as *mediums* through which the past can be evoked in a partial and fleeting manner. And, as we have seen, it is a combination of the promise of these glimpses against the partiality of objects in accessing them that compels collectors to build their collections. Collectors are transfixed by not just the object but, with the idea of the passage of time itself. The object is "just a starting point." Collectors are never engaged with a simple physical object alone but with a web of extended meanings and reciprocal relations enacted through the object. To attempt to

understand the power of the object is to become immediately tangled in this complex web. Accounting for the value the object comes to hold for collectors is to understand the object as a facet of a wider negotiation between collectors, collectibles, and in this chapter, memories and time.

An exploration of nostalgia among collectors highlights how memories, the past, ideas of authenticity, ideals, collectors and collectibles are inextricably bound up in one another. Just as in their use for remembering, objects are partial, mutable and incomplete. Yet this fragility of the object transforms itself into a strength. It is the very mutability of collectible and “because they can be mobilized to tell a variety of stories [that] objects are powerful” and able to resonate nostalgically. I should take Vincent’s prophetic offering that “the object is just the starting point” as a mantra for my entire project, for the object is uncontainable, slippery and elusive, and always - not unlike in the collectors’ own nostalgic experiences - leading me elsewhere.

## Chapter Four The Market

*Toy fairs are remarkably unflashy affairs compared to their cousin, and another locale of object centered worship, the shopping mall. Dealers and collectors stand side by side at tables rented for around a hundred quid. The place has an undeveloped, temporary feel. Very simple set-ups -- some take the time to arrange cabinets restricting touch, but most merely lay out their wares directly on the table. Prices marked in pen are stuck to the items with masking tape or simply printed out onto slips of paper. This is a grassroots gathering save the presence of a few auction houses and larger dealers who look strangely out of place with their polished tables, brochures, obvious branding and graphically designed banners. Despite the underwhelming façade the fair is a space of barter and of deal making where items are put back into circulation, their values established and argued for. The fair has a buzz all its own. It's a coming together that only happens so often and to attend is as much about buying and selling as taking the temperature of the collecting community (Sandown Toy Fair, May 2007)*

Just as nostalgia has been shown to influence collectors' attachments to their collectibles so too does the market. The market is the primary site where economic value is negotiated, maintained and attached to collectibles. Whether they like to engage with the financial aspects of collecting or not, all collectors necessarily engage with the market. As sites of exchange it is in market spaces where most collectors make first contact with their collectibles. It is thus a space of excitement, apprehension, and desire, and always present in the intimate relations between collectors and collectibles, even long after they have both left the market space. In this way the market is also where a wider public community and system of circulation effect the collectors' more personal connections and relations with their collectibles.

The market pertaining to collectibles includes, but is not limited to, car boot sales, flea markets, fairs, auctions and more recently, eBay. It is a diffuse somewhat ambiguous entity and rather than struggling to define its boundaries I

take the market as any space of exchange and consumption in which both objects and their attendant meanings are transacted. I draw primarily on the markets I was able to observe first hand. This includes Sandown Fair, a large generalist toy fair, which I attended twice, as well as more toy specific fairs such as Hugglets Winter Bearfest, and On Parade The Toy Soldier Show. I also attended two toy auctions and the viewings leading up to them, and visited numerous collectors' shops and websites, as well as eBay. Furthermore I consider various industry publications, auction catalogues, and collector's club magazines. In addition to observing the manner in which collectibles and collectors were transacted in these publications, I paid attention to the official discourses of collecting they supported.

There are multiple discourses informing the collectible's market. These discourses are disseminated and developed across a wide range of players, from individual collectors, to collector-dealers, to numerous companies and auction houses seeking to maximize their profit. All discourses on the market indirectly or directly appeal to the production of economic value. Examining the discourses circulating within catalogues and magazines is indicative of the wider discourses found throughout the market. The catalogues of companies including William Britain's who manufacture toy soldiers, and Vectis, a large auction house specializing in toy collectibles, are informative. One set of discourses attempts to foster a sense of community among collectors, at the same time as reinforcing the continued popularity of particular branches of collecting. Emphasizing the number of stalls at each fair, and advertising the profitability of various collectibles in price guides, both demonstrate that the hobby is in a healthy state

and therefore a safe investment. Another set of discourses emphasizes the stature of experts, profiling key collectors in each field, and publishing their detailed historical research articles, in effect, a statement on what comprises expert engagement. A third set of discourses mobilizes nostalgia for monetary gain. Whether trying to sell new production output on the basis of an association with older vintage pieces, or appealing to reminiscent language, these publications encourage and seek to monetize a nostalgic connection wherever possible. That nostalgia comes to be monetized is a reminder that aside from its social and cultural facets, the collecting market is, above all, part of a wider capitalist economic sphere of profit imperatives.

The market is a network of overlapping, mutating and layered object relations playing out across a wide range of sites and spaces. In keeping with the wider argument guiding this project - that the value of the collectible lies in what the object is made extensive with - collectors are as engaged with the networks and tensions of the market as with their collectibles themselves. Despite collectors' claims otherwise, the economic value of collectibles is of overwhelming importance to the attachments they have with their collections. The stigma often attached to collecting for profit means that collector's comments on the market, their emphasis on the magical and enchanting qualities of their collectibles as well as their historical pedigree, cannot be taken at face value. Instead they are evidence of the complex maneuverings going on within collecting communities where expertise and the right connections are widely known to translate into economic profit.

The market is much more than a space where purchases are made, and the exchanges made here are not just of objects. The market is a network of relations where equivalences and differentiations are made such that very different objects are capable of being slotted into the same hierarchies of value. Market spaces and “auctions serve as rites of passage for objects shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty” as Smith puts it (1991: x). The market is a site of translation, where relations of cultural, physical, and financial merit are compressed as best as possible into a sliding scale of price. The wonder and pleasure of the market arises because these prices are so negotiable, fluid and subject to impression. It is no surprise, and is evidence of the mutability of collectible meanings, that collectible market spaces remain ones of barter, haggling and negotiation. Only a few minutes spent in a collectible toy fair is needed to grasp that much more is on the table than toys.

The market is a central site from which to assess how the collectible becomes valuable for the collector. The collectible is often understood as somehow set-apart and an “inalienable possession, outside the usual system of exchange, un-exchangeable but still mediating social relationships” (Weiner 1992: 2). In direct opposition to this conceptualization, this chapter shows how collectibles are resonant *as a result of* their circulation through a wider economic market. Looking at examples of how collectibles’ meaning are forged in relation to marketing and exchange, it demonstrates that collectibles circulate in a much wider economic system. Collectibles as they circulate in the market are commodities and thus have not only social and cultural, but also economic value.

To grasp this economic value is to acknowledge that there are many vested interests in the collectibles market that come to influence practice of collecting. In order to adequately address both the economic and cultural components of collecting in all their complexity I follow Miller's offering that "ethnographies of material culture provide a means for understanding capitalism as a set of cultural practices rather than as a unitary economic logic" (in Bridge and Smith 2003: 258).

Participation in the market is absolutely compulsory when building a collection of toys. Even spaces which were not market sites strictly speaking, such as a private collector's home, carried with them assessments, negotiations and values derived from the market. The omnipresence of the market in fact, makes its examination a key contribution in understanding the collectible as an extended artefact. The collectible seen in light of the market is undeniably embedded in a social milieu, however tenuous and evolving. To look at the market is to answer Robb's assertion that we have to examine "*the extended artefact*, the artefact with its extension into social space and time" (in DeMarrais et al 2004: 133). Seeing the collectible and the market as extensive with one another is to understand how shifting regimes of economic value, as well as the modes of exchange become implicit to the collectible as object. This is a process whereby "(t)races of their [objects] possible meaning are embodied in the very practices that bring them to life. The object is not merely an artefact but also a set of practices with which the artefact is associated" (Bull 2000: 6). The commodification and assignment of

economic value to a collectible is where an object comes to be entangled and inseparable from the practices of valuation and exchange that define it.

The market is a site in which collectors are able to exercise their expertise, as well as an arena in which value hierarchies are established. The market is thus also a place where immaterial value hierarchies which imbue the collectible with value. Collectors repeatedly impressed upon me how crucial it was, to the development of their collection and their expertise, to be in tune with the market. A great deal of collectors' time is spent either directly occupied with the market, browsing, buying or selling, or, in speculating about where market prices are headed. In these activities collectors are assessing the cultural field, so to speak, and getting 'a feel for the game' in Bourdieu's sense of the term, which as Hinde and Dixon explain is an instinctual and "calculative knowledge" (2007: 415). Mastering the market has implications for both collector and collectible: not only does "the very meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed" but "each social space [such as the market] functions as both one of the sites where competence is produced and as one of the sites where it is given its price" (Bourdieu 1984: 88). There is a significant parallel between the activities required by the market, such as the juxtaposition and negotiation of the various values and merits of collectibles, and those required when assembling a collection. A merger or blurring occurs in market spaces whereby collectors put on different hats and operate as dealers in an effort to maintain their collection. One of the primary personages of the market space, be it a fair or eBay, is the collector-dealer.

This chapter considers the figure of the collector-dealer and picks up from Chapter Two's discussion of the role of dealing in maintaining a collection and the collector-dealer's ability to 'let go' of their possessions. As part of a wider tension implicit in my findings between those who are seen to collect for passion and those for profit, the prevalence of the collector-dealer and the necessity of engaging with the market in order to collect at all, is part of the tenuous relationship many collectors have with the market and all things financial. Given the influence of the market on collecting, and the sheer extent to which individuals who claimed to disdain collecting for investment nonetheless spoke of financial value, such tensions are intriguing. Keeping such prevalent tensions in mind I see the collector-dealer as exemplary of the fusion of market and collecting activities. I address this fusion with an eye to how financial limitation fosters different levels of engagement with the market, and in turn collectibles.

This chapter also considers the market as a community space, where social relationships are forged and competitions fought. As such discussion focuses on the role of expertise in collecting circles and argues that the market is best understood as an economic and cultural field in which expertise and knowledge are exercised largely with an eye to profit making (Bourdieu 1984). Examining the most common narrative of expertise relating to the market, the "glory story," and focusing in on Douglas, an exemplary market-expert collector, this section of the chapter considers Douglas' engagement with the market.

The fourth section of the chapter examines the market as a site of value assignment. This section pays particular attention to the circulation of collectibles

through various hierarchies of the market, including the economic value assigned to rarity and origins, as in the case of collectors enchanted by original marketing campaigns and circumstances of consumption. It also engages with the debates among collectors over restoration and considers how market imperatives often trump the supposed material sacredness of the collectible. This section examines the contradictions in collectors' detail of their attachments to their collectibles. To collect for profit is looked down upon and yet every collector's comments have discrepancies on this note and their actions reveal significant financial motivations. Finally, this section examines new markets, namely the increasing prevalence of eBay, in collecting communities, and assesses how such emerging markets mediate the attachment between collector and collectible.

The fifth section of the chapter analyzes how the market informs us about the collectible as a particular form of object. The collectible is not only a commodity but also crucially an object made relevant in relation to a wider series of objects: the collection. Here I challenge claims made in some of the literature that collectibles are sacred objects once removed from the "economic circuit" (see Elsner and Cardinal 1991) and argue, on the basis of my findings, that it is not outside of the market that collectibles come to be reverent but, in fact, *within* the market, by virtue of its vibrant and constantly changing character. Collectibles are made reverent by collectors not in isolation but as extensive with communities and markets and histories. The chapter concludes with a review of the influence of the market adding to our wider understanding of how consumer culture comes to

impact the value collectibles are attributed, and the character of the attachment between consumer and commodity.

### **The Dealer Collector**

The dealer collector is the central figure of the collecting market. Located at the nexus of the market and the collection, the dealer collector's narrative and strategy of selling yields great clues not only to how the market influences the attachment between collector and collectible but on how the object is made to enchant. Examining the motivations, activities and attitudes held by dealer collectors towards the market is to account for "the intrusion of the market and its effects on destabilizing the meaning and values of money and material things" (Myers 2001: 19). Myers argues that, "the value possessed by objects is subject to slippage and therefore is problematic. It must be sustained or reproduced through the complex work of production" (2001: 6). I view the market as just such as site of value production, and focus on the role of the dealer collector in facilitating a synthesis of material and immaterial value in the collectible. In the introduction I pointed out that it is precisely the ambiguity of value that engages collectors with the market. Aside from providing a unique opportunity to flex one's expertise and influence the value structure of the market, the fluctuations of market value necessitates that collectors be engaged with the market on a regular basis.

Dealer collectors or collector dealers fall on a spectrum of commitment to the market, from an involvement with an eye to investment to engaging with the market as a means to maintain their collection. As detailed in Chapter Two, there is a noticeable stigma tied to the idea of collecting for investment, and collectors

often draw firm lines between motivation for profit and as opposed to that of passion. In both instances, however, the market is ubiquitous in collecting activities, and every collector, except perhaps wealthy individuals, is a version of the collector dealer. Derek, who considers his knowledge and participation in the market as a mark of his expertise, points out the hypocrisy present in the tension between passion and profit: “these collectors. They tend to be very greedy. They all claim they aren’t interested in the money, but you wait till they sell something...” (interview with author, December 2006).

Collector dealers sell their collectibles on the market as a means of maintaining their collection. Many collectors consider the evolution and fine-tuning of their collections as part of the normal process of collecting. As a Dinkie collector notes, having all these different items pass through your collection is a source of enjoyment:

I’ve always been a bit of a collector, not like a totally mad one, just into toys. I’ve got more now I think than I did when I was a child, but again they’re all for sale and they will go and I’ll just get something else...the thing is I’m parting with them but I’m getting other ones. So I’m still enjoying them, especially when they’re in nice condition” (Harold, interview with author, May 2007)

Focusing one’s collection is often seen as a mark of a rigorous, expert collector. As one collector remarked with disdain, “some people never sell anything and it just keeps accumulating” (Ronald, interview with author, October 2007). Selling is also, for the majority of collectors that I spoke with, a necessity. Financial limitations and the often-prohibitive costs of some of these toy collectibles is what brings many collectors into the market as sellers. Often this financial limit is embraced positively, as a challenge, with collectors using their ability to maintain

their collections as a mark of their expertise and proficiency in the market. Indeed Douglas, whom I examine in closer detail, has made working the market the hallmark of his collecting activity.

It is important to reiterate that collectors interact with the market from any number of positions: buyer, seller, barterer, and browser, and that a great deal of the selling is a very low key affair, a couple of pieces here and there, rather than a fully fledged business activity. Often collectors dabble in dealing because in scouring the market they come upon bargains in another branch of collectibles too good to forgo. Helen describes her first foray into dealing: “I went to an auction and saw these bears, I mean they were bags of rags falling apart and I bought them, I think I paid a hundred quid and then I put them up on eBay and you know I doubled my money...” (interview with author, March 2007). Helen’s initial engagement in the market as a dealer was part of a larger narrative of a collection evolving towards ever more expensive tastes. Dealing presented itself as a worthwhile and exciting avenue to continue collecting, even if it meant she needed to modify the character of her attachment to bears, and learn to pass them on.

Helen’s particular engagement with the market, by virtue of financial necessity, has transformed the character of her attachment to collectibles. In “the pleasure of seeing it and then selling it on to someone else who loves it,” Helen consumes her collectibles in a remarkably different way than our typical understandings of collectors, who hoard their collectibles, and forever remove them from the economic circuit as their houses steadily fill with things. These

new forms of attachment propose new ways of thinking around how the collectible becomes valuable and what it means to be possessed by one's possessions. A consideration of the dealer collecting habits of both Helen and Harold builds a case for the evolving forms and manners of attachment collectors have with their collectibles. Systems of exchange are an integral part of the collectible as object. Far from compromising the collectible, or tarnishing its supposed sacredness, the market serves to enhance its value and to enliven its enchantment in the eyes of collectors.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the strategies dealer collectors such as Helen employ when selling their collectibles. Such strategies are indicative of the extent to which selling a bear involves fostering a personal level of attachment, and using the cachet of provenance wherever possible to make the bear stand out as unique. Selling is often about animating a toy and blurring the lines between the inanimate and animate. Helen explains how "if I sell a bear on my website, you know and I call it a name, people will email me not just 'the bear' they will call it that name..." concluding that "you just need to make everyone different and stand out on its own. I don't know. You can use props for things" (interview with author, March 2007). Helen's selling tactics are evidence of how a personal level of attachment may be fostered in a market environment despite suspicions to the contrary. Here the market is influencing the very value of the bear, which far from being cut off from the economic circuit has circulated through the market numerous times and is made meaningful as a collectible. Interestingly, it is on eBay, a fairly recent market form in collecting circles, that

Helen sells the majority of her collectibles. The market then quickly emerges as a central space in which objects are made enchanting, and where the attachment between collector and collectible is enacted in new ways. As the activities of collectors transform, so too do their relations and attachments to their collectibles, and, in turn, the very form and circulation of the collectibles themselves.

### **The Community**

The entanglement of the market and collecting communities is a testament to how it is not only money and objects, but also social values that are being exchanged in market sites. A collector's integration into the community most often goes hand in hand with their integration into the market. The fair is a site of social exchange. Fairs are usually noisy affairs full of people chatting in groups, running in to friends they haven't seen in a while, and comparing bargains over a cup of tea. One only has to spend a few moments at a fair to realize that the fair is as much about taking the temperature of the collecting community as it is about buying and selling. Who are the key players? What are they doing? What's up on offer? - - are all questions attendees preoccupy themselves with. Far from the solitary individual in his study at home assembling a collection, collectors are remarkably social. For many collectors the social aspect of the hobby is the prime attraction for them. Not unlike collectors whose interest in their collectibles becomes eclipsed by playing the market or researching history, some collectors appear to be entirely transfixed by the social outlet provided in their collecting hobby. I consistently found collectors quite gossipy, and noted the delight they took in discussing their fellow colleagues' activities and acquisitions.

These “discussions” were both of pleasure and purpose. Collectors impressed upon me how a central part of their collecting is to cultivate key relationships with their fellow colleagues and with dealers on the market. Henry points out how the very type of transactions done on the collecting market lend themselves to a certain sociability: “I think it’s very different buying secondhand items like we’re doing, than buying new things. Now if you’re a person who goes to junk sales, boot fairs, antique fairs...that’s a world of negotiating and doing deals...it is a social life” (interview with author, May 2007). Because of the mutability of value found in such environments, cultivating relationships with the right people can make the difference between a satisfactory collection and a superb one. Joe, James and Douglas all described how an encounter with a key figure in the collecting community, and unparalleled access to innumerable collectibles were central factors in the extent of their engagement with the hobby today. Ever the strategist, and not unlike both Joe and James, Douglas explains how he used his position at a toy shop to best advantage:

I actually worked for a toy shop who dealt in second hand and I increased my collection possibly by five fold when I was working with them (laughs) oh it was great...I'd help them catalogue it, I'd get paid for the time I was cataloguing and they'd write the list and say what do you want, and I'd say that, that, that and that...(interview with author, May 2007)

Clearly cultivating particular relationships with the community is very advantageous to collectors, both economically and culturally speaking. What struck me most about collectors’ details of their engagement with the collecting community was the extent to which these engagements took place almost exclusively in market spaces, and how the value and meanings attached to any

given collectible were based on that object's situation in a much wider community.

Put simply, taste is social, always with an eye to others, and it is in the sharing of value with others that the collectible becomes meaningful. As Henry notes, "value is something you share with someone of a similar knowledge" (interview with author, May 2007). The value of networking as a collecting activity is evident in the scores of collecting clubs and societies catering to the hobby, and in the degree to which some of these clubs have been able to turn social membership itself into a commodity. The British Model Soldier Society entices interested parties to "get more from your hobby..." detailing how for a fee, a membership to the society can provide ample opportunities to "meet fellow enthusiasts" and "get the information you need" (2007 Brochure, British Model Soldier Society). Likewise for a fee of £28 annually, The Teddy-Hermann collectors club encourages bear collectors to "become an enthusiastic member of our Teddy-Hermann collectors' club which unites bear friends around the globe" (2007 Brochure, Welcome to the Teddy-Hermann Collector's Club).

Aside from being lucrative from a strategic standpoint when assembling a collection, communities also present challenges and competitions that both engage and motivate collectors onwards. The majority of competition takes the form of gaining access to collectibles, that is, bidding wars at auction, being the first to spot bargains on eBay, and gaining entry into fair spaces early in the morning before all the others arrive. Robert's detail of his ongoing relation with his "frenemy" provides some clues as to the engagement collectors derive from

competition with their fellow collectors. Robert collects “Bonzo” - figurines and bears related to the output of a specific artist. It is an esoteric collection within collecting circles, and so he and his frenemy operate in close quarters. Robert and his frenemy’s disputes are almost exclusively about bidding on eBay. Not uncommon among other collectors I spoke with, and indicative of the complex social networks and negotiations governing collecting communities, Robert has “a gentlemen’s agreement” with his frenemy over bidding. Yet, as Robert laments, “the trouble is that he seems to live at home on his computer 24-7. And he seems to be monitoring eBay every ten minutes, so if anything interesting comes up he’s on it, so I have to wait for him to be outbid before I can go and bid on it” (interview with author, March 2007).

Robert spoke of the competition with his frenemy in a tone conveying how, despite his frustrations with his frenemy’s ability to snap up a deal online, the challenges and competition between the two added a certain sense of drama, excitement, and was a motivation to his collecting activities. Robert’s awareness that his strategy of collecting, and all of his acquisitions were being surveyed by his knowledgeable frenemy, seemed to invigorate his collecting activities. Laughing when talking about his frustration with his frenemy Robert revealed the level of delight he took in the competition, “I’ve never seen the eighth [Bonzo prints] and my frenemy has got the seventh and he beat me to it on eBay and he got it for a song actually, which is annoying (laughs) but yeah” (interview with author, March 2007). Aside from displaying the friendly competition that can

exist among collectors the case of Robert and his frenemy is significant in relation to eBay.

eBay has an intriguing impact on the relationship between collectors and their collectibles. Collecting using eBay creates a notable distance between collector and collectible. The sensuous, tactile connection I observed between collectors and their prospective collectibles at toy fairs was, at best, deferred, as possible buyers on eBay browsed pictures of collectibles on their computers. However, the collectors didn't find this tactile distance a problem. After all they eventually got to see the item when it arrived on their doorstep. Instead, collectors underscored the loss of community that occurs with eBay, and explained how keeping in touch with people online required a modification in their collecting habits, as compared to the much more social spaces of fairs. Edward confesses that despite having used eBay years ago he prefers going to fairs where he has "much more fun going to these things and chatting to people" (interview with author, March 2007). Robert's sustained interaction with his frenemy on eBay however, is a striking example of how eBay can function to enhance collecting communities, despite the reservations of some collectors.

E-Bay changes the sociality of collecting in particular ways. Collectors view it as both detracting and enhancing their interaction with fellow collectors. On one hand e-Bay severs the physical contact of fair spaces as collectors realize they no longer have to leave the comfort of their homes to access toy collectibles. Yet it also fosters new forms of sociality and greatly expands the network of collectors one is able to communicate with. At any given time of the day

collectors from Europe, Australia, and North America are online. As e-Bay has become a central market operating within collecting communities the prices particular collectibles achieve in auction on the site figure heavily into the construction of their value. Even collectors who do not buy things online go onto the website to gather references of what certain objects have achieved. The field of values around collectibles is increasingly a measure of their value on eBay. What is more eBay is perceived to have negatively affected the merit of collectibles at fairs: “nowadays you don’t get the quality or the quantity at those toy fairs. Because the people who were supplying the dealers...they’ve got a cousin or a nephew who’s a slick wizard on the Internet who says ‘uncle don’t do that, I’ll put it on eBay for you and you’ll get two times the amount for it’” (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007). Crucially, eBay is very much a form of interaction closely intertwined with an economic market. Although one could argue the same about collectors gathering in person at a fair, the very structure of e-bay as a website, its auction format and the limited channels of communication (email the seller) it makes available to collectors, encourages interactions that are chiefly economic in character.

Although further research would be required, there seems to be a generational effect in play here. Those who most avidly use eBay and strategically cultivate relationships with dealers using email tend to be a younger set of collectors. I quite often got the sense that not only integrating oneself into a new market, but also mastering a new technology was more trouble than it was worth for older collectors. The younger collectors took eBay in stride and

negotiated the changing forms of social networking within this new online market. In addition to a concern with the changing face of communities, collectors also invariably mentioned the risks involved in buying on eBay, and again, the younger collectors seemed to navigate these risks with much more enthusiasm than their older counterparts. Douglas a fan of eBay explains some of the barriers to eBay use:

eBay only appeals to a certain style of collector. You've just mentioned the people who like to touch and so forth, those people do not use eBay because they are scared and the unknown to them is a reason for not purchasing...eBay is all about using your judgment about who the seller is... (interview with author, May 2007)

The close integration of collecting communities and the collectibles market shows how the value of a collectible lies not only in the relation between an individual collector and his collectible but also by how that collectible is evaluated and comes to circulate through a wider social network. In this way the toy collecting community can be seen as a particular form of subculture. As a community they are defined by the way they transact their collectibles to signal one's allegiances and communicate to others. Hebdige's comments on the fashions of the punk subculture could equally apply to the constraints and choices negotiated when assembling a collection:

Each ensemble has its place in an internal system of differences – the conventional modes of sartorial discourse – which fit a corresponding set of socially prescribed roles and options. These choices contain a whole range of messages which are transmitted through the finely graded distinctions of a number of interlocking sets – class and status, self-image and attractiveness, etc. (1979: 101).

Collectors are continually making and remaking meaning with their collectibles but they have to do this in tandem with a whole host of cultural, social and economic forces. It is often the case that collectors are unable to completely control the significance of either their collectibles nor their attachments to them. ‘We learn from Marx that ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx, 1951 as quoted in Hebdige 1979: 80). To return to the opening vignette of this chapter, considering the interplay of community and markets is an acknowledgement that far more than collectibles are being transacted in the market.

### **Expertise**

*In the middle of my interview with Julie a man approached clutching a garbage bag. It turned out the bag was full of bears he was hoping might interest Julie. As she pulled the bears one by one out of the bag, the extent of her discerning expertise was apparent. Within seconds, and at times before the bear had even emerged completely from the bag, she was able to recognize the make of the bear, its age, and do a quick run-over of its condition. None of them turned out to be her “cup of tea.” She kindly thanked the man and turned back to our interview. It was an impressive display of knowledge and expertise, the whole assessment might have taken two minutes. I had just witnessed a professional dealer collector in action. (Toy Collector’s Shop, May 2007)*

The market is a primary site where collectors exercise their expertise. A significant portion of collectors’ energies are given over to playing the market: an amalgam of activities characterized by applying one’s expertise so to be able to navigate the market to one’s best advantage. As we saw in the preceding section, collectors come together in communities centered around markets to debate and speculate over where the market is heading, and to gather references and to share

tips of the trade. Outside of an intellectual historical engagement with their hobby, it is when interacting with the market that the majority of collectors develop their expertise. Navigating the market efficiently is indispensable to not only building a collection, but in knowing what one's already existing collection is worth.

The development of expertise along market lines is a testament to both the ubiquity of the market to all things collecting, and to the mutability of object values and hierarchies. There is an overwhelming sense, when speaking with collectors that a central part of such expertise is being able to keep on top of the changing landscapes of markets. Large volumes of collectibles circulate in complex networks, across various sites at different rates. Market expertise is almost exclusively about being able to come to grips with this complexity and making an advantageous move when opportunities arise. It is then, no surprise that Douglas, market expert collector extraordinaire, speaks strategically as if his interaction with the market is a game putting his skills and knowledge to the test. Douglas details how he works his ability to recognize economic value to his advantage: “I buy a rather large collection, put a reasonable value on the items that I don’t want, sell them and then somebody will put a higher value on those so I make money and get to recoup the original investment and I get to keep the original items I wanted” (interview with author, May 2007)

Collectors spoke of ‘knowing the market’ as keeping in play changing regimes of values and the factors influencing them. This is evocative of Bourdieu’s concept of a “feel for the game” where the field of collecting “is a space of competition, the analogy being a game of chess where players enter the

game and position themselves according to the powers and moves available to them” (Prior 2008: 305). Keeping on top of the market then is not only to understand the continually shifting values assigned to collectibles, but to use this information to positional advantage within a larger network of collectors.

Following a lengthy diatribe on the various factors shaping the market, from the impact of up and coming younger collectors, to the arrival of large collections on the market as collectors die, Derek employed an example to make his point about the ever-changing market:

So Dinkie toys are, and this is an example I always use, years ago, lets say you go about fifteen years, even twenty years you could take the Dinkie Weetabix van which is a 1950s Dinkie toy, and it was very, very desirable. A mint boxed one in those days would go for something like 8, 900 pounds. And a crappy one would go for 200 and between the crappy one there would be a sliding scale. Well now the mint boxed one might go for 1400- 1800 pounds but you won’t be able to sell anything else of it, you know so many had come out that the rest had been knocked out (interview with author, December 2006)

Derek’s comment demonstrates how the market shapes collectors’ very desires. It also exemplifies the speculations and detailed explanations collectors made of the market throughout my interviews. As the craze for Weetabix vans escalated, more and more collectors’ put theirs onto the market precipitating the decline of the Weetabix van in value overall. That collectibles’ economic values shift as a result of collectors’ actions on the market reinforces how “the value of potentially collectible objects...remains determined by social valuation and not by any intrinsic properties of the objects themselves. Rarity and scarcity are other non-intrinsic properties that affect the social valuation and collectibility of objects” (Belk 1995: 38). Knowing the saturation points of the market and anticipating

coming waves is a mark of expertise, and an opportunity to make money and gain access to desirable collectibles.

The key task of expert collectors is to follow the market through time, from the original markets in which a collectible was initially introduced to the future markets it might circulate through. James explains how William Britain's markets their limited edition new production regiments in the hope of controlling their future worth: “A manufacturer like Britain’s comes out with a new Civil War set, and you know they’re [collectors] marking it down on their list for September, they’ll know they’ll be able to go into their shop and buy it...” (interview with author, March 2007). James’ description lays out the relation between collectors and the market in which desire, demand as well as market and collecting habits are shaped. Although there are differences between collecting in-production William Britain’s and vintage pieces stretching back as far as the 1890s, the principle of anticipating the market remains the same. Collectors collect every bit as much for the future as for the past.

Examining how collectors exercise their expertise on the market reiterates Miller’s observation that “The physicality of the artefact [collectible] lends itself to the work of praxis – that is, cultural construction through action rather than just conceptualization” (1987: 129). Expertise informed the collectors’ engagement with their collectibles, and directed their activities from buying patterns to fairs attended. There are numerous fairs across the UK in any given year, ranging from generalist toy fairs such as Sandown and the Toy Collectors Fair in Birmingham, to more niche and toy specific fairs such as Sci-Fi fair and Memorabilia. The

largest fair in the UK is Sandown Fair. Held on the outskirts of London and billing itself “Europe’s No 1 Toy Collectors Fair,” Sandown has five hundred stalls and provides free parking for up to six thousand cars (2007: Barry Potter’s Fairs, a Pocket Guide). These fairs play an important role in a wider chain of collecting community gatherings, where economic value hierarchies are negotiated and relationships established.

It was at such fairs that experts partook in their most typical activity, browsing. The amount of browsing collectors engaged in, whether at fairs, auction viewing, or at home on eBay demonstrates how a collector’s engagement with the market goes beyond mere acquisition to the building of a network of references. Expert consumption exceeds the point of purchase. Collectors browse not only objects but also the interplay of their colleagues in social networks, and the spaces where particular collectibles are found. Among collectors this activity becomes an automatic, embodied form of expertise. Edward explains how “you’re always looking and your eyes they eventually get practiced” (interview with author, March 2007). Likewise, Henry describes browsing as “get(ing) a feel”:

Well to browse you gain knowledge don’t you. The only way you learn is to handle them, that’s the way you really learn, to get exposed to it. And what you thought might be rare turns up a lot more than you thought...and then you get a feel for price. First it’s to learn and second you assess the object and see if it’s something that you really want and so you use your knowledge that you’ve already got (interview with author, May 2007)

Expertise then, is developed overtime by collectors, as a result of their exposure to the market and the collectibles circulating within it. It is also perceived to be something natural, an embodied doxa, to draw from Bourdieu. This doxa, an

“unquestioned and pre-reflexive way of experiencing and negotiating the world” is actually social, cultural and economic in origin (Thorpe 2009: 126). Expertise is seen as instinctual and is often ambiguous as Henry’s use of ‘getting a feel’ conveys. Collecting as a field is guided by rules and a largely unspoken structure of power. For Bourdieu, as Hemondalagh explains, “the social making-up of the rules surrounding such activities” is often “hidden from view, or misrecognized” (2006: 216).

Bourdieu notes how “the competence of a ‘connoisseur’ is an unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation...which, like an art of thinking or an art of living, cannot be transmitted solely by precept or prescription” the connoisseur is “generally incapable of stating the principles of his judgments” (1984: 66). The collectors did try and explain the exercise of expertise in their circles. However, in keeping with Bourdieu, they often elided the extent to which price, and economic gain directed their activities, preferring to speak instead to the cultural value and sentimentality of their pieces. Nor did they often speak to positioning within the community, to the class differences and financial power differentials between collectors and their effect on who was and wasn’t deemed ‘expert.’ For Derek someone who collected “plastic OO gauge nonsense” was simply not an expert (interview with author, December 2006). That these plastic trains were far more affordable than the exceedingly expensive Hornby line he focused on was of no consideration. Definitions of an “expert” and a “good” collection were often conflated with wealthy or expensive within collecting circles (although not completely as we saw in the case of the ‘invisible bidder’ in

Chapter Two). This conflation is reflected in Bourdieu's idea of capital as a measure of what is being consumed, how and by whom. Derek's comments of "plastic nonsense" referred to a group of train collectibles, but it also was directed at those collecting them: "Judgments of the worth of goods and practices are closely associated with judgments of superiority and inferiority of social groups" (Sayer 2003: 349).

Using one's knowledge requires a careful negotiation of access to various market spaces, some of which are restrictive. Perhaps because the benefits it brings are dependant on a certain exclusive knowledge, expertise is a closely guarded club. Two such market spaces, brought to light only by word of mouth, include the seven am car-boot sale and the walkabout. The seven am car-boot sale attended by those in the know occurs in the morning of any large fair. John explains,

The more involved you get in the hobby the more chance you get to see it [the object]. You come here at two in the afternoon and all the bargains are gone. All the rare pieces, the unusual pieces would have been sold by dealers and they sold a lot of things outside in the car park at seven this morning (interview with author, March 2007)

The walkabout, another means to separate the experts from the amateurs, is done by collectors who pay one hundred pounds for a table at a fair, solely on the opportunity it provides whereby "you pick out the choice items and then the public comes in" (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007). All of these tactics and exclusive spaces illustrate how expertise is based on differentiation and hierarchy. Indeed the market, far from a unified welcoming space, is exceedingly fragmented field of competition upon closer examination. There is a sense of

impending pressure governing the expert tactics of collectors. This pressure is linked to the need to keep on top of ever advancing time, and an awareness that the saturation of not only objects but also experts in the market is highly counterproductive. Thus expertise in collecting is built upon a sense of dominance over the market with those in the know insisting they play the market rather than the market playing them. A common pattern among collectors is the assertion that other collectors are completely misinformed about the current and future worth of their collections. Max encourages collectors not to play the market and to “buy it for the here and now” insisting that “if you get 2000 pounds for your collection, it’s not a lot of money today, but in ten, twenty years it’s going to be worth peanuts” (interview with author, October 2007).

Throughout the interviews collectors impressed upon me their unique level of expertise through what I came to think of as exaggerated ‘Glory Stories’. These narratives’ primary function is to showcase the prowess of the collector, and rather than being framed as a story of luck are instead forwarded as evidence of a coming together of skill and expertise. The glory story is ultimately a narrative of triumph over the market. Henry and Lewis’ glory story, of finding soldiers in a junk box at an auction viewing demonstrates expertise in two ways. Not only were they able to recognize the figures and their worth immediately and instinctively, but they had defensively cultivated a gentlemen’s agreement with the only other person in the room in the know:

L: We went to auction not long ago and there was a box of soldiers there, a junk box there in the corner, and it was like everything was scratched up...there were seven and they were little soldiers and they moved their legs and...I had to buy this lot...you know you

get so happy and there's only one figure known like this in the world

H: made in 1936...and it was the manufacturer's own collection of, archive collection

L: that's when I was the most excited...and they ended up in this junk box and so the estimate's 30 to 40 quid and I had to go to the shop that day and so I told my Mom [bidding in his place] and she said well how much should I bid for it. And I said go to a thousand (laughs) and I got it for 40 quid.

R: so nobody else noticed it?

L: well one guy did but we have this sort of understanding, if it's good Britain's soldiers he doesn't bid against me and if it's good aluminum stuff I don't bid against him" (Lewis and Henry, interview with author, May 2007)

Although this glory story's factuality may be suspect seeing as it takes shape as Lewis and Henry add ever more exaggerated details, what matters is that collectors, time and time again felt the need to share such stories with me. All collectors have a glory story of some version or another, and many are exaggerations. Aside from exhibiting the degree of Lewis and Henry's expertise, what also emerges from this glory story is how fun and exciting such moments are. Lewis and Henry's blow-by-blow account of the auction deftly conveys the anticipation and the pleasure wrapped up in such a moment of interaction with the market. Pleasure in these cases stemming from getting the items you desire, turning a profit, and seeing your knowledge and expertise coming together to advantage on the market.

Another source of pleasure stems from an awareness that you have made a contribution to the collecting field and brought something otherwise unknown to light. Other glory stories refer to such finds as discoveries. In Robert's case his find was,

one of those very rare moments where I suppose the only way you can describe it as is you get sweaty palms, real almost heart palpitations of excitement as to the discovery you have made. I mean I don't know how else to equate it, you have made a discovery. And you've made it against someone else who had missed it (interview with author, March 2007)

The thrill of discovering an item is a culmination of a great deal of work, coming to terms with a complex market, ever-shifting value hierarchies, and diverse spaces of exchange. Beyond a mere material find, a discovery unlocks a door to an extensive network of historical and cultural significance. Walter Benjamin reminds us of the complexities wrapped up in each and every collectible discovery arguing, in keeping with Robb's concept of the extended artefact, that collectors collect not only the object "but also...its entire past" (1973). "The details of [the collectible's] ostensibly external history: previous owners, price of purchase, current value and so on. All of these come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magic encyclopedia" (1973). Being a "true collector" as Benjamin puts it, or an expert, is about relating to, mastering or reveling in the collectible object and all it is extensive with. A discovery then is a moment in the 'career' of a collector laden with significance, and it is the promise that there are more such moments to come that motivates collectors onwards.

Although there are genuine reverberations of appreciation for the object in these glory story narratives, their focus on monetary value serve as evidence that, despite their supposed misgivings about the commitment of investment collectors, most collectors are enormously preoccupied with the market and more specifically, with the economic value of their collectibles. Aside from a passion

for history or a fondness for the social aspects of collecting, collecting is a practice often requiring a substantial economic investment from collectors. Collectors are nostalgically, culturally and personally attached to their collectibles but they are also financially invested in them. Collecting, if astute and selective can be lucrative, and in turn, if unguided can result in financial loss. It is important to remember that alongside a developing attachment between collector and collectible there is, in most cases, an exchange of money taking place.

### **Douglas (A Case within a Case)**

You needed to buy the item and you needed to buy collections to get the item, and it was well ok I'm putting a value of 100 dollars on that item and I'm putting a value of about 500 dollars on the other items so I've got 600 worth of value, so if I buy it for 500 dollars and sell the rest for 500 dollars then I've gotten the item for nothing. And a lot of my collection has actually turned out that way (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007)

I refer to Douglas as “market man.” Douglas was above and beyond the most strategic and opportunistic player I spoke with. Just as Bill left a lasting impression on me as an intellectual collector, I couldn’t help but notice that for Douglas, the toy collectible seemed incidental to a wider market game. Douglas’ entire modus operandi was working the market, fairs, eBay, acquaintances and new opportunities provided by a recent relocation to the UK.

His remarkably open and guilt free approach to the market signaled that Douglas paid no heed to discourses within the collecting community around investment compromising a collector’s true commitment to their collectibles. Unlike the majority of collectors, Douglas displayed little nostalgic reverie of any sort for his collectibles. His passion surfaced instead when he spoke of the

complexities of the market. Owing in large part to his age, he conceded that he had no direct association with real trains or Hornby. The imaginative component of Douglas' activities involved a dream in which he walked into a toy shop frozen back in time where he “can go ‘I want that one, and that one, and that one’” (interview with author, May 2007). Douglas spoke fondly of his Hornby Locos and all of his efforts were made in the direction of completing train sets, but somewhere along the way it was the requisite market maneuverings that captured his attention.

As an exaggerated example of a market expert, Douglas' case offers great insight into how a collector's attachment to their collectible is influenced by the market. It is evidence of how objects are attributed a particular presence in particular contexts. By building on the idea of expertise, Douglas' experience helps cement my point that the market and economic value has become completely intertwined with collecting: in how collectors relate to their collectibles; and in how collectibles are made meaningful and resonant. In describing how it feels to find a sought after piece, Douglas' comments betray the extent to which such moments are influenced by market factors: “it's almost like butterflies, it's like oh great there's that item but it depends where it turns up and at what price. Because there are rare items and then there are rare items that you can afford” (interview with author, May 2007). Not only do Douglas' financial limitations affect his ability to access collectibles, he has added further criteria to his list of what constitutes a good find. Not surprisingly, when asked how long the appeal of a new item lasted Douglas responded, “only the time you're looking at

it” (interview with author, May 2007). A consummate hunter, the magic for Douglas lies not in the object but in the market surrounding it.

Douglas was engaged directly with the market from the beginning. His first exposure to collecting was an attempt to fix up the old train set his Dad had given him. As Douglas explained,

once you've got a train you need more bits and pieces...and you realize that the item you need is no longer made. And so how do you find it you find it through newspapers, you find it through collecting magazines, you find it through associations...it wasn't the fact that it was an obsolete toy, it was the fact that I couldn't get bits and pieces just by going to the train shop and buying them. And so that's how I started collecting... (interview with author, May 2007)

Douglas describes how his attachment wasn't a facet of the cachet of an obsolete toy, its provenance or the lure of its age, but instead a facet of the practical challenges provided by its condition, and the navigation required in solving these challenges. In other words, it wasn't so much any quality of the collectible train itself but the activities and skillful negotiations surrounding the possession of one of these trains that engaged Douglas.

Douglas readily admitted that he doesn't play big money on the market but his tactics and prowess are considerable nonetheless. To Douglas “it's using your ability, what I've built up over the last 25 years, and it would be a waste not to use that” (interview with author, May 2007). Collecting, in his case, is defined primarily as using one's skill on the collectibles market. This market as a field has its own rules and “success in a field is the result of effortlessly and effectively following the(se) rules and/or strategically using the rules to one's own advantage” (Hinde and Dixon 2007: 411). In manipulating his social contacts to

access particular collectibles, and selling on those he is not interested in for a profit, Douglas is playing the strengths of his cultural, social and economic capital. A huge part of Douglas' skill involves positioning himself within the flow of collectibles on the market, learning circulations and being able to size up those he deals with. The competitive, ruthless, language Douglas uses when describing his efforts at fairs in "looking for the new blood...the people there who weren't dealers, or just the general old chap who cleared out his toys before he's going to the rest home so to speak..." not only rang of opportunism but indicated that Douglas had no inhibitions about playing the market (interview with author, May 2007). Whereas other collectors claimed that their passion was for the object itself and that their engagement with the market was only of necessity, Douglas unapologetically played the market.

Douglas' case exemplifies the varied forms and sources of a collector's attachment to their collectible. Collectibles are valued in concert with multiple social forms and contexts, some of which can be contentious, even within the same collecting circles. That Douglas and Bill, both avid Hornby collectors, contrasted significantly in passion, speaks to a diversity of points of engagement with the collectible.

### **The Market as a Site of Value Assignment**

*I entered the viewing room. It was large, filled with tables whose every inch was covered with boxes of trains. The volume was greater than I had expected. There was a square glass case holding especially shiny looking trains, they were lit from above, on display and, I ascertained, the most valuable lots. I began to walk among the tables. Browsing I became immediately aware that I had no idea what I was looking at. To me they were boxes and boxes of trains which varied to my eye only in color and slightly in size. Yet to the group of approximately fifteen men in the room there was so much more going on. Some were engaged in*

*conversations, discussing particular locomotives, a number of others held notebooks and were examining specific trains in detail. They all moved about with a purpose and there was a palpable energy in the air. My position as outsider lay bare; I realized I was oblivious to the complex hierarchies guiding the collectors around me. To my amazement when I returned back to the viewing a few hours later many of the same collectors were still there, taking notes and chatting. Beyond the clear-cut immediacy of the collectible locomotives in the room complex social networks and value systems were being transacted. (Toy Train Auction, December 2006)*

As we saw in the preceding section, expertise in the collecting market is about coming to terms with, gaining some mastery over and in some cases creating new levels of variation. Whether Derek's Weetabix Dinkie van from the 1950s (which became desirable and as a result caused a saturation in the market) or Lewis' and Henry's discovery of one of a kind soldiers in a junk box, variation is something uncovered, argued for and presented to the community, in short it is *produced*. Consumption is not a process of homogenization but one of heterogenization. Indeed Daniel Miller's well known theory of consumption pits itself against this assumption of homogeneity "challeng(ing) 'myths' that equate consumption with homogenization, loss of sociality and authenticity" (Dant on Miller 2000: 33). Consumption in this framework is about re-creation, re-appropriation and the rebirth of objects along ever-newer lines of variation. Smith confers noting how "objects are reborn in auctions. They acquire new values, new owners, and often new definitions" (1991: 78).

Variation is the motor of the market and the character upon which value is produced. Collectibles are made up of minute differentiations established between a series of objects, often, as in my experience of the auction viewing, largely unrecognizable to outsiders. Ronald's explanation of the toy buses before us

during an interview is indicative of the levels of variation upon which value is established. It takes an expert collector to be able to navigate such complex negotiations.

You see, that bus there has got 24 pounds on it and it's a chippy old Dinkie bus, very scraped, what you call playable...the attraction to this bus is that it's painted in a rare colour. Most of them were painted in that colour [pointing to another bus] or green. This particular one is blue and if this was mint it would be worth probably 250 pounds, because of its rare colour. But because it's playable and chippy it's worth 24 pounds. But if it were a common colour it would be worth a fiver (interview with author, October 2007).

Ronald's explanation illustrates the varied factors influencing the value assessment of any collectible on the market. Condition, rarity, colour, and in other cases, labeling, size, working order, and packaging all come together in a negotiated assignment of value. What is intriguing about these values is how they are determined in relation to a wider series of collectibles known to be, or having circulated through the market at one time or another. The collectible, is a member of a larger fraternity of related items, and is always evaluated in relation to these other goods. The value of a collectible is a combination not only of the merits of the collectible itself - physical condition, colour, shininess - but of the merits of where it can be located in a much wider hierarchy of similar objects.

Baudrillard's comment that "no object is isolated, unconnected with any other object; there must always be a set of relationships of similarity and difference by which we can 'think' the object, grasp its meaning in relation to other object about it and before it," is especially true of collectibles (1996: 93).

Three factors surface most often as integral to the hierarchies of value of collectibles: rarity, condition and original provenance. Overlapping in most cases and by no means exclusive, it is within the parameters of rarity, condition, and original provenance that the cultural and personal resonance of a collectible is made to mediate its market worth and where collectors assert themselves as experts. This is a process which Chris Gosden terms “miraculation” or the “mutual creation of people and things through the value attached to each” (2005: 153). Collecting is all about navigating such value negotiations.

The rarity of collectibles functions in collecting communities as both a regulation of access and a sign of expertise. Collectors are preoccupied with making new discoveries and finding a rare variation is perhaps the ultimate collecting experience. There is a premium placed on rarity and as one collector summarizes “unusual things are easier to sell” (Charles, interview with author, October 2007). The collectibles market is very much an economy of scarcity. Some collectors build entire reputations, and are recognized as experts on the basis of their collection of rarities, of factory mistakes and custom built pieces. To know what is rare assumes an already developed knowledge of ‘normal’ pieces and thus collecting rarities is a form of hyper-expertise. As DiMaggio points out “conversations about scarce cultural goods bind partners who can reciprocate and identify as outsiders those who do not command the required codes” (1987: 442). At the heart of rarity is difference, and variation against all other similar objects. Small details such as the colour of a wheel in Ronald’s discussion of the buses are raised to epic proportions.

Complicating matters further is the fact that rarity as a value is always in flux. What was rare yesterday is often not so tomorrow. More often than not, in direct response to an item's presentation as rare, the market becomes saturated with similar objects and the claim to rarity is necessarily repositioned. The flood of the previously mentioned Weetabix Dinkie vans on the market, for example, altered definitions of rarity. Scales of rarity have also shifted as a direct result of eBay. In operation since 1995, and with gross sales in 2004 of more than \$US 34 billion (Hillis 2006) eBay is exemplary of how the market regulates value hierarchies, assessments of rarity and ultimately the attachment between collectors and collectibles. eBay precipitated the release of a high volume of collectibles on to the market. A relatively convenient platform accessible to anyone online, eBay not only facilitated the rapid circulation of items but the circulation of these items globally. The following comments by collectors on eBay demonstrate how eBay has changed the playing field and interpretations of rarity in particular:

The other thing with eBay I think is that with collecting whether records or books or whatever, something that you thought was rare now the whole world is opened up on eBay and things aren't rare...so in some ways it's actually lowered the market I think. Cause there's always another one coming along (Helen, interview with author, March 2007)

Originally items were produced specifically for certain markets in the world, specifically for Australia, the UK and the European continent and until eBay came along you very rarely saw them in your native country...so in that respect the internet and eBay opened a market for all collectors...(Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

R: they do resurface, particularly the rarer items. eBay's interesting because it opens up a whole world of stuff coming in to the country

B: it has transformed the collecting scene in a lot of ways. And in different collecting areas because we collect books, eBay was absolutely superb...Sharon [Bill's wife] collects a particular author who published around ninety titles and we're lucky if we found one different every three years. eBay comes along and we're buying one a month (Roger and Bill, interview with author, December 2006)

As the collectors attest, eBay has fundamentally reconfigured the economy of scarcity, and the level of detail upon which rarity is conferred. With ever-greater numbers of collectibles circulating on the market, those that earn the moniker of the truly rare have done so along ever more impressive and detailed lines.

The new ways and places in which objects now circulate have changed not only collectors' hierarchies of rarity in respect to current purchases, but also their views on their existing collections. Collectors reassess their purchases retroactively, measuring and developing their existing collections with an eye to new value hierarchies. eBay and the influence of new collectibles made available to collectors have substantial reverberations in the entire value system underlying collecting. It has provided new avenues along which expertise is exercised, in the form of browsing abilities, bidding tricks, and managing risks. eBay has also led to an ever greater complexity in the variations which collectors employ to differentiate one object from another. Furthermore, eBay allows collectors constant access to changing scales of rarity with the click of a button and the ability to monitor these shifting registers of rarity, as they like. As a continuous and ongoing auction, eBay adds a staggering complexity to what was an already intricate hierarchy of value. George explains the scale of this: "at one stage to buy

one antique bear you'd have to go to three or four dealers, and come to a teddy auction twice a year or go to the four or five teddy bear fairs, but now, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week there are constantly two thousand antique bears available on eBay..." (interview with author, March 2007). The impact of eBay is an illustration of how the market impacts not only the attachment collectors have to their collectibles, but the manner in which these attachments are negotiated and made.

The condition of a collectible, the second of three hierarchies along which a collectible is commonly valued, most often concerns the physical integrity of the object. 'Is its paint chipped, is it dented, do its wheels roll, do its mechanisms function?' are all assessments made when evaluating the condition of the collectible. Collectors take into account a dazzling array of factors. The careful notes I saw the collectors taking at the auction viewing were undoubtedly a way of keeping track of all these details, and of ordering all the components of their assessment into a single monetary value at auction. Collectors not only perceive details of condition unapparent to an unknowing eye, they are able to negotiate these assessments of condition in light of a flux of other values pertaining to a collectible's rarity and provenance. Looking at how registers of condition are negotiated in a collecting community is to note the extent to which the market is able to bear upon what are judgments constructed around the tacit materiality of the collectible.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the restoration debates between collectors. Mentioned in chapter two as evidence of the myriad rules governing

the possession of collectibles, the restoration debate centres around what degree of “interference” is acceptable (Derek, interview with author, December 2006).

The debate is part of a larger negotiation of ideas of authenticity, rarity and condition on the market. The restoration that does take place within collecting communities is evidence of how market imperatives can trump the supposed sacredness of the collectible object, and how strongly tied to the market the value of collectible objects are. Derek discussed an instance in which trains are broken, belying the extent to which the market not only drives value but also influences the very material integrity of the collectible.

So you've got this equation, you know, loads of people interested in Hornby trains but there aren't too many Hornby trains with loads of people interested in them in the long run. And that's reflected in the fact that, and it wouldn't even be feasible twenty years ago for people to break stuff, people break them now because it's just not worth selling them (interview with author, December 2006)

The breaking of trains that Derek refers to is not a total destruction of the train but rather breaking up one train and using its bits and pieces to restore another. What is significant here is that this restoration, effectively a material alteration of a Hornby locomotive, is always done with an eye to the market and economic gain. Not unlike Jim McKay and his “interventions,” other collectors restore trains in ways that make them more favourable to marketability. These alterations are always done quietly and there is a secrecy surrounding them. Indeed, as Roger was discussing his own personal approach to restoration Bill quietly reminded him “you should remember this is recording Roger” (interview with author, December 2006). Illustrating the tensions present in the community over the

extent to which restoration compromises authenticity, Bill's comment suggests restoration should be a discreet activity. A properly done restoration is difficult to detect, and is viewed by many collectors as an enhancement. Enhancement, in this case, indicates how two average pieces can be combined to create an outstanding one. As collectors well know the sale of such a piece on the market only helps reinforce its authenticity. The fact that it has been purchased means it has passed the detailed assessments it would necessarily be subject to and deemed valuable. Its restoration has either not been detected or is thought to be of a high enough standard to improve rather than detract from the collectible's value.

The third main hierarchy governing the valuation of collectibles is that of original provenance. The degree to which a collector can confirm a collectible's provenance is commensurate with the degree of value placed on it. In a telling description of the hierarchy of provenance, George describes how in auctioning collectibles,

there are some collectors who just want the original photograph and won't have anything else, if they [the seller] won't part with the original photograph I'll have Luke step down and ask for a copy of it, but that's not really, it loses it, the emotional attachment...now I just say you know do you have an old photograph and if they don't have a photograph of them holding the bear do you have a photograph of you as a child (interview with author, March 2007)

George negotiates not only registers of condition (copy vs. original) but also those of proximity to the object at origin, or its aura when establishing the provenance of a bear. The best is an original photo of the original child holding their bear, yet value remains in a photograph of the child alone. As George's negotiations show, an appeal to origins is a matter of degree, and a measure of proximity.

The value of origins and provenance in collecting communities has translated into a significant level of interest in all aspects of the original market, from original marketing materials and methods, to original consumption circumstances. Often presented as a nostalgia for “the golden days [of the market] before my time” (Roger, interview with author, December 2006), an engagement with the original market often manifests in the ultimate cachet held by a Corgi box meant for an original dealer: “That’s an even rarer thing because that’s a dealer’s pack...It would have been sent out to the dealers in packs of six” (Charles, interview with author, October 2007). It is also manifest in collectors’ detailed knowledge of not only the production circumstances but of the very development of the company they collect, year by year. Collectors’ depth of engagement with all facets of the original market is evidence of how hierarchies of value are based on a series of interrelated markets of both past and present.

For the collector all of the above interlocking values across multiple markets past and present culminate in the collector’s attribution of presence to the object. The collectible market is a circulation of symbolic objects removed from their function. Yet with collectors’ interest in origins these now vestigial functions operate as powerful fantasies and as sources of economic value. The original markets and circumstances in which the toy collectible was once consumed are therefore present, although in diminished form, in current market values.

Whether rarity, condition or an appeal to origins, all registers of value in collecting communities are continuously produced, negotiated and asserted. The market is the primary site where this negotiation takes place and significantly,

where the complex overlapping structures of a collectible's value culminate or are collapsed in to a single monetary value. Although, as we have seen, these monetary values are never fixed, they are nonetheless moments in which multiple items and values can be slotted into an overarching hierarchy of value, and a system of equivalence. This is a very practical role of the market – to make what are for the most part invisible values graspable and negotiable in economic form. As Hennion aptly notes “tastes are not given or determined, and their objects are not either, one has to make them appear together” (2007: 101). Making values and tastes “appear together” (*ibid*) is the work of both a collector and the market, an assembly of interrelating statements of value and authenticity. Hennion’s choice of the word “appear” is indicative of how material goods function to “provide a connection between the visible and invisible” (Belk drawing on Pomian 1995: 146). To return to my notes on the auction viewing, it was not surprising that I had the sense that something much more than the objects were being exchanged. The intensity of the collectors’ interactions with and responses to the collectibles on offer revealed that other things were being transacted within the room. The trains were valuable in ways I had yet to understand. This is what Kington calls “the classic authenticity conundrum whereby “the efficacy of the object, which is more or less visible, is supposedly based on its authentic connection to a specific numinous source, which is almost entirely invisible” (1999: 348). Kingston highlights how the value of the object is a composite of material visible values and immaterial invisible values, the latter attached largely in market spaces.

This chapter has reiterated that these attached values aren't *attached* per se, but are instead an integral part of the object, merged inextricably with it, shaping how the object is received, how it circulates, and indeed how it comes to accrue a certain cachet in collecting communities. The difficulty of determining "where objects start and where they bleed into their context" is indicative of a depth of merger between an object and its surroundings so considerable that the object is made out of its very context (Douglas in Riggins 1994: 20). My findings line up with Bourdieu's cultural economy, "an elegant theory of how cultural, economic and symbolic relations are variously structured, embodied and practiced" (Hinde and Dixon 2007: 417). Keeping with the idea that the social, economic and cultural hierarchies in which a collectible is located are constitutive of the collectible, this final section of the chapter considers the collectible as a particular form of object.

### **The Collectible as Object**

*Interviewing Nick and his collecting buddies was a raucous affair, lots and lots of banter back and forth, lewd jokes, and side conversations. I found it hard to focus them on the questions at hand. Scratch that, I found it hard to ask any questions at all. I began to worry when the interview seemed to be getting further and further off topic. I hadn't been able to assess the character of their attachment to their collectibles, and we had only spoke of collecting in general terms. Then, George opened up a plastic bag holding an antique book he had just found at the fair. Opening it gently he began reviewing its merits with pleasure, "there's an inscription inside, 1907, so it shows it's a hundred years old, up at the top, and it's in pretty good condition too..." All the guys were silent, looking to George's catch. Of no credit to myself we were now focused back on the object. All eyes turned to the book, the rowdiness of the group was replaced with an interest and curiosity that seemed almost reverent in light of the previous banter. In this show and tell moment the collectible had centre stage (On Parade Toy Soldier Fair, March 2007).*

This final section considers what the market tells us about the collectible as a specific type of object. Toy collectibles come in all shapes and sizes, and the more variation the better. In examining the collectible as object I am not trying to account for all these items, but speaking instead about the collectible as an object in general terms and pointing out what the market allows us to understand about it as a particular kind of commodity. This goal is in keeping with Bridge and Smith's assertion that "the commodity has emerged as a particularly effective vehicle for exploring reciprocal relations between the 'cultural' and the 'economic'" (2003: 258).

An examination of the collecting market has illustrated three central aspects of the character of the collectible as object: that it is mutable in form; that it is part of a wider series of objects; and that it is resonant by virtue of its circulation in the market. Igor Kopytoff asserts that "commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being" (in Appadurai 1986: 73). By viewing commodity status as a phase in which objects can shift in and out of, Kopytoff effectively argues for "the commodity candidacy of things" (in Appadurai 1986: 13). This candidacy is formed in reference to "the standards and criteria (symbolic classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context" (Appadurai 1986: 13). Kopytoff thus confirms that the candidacy of a collectible as commodity is something negotiated and argued for according to a range of value hierarchies. Emphasizing the shifts and differences between when a thing is and isn't a commodity, Kopytoff is also pointing to the

mutability of the object, and the extent to which it is a product of its surroundings. As my study of the market confirmed, collectibles are made and remade, profoundly shaped by the market. So profoundly shaped in fact, that the very physical integrity of the object is too shaped according to market imperatives.

In restoration collectors physically transform the materiality of their trains to make them more desirable on the market. Likewise, Star Wars collectors and the emphasis they place on packaging is evidence of how the very outline of the physical form of the collectible, is transformed by the market. Although he himself didn't see the point of "having the figure in the package, never touched," Michael a Star Wars collector explained how the packaging has become all-important in figurine collecting circles. This intense preoccupation with packaging is in fact the norm for collectibles spun off TV and movies which are often still in production. Detailing the activities of the AFA, the Action Figure Association, a company set up expressly to grade the condition of the figurines and their packaging, Michael notes how "you can become obsessive and if you get a normal carded figure you'll be looking for hairline cracks and pings on the plastic...I mean this [picking up a box] has obviously got some marks there, scratches, you know, they would be grading the corners..." (interview with author, October 2007).

Due to myriad factors from the relatively recent production of the figures, and their availability and volume on the market, hierarchies of judgment in Star Wars circles have come to encompass not only the figurine, but also the packaging surrounding it. The form of the collectible as object has extended to

include the packaging. Star Wars collectors collect a composite of packaging *and* figurine, whose total integrity is dependent on the condition of both. Watching Michael talk about his collectibles, seeing him pick up the boxes and detail their condition more than the figurine encased inside, confirmed the mutable nature of the form of the object as collectible. Further confirming the extension of the form of the figurine collectible was Michael's mention of Star Cases. Star Cases are industry made plastic "clam shells" into which fit both figurine and packaging (interview with author, October 2007). In Michael's words, with the Star Case "you can actually find a card that's perfect, there's no blemishes, no hairline, any veins none at all, no creases, no pings..." (interview with author, October 2007).

The degree of the Star Wars packaging obsession and the encompassment of the packaging into the very form of the collectible are indicative of the mutability of the collectible as object, despite its material integrity. As this chapter outlined, the market influences not only the values and meaning systems surrounding the collectible, but also the material form of the collectible. That we can distinguish between 'the collectible' and 'the object' is evidence of its particularity of form. It also suggests that there is a particular social and cultural context, and set of activities against which it can be distinguished.

Michael's Star Wars packaging obsession is exemplary of the interplay of the cultural and economic in collecting. Michael's comments detailing how he actually buys two of every figurine, one for play and the other for safe keeping, are a reminder that despite collectors' claims to the contrary, their engagements with their collectibles are both sentimental and economic in character. Taking the

time and space to carefully store unopened figurines is an overwhelming indication that a central motivation for Michael is the promise of profit from his collection. Michael's collecting activities are about shoring up what he sees as a future investment as such they are profit driven and calculating. He may speak about his appreciation for the toys and awe for the movies but his actions evince another source of passion.

Michael's collection of Star Wars, and his fixation on packaging also illustrates how the interplay of the cultural and the economic varies depending on the collectible. Star Wars figurines are new production, and historically speaking, were the output of a pioneering effort in film merchandizing. George Lucas took no profit from his films, negotiating only merchandizing rights. This model had never been seen before and because of the success of the film Lucas' gains from merchandizing far outweighed what he would have received from the films themselves. Michael's passion for the toy is informed by his appreciation for the savvy of George Lucas. The cultural history of Star Wars is very much a history of an economic breakthrough. Star Wars figurines then are embedded in a market heavily structured by intentional production, and the commodification of nostalgia. The market in which they are located distinguishes them from other collectibles in terms of how they are collected, and how their value is ascertained. This is not to say that other collectibles are not commodified or also tied to histories of intentional production but that the degree to which this factors into collectors' activities of collecting does vary.

The economic and monetary value of collectibles plays a role in every

collection, from Douglas at one end completely absorbed by the market, to Michael who tries to sustain both the economic and cultural facets in his collecting activities by buying two of everything, to other collectors who disdain the economic and see it tarnishing a collector's genuine commitment to their collection. The balance between the cultural and the economic in this spectrum is a measure of the collectible as fetish and the collector as fetishist. The fetishism of commodities, in Marx's sense, may be the outcome of wider societal economic factors, such as the distance between producer and consumers in a given economic system, but it is also enacted in each individual's consumption activities. Fetishism is an act of attributing a collectible magical power every bit as much as the outcome of a particular set of economic conditions. Collectibles are not magical on their own, but made magical in an exceedingly complex negotiation of social position, financial gain and expertise.

Perhaps the most relevant distinguishing factor of the collectible as a particular form of object is its membership in a series of other collectibles. Many collectibles even existed as part of a wider set long before they become collectible. In viewing John's playroom, a set up of a complete Hornby track, and in hearing John speak about the original marketing techniques of the Hornby company, it became apparent that single Hornby pieces had always been part of a wider set. John describes how:

their marketing was phenomenal and with everything you bought from Hornby you had a form...you could be a member of the Hornby railway company right...and that's how they used to get all these boys together...these clubs all joined together...and every month the Meccano magazine would come out with the new things...you know to keep the kids interested...their marketing

was phenomenal, absolutely, it really was (interview with author, September 2007)

Meccano as a company actively encouraged the continued consumption of their products by making intentional production choices. Not unlike Meccano, other companies such as William Britain's also made such choices aimed at engaging their consumers and thus furthering their profits. These included the strategic release of toy soldier regiments to foster a economy of scarcity, and the sale of accessories a young child could use to situate his train or regiment into its own miniature world. As John notes, reflecting on Hornby, "you could have bought anything, they even made dinkie toys which were the cars and lorries that went with it" (interview with author, September 2007). These practices continue in the current production of collectibles. James explains how William Britain's manipulates production and membership to its club to play upon competitions within the community and create an economy of scarcity:

There are two other sets which we did last year which both sold out and within twelve months they were gone, that's it, no more are going to be made. So now if someone's joined the club in another year or two and wants to buy one of those sets, they only way they're going to be able to but is if they buy off an existing member (interview with author, September 2007)

The way collectibles were marketed not only effected their consumption by children in the past but the lines along which collectors choose to order their collections today. John's set up captures a miniature world, effectively the ideal Hornby set-up, including not only the tracks and locomotives but various out-buildings, signage, people, cars, and even bags of cargo to be loaded on to the locomotives. The consumption of both young consumers of the past and older

collector today is shaped by production imperatives designed to encourage sustained consumption. Young children bought railways, lengthening their locomotives and obtaining all the available accoutrements to create a complete miniature world. In many ways then a collector's current consumption practices are very much a continuation of the excitement and challenges of attempting to obtain a full Hornby set as a young child.

Although not all toys were marketed in this manner and Hornby is a particularly sequential set of toys, it is worth noting that Britain's, Dinkies, Teddy Bears and to a lesser extent dolls were too produced as a part of a wider series of one kind or another. The series in which collectibles were originally produced figures heavily into the lines guiding many collections. Collecting can be seen as an activity in which the serial character of a collectible is heightened. Indeed it is the very seriality of a given object, and its positioning in a wider set that lends it collectability. Pearce notes how: "They too, like all objects, hold meaning only in so far as they relate to other meaningful objects, for significance rests in a web of relationships which is physically inherent in each thing. All objects are a part of sets, often more than one set at a time, but collections are sets in a particular sense, which marks them off from other kinds of object sets..." (Pearce 2000: 20).

The engagement of collectibles with a larger series of objects presents a challenge, as every time one evokes a collectible, one must necessarily evoke a series of related collectible objects. "Collections are essentially composed of objects which bear an intrinsic relationship to each other in a sequential or representative sense, rather than each being valued for its own qualities" (Pearce

2000: 20). Collectibles furthermore, as we have seen in this chapter, need to be understood as meaningful not just within the relationship between collector and collectible but in the relation between collectibles, and between market figures and collectibles. The market and its mechanisms of intentional production leverage the competition among consumers and the meaningfulness of objects cognizant of the fact that “cultural practice...takes it’s social meaning, and it’s ability to signify social difference and distance not from some intrinsic property but from its location in a system of like objects and practices” (Wacquant in Fowler 2001: 115).

Present in a collector’s attachment to one collectible is, in effect, his attachment to all of his other collectibles and moreover, all of the possible related collectibles circulating on the market. The market is the point where collectors are exposed to the possible or ideal totality of their collections, or the whole body of available collectibles in all their guises. The frame of this possible collection is used to assess the actual collection, and because all collectibles necessarily reference a series of other collectibles, shifts in value reverberate throughout a network of collectible objects. This is not unlike the interconnection of object values in evidence when all collectibles’ values, whether bought and sold online or not, were affected by the introduction of eBay.

Given the extent to which collectibles are coterminous with the markets in which they circulate, it seems curious that there is still a tendency in some of the literature to reduce the role of the market when arguing for the sacredness of the collectible. Roger Cardinal’s study of collector and German artist Kurt Schwitters

is case and point. Cardinal highlights collecting as a rite of passage in which collectors seek to mark their ownership and “invent a space of privileged equilibrium offering at least some respite from the pressures of life” (Cardinal and Elsner 1994: 70). One such pressure is the market, and Cardinal underscores how collectors “attempt to ‘disinfect’ the purchase...and draw it decisively into the orbit of present possession” (1994: 68). To support his argument Cardinal cites Pomian’s definition of a collection as “a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently *out of the economic circuit*, afforded special protection in enclosed spaces adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display” (Pomian 1990: 9, emphasis added). Cardinal’s argument is part of a larger lineage of arguments emphasizing the sacredness of the collectible wherein “this quality of separateness or 'set-apart' is to say that collection objects have passed from the profane -- the secular world of mundane, ordinary commodity -- to the special and capable of generating reverence” (Pearce 2000: 24). Implicit within these arguments is the assertion that an object becomes truly sacred when the collector no longer subjects them to the vicissitudes of the market and they accrue a value beyond their exchange value. As Cardinal would have it, truly sacred collectibles are so special they are priceless.

The idea that collectibles become reverent objects when closed off from the economic circuit is in direct opposition to my findings that collectibles actually become reverent *as a result of* their circulation within economic circuits. Pomian’s definition does allow that collectibles may only be “temporarily” kept out of the economic circuit, but its emphasis on how they are most often set aside

and isolated does not correspond with my conversations with collectors. That collectibles circulate through collections much more often than commonly thought, and that the very activity of collecting has become defined in part as an ability to play the market, underscores how collectibles come to be resonant by virtue of their very circulation in markets.

It is not that the collectible is not sacred but that its value and resonance obtain a new form of sacredness in intimate connection with the market. Collectibles are not “inalienable” objects, that is objects that are un-exchangeable or outside the system of exchange but still mediating social relationships (see Weiner 1992) but objects capable of mediating social relationships precisely *because* of their exchange on the market. To see the market as compromising the attachment collectors have with their collections, given the evidence presented in this chapter, is to profoundly limit our understanding of how the collectible comes to accrue its value for collectors.

Pearce’s outline of the “set apartness” of collectibles was trying to draw a distinction between mundane everyday commodities and more extraordinary ones such as collectibles, a valuable exercise. However we need to understand how the collectible is made magical by virtue of its extension with a host of cultural, economic and social contexts. Rather than viewing the entry of a collectible on the market as the point of its homogenization and reduction, we need to see how the complexities of the market and its ever-changing landscapes are a significant point of engagement for collectors. It is the very play and mutability of the collectible object that engages most collectors. The idea of the collectible as a

reverent object set aside is perhaps indicative of the persistent image of collecting as a solitary pursuit of collectors, behind the closed doors of their homes. Yet they are social, intimately involved in communities and markets. We will never understand the resonance of the collection if we do not engage with the full spectrum of activities comprising collecting, and consider how it is within them that collectibles are made meaningful.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Authenticity**

“hand-painted,” “correct,” “more realistic,” “the earlier ones,” “proper,” “real toys,” “proper toy miniature,” “original,” “total reality,” “spot on,” “made yesterday,” “time warp,” “just out of the shop,” “never been unwrapped,” “unusual,” “very mint, very scarce,” “traditional,” “factory mint condition,” “quality of age,” “true representation,” “the genuine article,” “old manufacture,” “pristine,” “virgin stuff,” “credible,” “the older stuff,” “top end,” “the ultimate,” “period piece,” “fine quality,” “never been sold,” “absolutely perfect,” “elite items,” “truly rare,” “almost like the day you got it from the shop,” “one of a kind,” “factory sealed,” “first edition,” “priceless,” “the right things”

This list of words the collectors employ synonymously with authenticity hints at their definitions of the authentic. Their descriptions, of the most desirable and coveted qualities across a wide range of different toys, emphasize the passage of time, the situation of the object in relation to other collectibles, as well as the condition of the collectibles. Collectors conflate authenticity with a host of values from mint condition to originality to rarity. What this chapter will explore is how collectors themselves define authenticity, and what the process of authenticating a collectible involves. It will grapple with the tensions inherent in collecting communities around the assignment of authenticity, and consider authenticity as a facet of financial, cultural and material values often in direct confrontation with one another. Authenticity in short, is contentious and tenuous. As a site where wider consumer values are forged, it is thus “the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 57).

Authenticity is a socially negotiated value against which collectibles are held in esteem. It is something that needs to be argued for and is a practice “in

which battles to legitimate particular criteria and hierarchies of cultural value and taste are central to the exercise of power” (Slater in Anderson et al. 2003: 155).

As a process of legitimization there is a great deal of cultural, economic and social value at stake in authentication. As such its assertion creates a powerful engagement between a collector and their collectible. Authenticity is mutable both in meaning and source, shifting repeatedly and requiring continual maintenance, renewal and investment. While its continual reinforcement testifies to the value of authenticity in collecting circles, the mutability of authenticity as a value indicates that authenticity is influenced by a wider shifting set of values, and by the social situation in which the judgment has been made. A complexity of factors comprises the assignment of authenticity, and it can be built upon a wide variety of sources. Provenance as well as the completed set or story, are two predominant sources of authenticity further detailed in this chapter.

Authenticity is not only continually renegotiated within wider collecting circles but within a single individual’s collection. As the cases of letting go discussed in Chapters Two and Three attest, collectors continually reassess their valuations of authenticity in light of their developing collections. As collections shift so too does the attachment a collector has to the collectibles comprising their collections. Derek, outlining the development of his collection in a particular direction, described this reassessment as part of a process of “forcing myself to have the object lose their grip on me” (interview with author, December 2006). Collectors’ valuations and authentications of their collectibles are located in a particular social space and time, and as such are variable. It is precisely the

mutable value of collectibles on the market, as we saw in the preceding chapter, which invigorates their collectability.

Authenticity is an amalgam of negotiations not only between individual collector and collectible but between a series of collectibles and a wider community. In Joe Richard's case the wider communities' authentication of collectible soldiers he deemed worthless and subsequently buried in his back garden world, resulted in their exhumation. In an exceedingly complex network of shifting social, cultural, and financial hierarchies, authentic values are constantly rising and waning. These struggles over the different meanings of culture are at the heart of Bourdieu's fields of cultural consumption. To authenticate is to make a discerning judgment, and as Bourdieu points out: "an object like taste, [is] one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production" (1984: 11). As we saw in the previous chapter a mark of expertise is an ability to follow and anticipate these fluctuations. A great deal of the tensions around authenticity in collecting circles, between proponents of mint condition, and those of toys as toys, to debates around restoration and collecting in an authentic manner, stem from the volatility of value. Kingston details the fragility of authenticity as a value: "the fundamental problem of the authenticators is that appearance, however many layers of it you peel away, is inherently mutable and it can never guarantee beyond all possible doubt the identification of the immaterial essence" (1999: 348).

The negotiation of authenticity presents a fascinating point from which to examine how collectors become intensely engaged with their collectibles. It is to

observe the “dialectic between people and things,” or a moment of interaction between collectors and their collectibles (Meskell in DeMarrais et al 2004: 249). Judgments of authenticity impact the very mode in which collectors relate to their pieces, and how their pieces come to mean for them. Thus looking closely at the negotiation of authenticity is to raise questions about how meaning is invested in objects and how, in turn, the investment of meaning alters our relation to the object, animating it in significant ways. The negotiation of authenticity in collecting circles provides a useful point from which to work with “the idea of a material universe that is socially conceived and constructed, but that also shapes human experience in practice” (Meskell 2006: 1).

Studying the operation of authenticity in collecting circles is to approach collecting as a particular way of meaning making wherein material forms and their cultural resonances are synthesized. The synonyms at the opening of this chapter are testament to the extent to which collectors speak to authenticity as both a measure of a collectible’s physical integrity and its cultural resonance. While at first glance we may assume that terms such as “factory mint condition,” and “pristine” pertain largely to the physical integrity of the collectible, they are cultural in scope. “Mint,” as this chapter will outline, is a tenuously argued and negotiated term, changing in meaning depending on the context. Likewise terms such as “elite items” and “proper” are values largely prescribed on the basis of opinion rather than by any reference at all to the physical character of the collectible. Although in employing terms such as mint collectors may feel they are making an objective analysis of a collectible’s physical condition, the shifting

parameters of mint and the tensions within the wider community underline that it is a socially negotiated and constructed value. The complexity of factors governing the designation of mint condition in a collectible range from the collectible in question, the other collectibles like it, and the collector making the assessment. Collector's squabbles over the condition of their collectibles and other's collectibles are part of a wider struggle to reinforce their status in the community, and to assure economic gain. These tensions testify to the push and pull between personal and wider cultural constructions of the collectible which, as we have seen, are also present in collectors' negotiations of nostalgia, their imaginative practices and in their activities in the market.

This chapter opens by considering what it means to authenticate a collectible. Taking authenticity as something argued for and as an activity of collectors, this section focuses on how collectors themselves most commonly present their negotiations of authenticity. This chapter considers the most prevalent source and basis upon which authenticity is argued: provenance. Working through the myriad ways the idea of origins figures in to collectors' activities and building on discussions of a proximity to an original or ideal as developed in chapter three on nostalgia, this section focuses specifically on the debates around restoration within collecting circles. It uses collectors' often-contradictory attitudes and approaches to restoration as a case study in the negotiation of authenticity and considers how restoration is seen to both enhance and detract from a collectible's authenticity. To further the argument, this section considers the inauthentic and closely examines the manner in which collectibles

of an authentic caliber are marketed and sold. How provenance is marketed and constructed by and for collectors is instructive to not only the appeal of the authentic, but to the elements that comprise an assertion of authenticity.

The second section of the chapter considers the value and authenticity of the complete set. A central drive for collectors, completing the set, or telling the full story runs throughout the transcripts. Evident in such preoccupations as filling in the gaps of history, building complete dioramas or worlds, and in the cachet attached to packaging, the drive to complete the set is understood as an attempt at authentication. This section is predicated on the idea that full authenticity lies in completion. Thus it contemplates collectors' attempts to gather ever-greater material detail and information cognizant that authenticity often operates as an ideal guiding the activity of collectors.

The third section of the chapter will compare ideas of presence, as outlined throughout previous chapters, with ideas of authenticity. It considers how authentication can be seen as a form of animation: an imaginary activity in which the collectible appears, to the collector, to have a degree of power and magic. In this way it will consider how collectors relate to the authentic object as a sacred item, as having an aura in Benjamin's terms, and how authenticity is oftentimes perceived as a force emanating from, or an effect of the object alone, rather than an argument constructed and put forth by the collector.

The conclusion considers authenticity as it relates to wider questions around the value objects come to have for collectors. Authentication is a central way in which collectibles become meaningful and take on a presence in the eyes

of collectors. Significantly the interplay of the collectible's material properties and the symbolic meanings constructed around these properties leads to the fetishization of the collectible. As Pearce notes:

This chameleon-like quality of objects – their ability to take on different cultural colours while retaining the same body – is an important part of that aspect of their character which defies explanation in ordinary ‘rational’ terms and for which we have to turn to words like ‘magic,’ ‘talisman’ and ‘spell’ (2000: 172)

A study of how the collectible is attributed a power or authentic presence by collectors explains the fascination and intensity of collecting, as well as what is at stake in the social reproduction of the authentic.

### **Authentication**

RM: and in terms of the older dolls is it very important that they're in pristine condition?

R: not really

J: not really

R: not for me anyways I like them a bit worn

J: not a cracked head

R: no because once the head's cracked there's no value in it...

(...)

R: it does apply to dolls but only to the head, if it's got a finger missing or a chipped foot it doesn't matter

(Julie and Rachel, interview with author, April 2007)

Julie and Rachel's account of the variable hierarchies governing the assessments of value in the doll world is a brief indication of the ordering, detail, and comparisons involved in the assignment of authenticity. To authenticate something is to invariably differentiate a set of goods. It is also crucially, to differentiate those who collect those goods. Julie and Rachel's assessment is reflective of their positioning as female collectors. “One’s judgment is both a reflection and cause of who one is: a member of an always normative group”

(Ferguson 1999: 116). Whereas their male colleague train collectors would recoil at the thought of a missing part on a train Julie and Rachel overlook damage and operate according to a far more lenient scale of condition. There is a hierarchy at work in their assessment but it is less rigid and focused on other factors than condition. Julie and Rachel's assessment is about positioning dolls but it is also about identifying themselves as particular types of collectors. They identify with a community of fellow collectors (largely female) who consume their collectibles on "the feel" of each one, and emphasize the value of a personal connection to their pieces: "my husband bought me one it was expensive...it was a wedding anniversary present...and that one my Mom bought me and because I've lost my Mom that's very important" (Julie, interview with author, April 2007).

Writing that goods are "neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges" Douglas and Isherwood capture how it is that the authentication of material goods is also the production and delineation of social communities, in this case along gendered lines (1979: 12). Authentication is at once a social glue, binding groups of similar collectors together, and a social wedge, dividing groups who operate according to different lines. Although Bourdieu tended to focus on class and how as the "valuations of judgments of goods become entangled with the class hierarchy and symbolic domination; the associations of class spill over into associations of quality and the good" and his observations also apply to gender (Sayer 2003: 351).

As we saw in the previous chapter on the market, to authenticate is to find some measure of equivalence between what are otherwise unrelated objects and to

slot these objects into hierarchies of value. Much of the collectors' time engaging with their collectibles is spent trying to position their particular collectibles into such hierarchies of value. Working within a field that extends through not only the entire collection surrounding the collectible but through all the possible pieces which could inhabit the collection, these processes of meaning making and assessment give a shape to the collector's efforts and intensity of engagement. Authenticity in collecting circles is an assessment of the material good and the network of meanings surrounding it. "The actual goods are the visual tip of the iceberg" in fact, whereby "the rest is a submerged, classified catalogue of names of persons, places, objects and dates. The main activity is a continuous attempt to standardize their values as precisely as possible" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 148).

Julie and Rachel's hierarchy of dolls' body parts has much in common with Harold's assessments of his Capston vans. As Harold puts it, "you check one against each other and you see now the colour varies on the three" (interview with author, May 2007). It also parallels Bill's spreadsheet catalogue of minute differentiations in Hornby locomotives where, as Roger explains "in his case they can be absolutely tiny differences, you know cuppling, I think if it's got a different number on it which you can't see if you have a magnifying glass that it different to Bill" (interview with author, December 2006). These are exemplary of the moments of authentication replete throughout my findings. All are based on differentiation, and a degree of comparison entertained only by intensely engaged collectors. They all function to legitimate the authenticity of not only the

collectible in question but the individual who selected the particular collectible. To authenticate an object is to put forth an argument for the merits of both collectible and collector, and to legitimize one's entire collection and purchases. One collectible successfully distinguished as authentic has reverberations for the entire collection. "The possession not only authenticates the authority of its owner, but affects all other transactions even if it is not being exchanged. If I possess a sacred cloth, in Walter Benjamin's terms, its 'aura' extends to my other possessions as well because my social identity, rank or status is legitimated by the possession of one sacred object" (Weiner 1992: 10).

Authentication is central to Bourdieu's field of power, and the distinctions of taste defining it (1984). These distinctions, as we have seen, may be drawn along gender, and class lines, fragmenting collectors further into groups all arguing for their own interpretation of authenticity. Authentication is the mobilization of material goods in the determination of social positioning, and the identification of cultural competence within a collecting community.

What individuals and groups invest in the particular meaning they give to common classificatory system by the use they make of them is infinitely more than their 'interest' in the usual sense of the term; it is their whole social being, everything which defines their own idea of themselves...(Bourdieu 1984: 478)

Choices and what are often minute differences among collectibles reverberate in the reputations of those who possess them. Practices of differentiation "raise the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions" (Bourdieu 1984: 174). A great deal is at stake, the legitimacy of not only the collectible and collector but the wider collecting

community, and in this way tiny details become paramount. Collectors base their arguments on ever finer levels of detail and condition in keeping with Douglas and Isherwood's assertion that: "when the tendency to standardize values is strong, some crucial form of social control is being exerted: it is a sign that we are near the hot centre of a competitive system where small differences matter a lot" (1979: 145).

A central feature of authentication and the wider enterprise of collecting is differentiation with an eye to standardization. Collecting is a constant attempt to negotiate complex registers of variation into a semblance of order. Many collectors, Harold among them, occupy themselves entirely with collecting variations of the same thing, gathering hundreds of what would appear to outsiders as identical items, in the process fine-tuning one's ability to differentiate along increasingly minute lines of detail. These activities lend collecting a certain legitimacy and rigor. Appealing to fine details in material integrity, the collector confirms the centrality of perceptions of the material to processes of authentication. Yet taken too far, it is this depth of attention that characterizes a collector's relation with the material world as obsessive, and contributes to what fellow collectors would describe as a loss of perspective whereby fanatical rivet counters or anoraks lose all touch with reality.

Authentication is an attempt on the part of collectors to see the whole picture, by gathering greater levels of information on objects, and in filling in knowledge gaps. As with the nostalgia chapter's discussion of collecting as an attempt to proximate and make contact with the past, processes of authentication

are an approximation of the stories and the lineage within which the collectible is situated in an effort of legitimization. Furthermore, authentication is the very creation of the object as collectible, and its insertion into a system of values that constitute it as a collectible. Collectors often rescue objects which have been overlooked and are continually forging new fields of collectability. Bianchi understands this as re-composition and a play on the mutable meaning of goods: “Collecting exploits this multidimensionality of goods, decomposes its internal elements and recomposes them in innovative ways, establishing new relations both within a particular class of goods and with other goods” (1997: 275). To authenticate a collectible in this framework is to devise new ways of making meaning.

The mutability of meaning exploited by collecting is apparent in the ever changing boundaries that constitute the authentic. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the example of Star Cases and Star Wars collectors. In interviewing a Star Wars collector, the issue of packaging and its centrality in the authentication of action figure collectibles surfaced repeatedly. In action figure circles the judgments on the condition of a collectible extend to the packaging of the figure, with outfits such as the AFA or the Action Figure Association providing a grading service for a fee. The AFA, which checks for pings in the plastic, and judges the condition of the box, has become somewhat of a gold standard in collecting communities. As a result serious collectors are those who collect figures in their original boxes, and removing the toy from its package is

widely acknowledged as a compromise of authenticity and ultimately its economic value.

Circulating through the collecting community are not only collectibles, but also ideas about the proper way to collect, and the basis upon which value is assigned. In the Star Wars community, pristine packaging has become the norm. All collectors are subject to such guidelines yet it is the experts or those who have mastered these conventions, who are awarded the ability to negotiate these hierarchies. ‘‘Becoming an aficionado means entering the debate about the recognition and application of the criteria – criteria of authenticity’’ (Spooner in Appadurai: 197). For collectors of action figures the criteria of authenticity leads them to buy industry made protective holders called star cases to protect their figures. These cases enclose and protect not only the figure itself but its entire packaging. A dealer’s website highlights the extent to which the authenticity of packaging is central to the judgment of a collectible in the action figure community:

This is the original Pro Tech Star Case, the exact same one hundreds of the top dealers in the country use when shipping out valuable figures, the same one thousands upon thousands of savvy collectors use to protect their carded figures from destructive forces...The crystal clarity of the Pro Tech cases lets the colour and details of your figures shine through, these cases are made of virgin plastic (unlike some other imitations)...

([www.wholesalecases.com](http://www.wholesalecases.com))

This sales pitch demonstrates how collectors seek, and the market encourages them to enclose their figures in an ever-widening cocoon of authenticity. Emphasizing the ‘‘virgin’’ plastic of their packaging is an attempt by the manufacturers of the star cases to associate their product with the preservation of

authenticity. This intense focus on pristine condition and packaging is an attempt by Star Wars collectors to compensate for the relative availability of their figures in comparison to other more antique toy collectibles. It supports the degree to which authentication is fundamentally an exercise in differentiation, and reiterates how a collector's attempts to differentiate their collectibles, and to establish them as outstanding, is part of the process by which they become valuable.

The star case example also underlines how the very form governing the collectible as object is variable according to market imperatives. In a quest for greater standards of authenticity the Star Wars collectible has expanded to include the very plastic and cardboard packaging around the figurine. Yet despite the authenticity bestowed on keeping one's toy collectibles pristine, many collectors wanted to play with their figures. This desire for play was a direct challenge to the authentic status of their collectibles. Playing with them not only meant opening packaging but the potential for irreparable damage and a loss of economic value. Michael told me that in response to the standards of condition in the figure collecting community he collected two of everything, one set to keep and the other to play with. Authenticity is not a straightforward assertion made by Michael about his collectibles, but a value he necessarily negotiated in his collecting activities. Michael was not in complete control of what was and wasn't deemed authentic. Although he felt that, as toys first and foremost, play was its own form of authentication, he needed to contend with a wider set of values and opinions within the community around the authenticity tied to pristine condition. The recent influence of star cases in the Star Wars collecting community

demonstrates how collecting is an evolving practice and a paradigm of consumption.

Michael countered community held approaches to authenticity by appealing to the toy essence of the collectibles and underlining the fundamental contradiction of such a thing as a ‘pristine’ toy. Commenting on the importance he assigned to touching and playing with his figurines Michael noted, “I don’t see the point of having the figure in a package, never touched, and also I mean you can become obsessive and if you get a normal carded figure you’ll be looking for like hairline cracks and pings in the plastic...” (interview with author, October 2007) Although mint condition packaging bestowed a high level of value on the figures Michael collected, it also directly conflicted with his desire to play with them, to pose them, and set them up into scenes. Playing and touching was integral to his consumption and engagement with his figures.

Throughout the interviews authenticity was described as something felt. This is indicative of the need for a tactile connection to the object and, how the authenticity of an object is perceived as a presence, or a culmination of values emanating from the object and something sensed:

“I like to see what the originals look like to get a feel around them”  
(Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

“when you’ve handled a few you just know, you know if something’s Steiff or not” (Helen, interview with author, March 2007)

“the character of the piece, to me it just has something else, it’s not new it just simply has a feel to it, I can’t describe what this is but it’s just to me it’s nicer” (Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

Authentication in these accounts is an act not only of observation, but of sensation or an embodied knowledge whereby the collectible's merits culminate in and are ultimately made to infuse the object with authenticity. This ambiguous feeling is the outcome of collectors' attempts to grasp the complex hierarchies and networks of value extending beyond the staid physical presence of collectibles.

Evident of the shifting parameters along which authenticity is established in contemporary collecting and part of a larger effort by collectors to strengthen their position, is the prevalence of the use of photos to preserve authenticity. Far from being acquired by a collector and integrated into a collection to live out the rest of their days, collectibles instead move in and out of collections at a surprising rate. As collections develop, and markets expand, collectors pass a certain number of their collectibles back into exchange. John notes how he is "happy now to take a photograph of it in my collection when I buy it, you know I've got a graphic library...so I know what it is, catalogue it, and then I'm happy to sell it" (interview with author, September 2007). Likewise, Neil explains how "what a lot of people do is you take photographs of what you've got and you sell it off and keep the photographs of what you've got...it shows that you've had it..." (interview with author, May 2007). This fascinating practice is an attempt to fix or hold on to the fleeting authenticity of a given collectible long after it is no longer materially present in the collection. This play with presence is largely born of financial necessity, and is likely related to the proliferation of photographs given the use of eBay in collecting communities. The fact that so many collectors

keep such libraries is a curious indication of the long-standing value of authenticity despite its changing nature.

Photographs never stand in completely for the collectible they can only ever be representations of the collectible. Although photos are largely gathered as background research into pricing, and the detail of available models, their increasing use in collecting practice indicates how circulating representations of objects are able to impact the very objects themselves. Although collectors gather these photos largely as supplements to their actual collection, they do factor into their purchase decisions, and how they value their existing collectibles. Given the advent of the Internet and eBay in particular, which is heavily based around the use of photos, these representations come to temporarily fill in the gaps of the collector's collection, informing them of what the ideal collection could be. Ownership of a collectible is still most desirable but collectors, given financial limitations, and barriers of access have integrated photographic representations into their collections in creative ways. As Neil and John explain above, given the restrictions they face, photographs often play a role in their claims of authenticity, when objects are not available. Using pictures as an alternative to ownership amounts to a new form of negotiating and laying claim to authenticity.

Many different practices comprise authentication, but at its core it is about differentiation, and contextualization. It is an activity: "authenticity is not an entity, discovered, found useful and then superceded. It is a mode of interrogating the world..." (Kingston 1999: 339). Kingston's approach to authenticity has much in common with Taussig's emphasis on the contact between perceiver and

perceived. Both positions underscore the extent to which collecting is a particular perception of the world, a particular way of making sense and a *productive* activity. Once again the metaphor of reaching towards, which I developed in my consideration of what collectors are doing in their nostalgic activities, is fitting when thinking around authentication. Taussig was fascinated with the process by which people attempt “to get ahold of something by means of its likeness,” and how in the “two-layered notion of mimesis that is involved -- a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” occurs “whereby the representation may even assume that character and power” (Taussig 21, xiii). We have already seen above how photographs function as representations within collecting; yet here, Taussig reminds us to consider how the toy collectible is itself a representation. The palpable connection between a train or toy soldier and its owner, allows the collector access into the world of train stations, or battlefields these objects conjure.

Helping us to think around how collectibles are attributed a power by collectors, Taussig raises important questions around what it is exactly collectors are trying to capture, in their collecting activity. Similar to my findings in the nostalgia chapter, an appeal to origins is ubiquitous in collectors’ efforts at authentication. In “puzzl(ing) over the capacity of the imagination to be lifted through representational media...into other worlds,” Taussig sketches a theoretical space in which we can consider how, in the moment of authentication, the collectible allows us to go elsewhere, and becomes resonant on the basis of

these traverses.

### **Provenance and Restoration**

Provenance or a reverence for origins was replete throughout the interviews. This chapter's treatment of provenance considers some of the tensions around the assessment of origins given that the collectibles being collected are the products of mass manufacture. It analyzes the restoration debate and closes with a review of how collectors themselves market the idea of provenance to other collectors.

Authentication is about sketching out a collectible's links to the past, and using these links to contextualize and differentiate it in relation to the wider set of goods. It is on the basis of this attachment, to stories, dramas persons and places that collectibles come to resonate for collectors. To outline the provenance of any given collectible is to argue that it is special and outstanding. As we saw in preceding chapters, collectors preoccupy themselves with details of the history of the production of their collectibles, and with original consumption patterns, actively soliciting any information and supplementary artifacts (be they photographs or paperwork) that provide solid material evidence for their case.

I bought one up here a few years ago actually and the story was written on the back of the box, my Daddy bought this back from...wherever it was and so the full story's on the back of the box...and that's really special (Rachel, interview with author, April 2007)

And the rarest of all, these are gun teams you see, were the rarest just before the war actually ceased production, and they're in tin hats and they're extremely difficult to find...I mean the rarest, the most expensive of all are what are called the Paris office...they were produced by Britain's for a short period and they were shut down in very strange circumstances (Joe, interview with author, April 2007)

My brain froze and I had a job not expressing outwardly what I had spotted inwardly. Because as I turned this little toy into the light I noticed that this was not a water stain. That toy had been signed by the artist. And dated 1927! It had the artist's signature across its chest. How rare is that to find! (Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

These are three examples from a large number of comments and reflections on the value of origins. Origins are valued from not only the standpoint of financial worth, but on their historical merit and ability to confer the mark of expertise. Whether tracing the production of soldiers, hearing the story of a young girl's doll or witnessing the touch of origins in a signature on a collectible, all of the above excerpts convey the wonder and high cachet placed by collectors on origins.

Evidence of origins collapses the distance between the collector and the ideal that enchants and motivates their collecting activities. An appeal to origins legitimizes both a collector's activities and the collectibles they covet. The collectors' activities are characterized by an attempt to collapse the distance between representation and reality: to make the past readily available and apparent. Robert continued on to marvel about his signed collectible in an awestruck tone noting how "at some point in its history that object was held by the artist." (interview with author, March 2007). For Robert this touch of the original was the true thing, the find that made all his efforts worthwhile and raised his stature as an expert collector. It was the next best thing to meeting the artist in person, and as unmediated a contact with the past possible given the circumstances.

Robert and his fellow collectors' enthusiasm for origins are indicative of the collectible as an extended artefact. The collectible "forms a link between the

collector and its origins," whereby "an accumulation of references, dreams, and stories [is] unleashed by contact with the object...the object is just a trigger to the real collection, which is totally internal." (Kiendl 204: 111). In this way a collector's appeal to origins or their attempts at authentication are an engagement not only with the collectible, but the network of meanings that extend from the collectible. The value of the object lies in collectors' ability to illuminate its extended meaning or the stories, persons, and places it is attached to.

Because collectibles are the product of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin's work around the aura of objects and the shifting registers of origins is valuable in our consideration of the authentication of the object. Benjamin complicates the link between person and object by emphasizing how under mechanical reproduction the relation between perceiver and perceived is increasingly effected by factors not immediately present to its physical form such as markets, value systems and cultural histories. In doing so, Benjamin sketches the object of mechanical reproduction as an extended artefact, and raises important questions about the new manner in which objects come to mean given their increasing circulation at some distance from their original. As products of mechanical reproduction all toy collectibles are copies and thus can only ever approximate their origins. It is this challenge at the heart of authenticating the toy collectible, this impossibility of an ideal, which propels collectors forward and engages their energies.

Benjamin's assertion that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" is in keeping with my findings (1968: 220).

Whether it's Derek explaining how "the thing that's driving the collection is effectively the methodology of manufacture," or Henry who "quite like(s) them when they're played with. Chips, worn, you know, paint faded, it reinforces for me the fact that it's a toy," collectors appeal to an ideal of origins in some form or another when authenticating. The multiple sources of origins suggest that unlike the work of art Benjamin was referencing, toy collectibles have no single origin per se. Instead collectors appeal to sources as diverse as the prototype on which the toy model was based; childhood in general; the idea of toyness; the ideal as the original marketers would have it; mistakes; and first run production pieces.

Benjamin also helps us to understand how this preoccupation with origins is a moment of fetishization, and a re-activation of the object's aura (1968). Not unlike Taussig, Benjamin was fascinated by how our imaginative work impacts our relation to the object. Here we begin to understand that the collectible accrues a value because it is made relevant in light of the people, places and times it was once a part of. No longer a mere object, the collectible becomes an integral part of past lives, stories, and histories. In his references to "renew(ing) the old world" and the "magic encyclopedia" that is the collection, Benjamin, in line with both Taussig and Kiendl, underscores that much more is being enacted in collecting than a physical accumulation of material goods (1973: 61, 60).

Many tensions and debates occur in collecting communities that are the result of the multiple sources of origin collectors appeal to in authenticating their collectibles. The main tensions prevalent in my findings that I would like to detail further are those between the idea of toyness or playability, and pristine physical

integrity. The collectors on either side of this divide feel that their appeal is a much stronger approximation of the origins of the collectible. The tension stems from the fact that collectibles are seen to accrue a value based on two contradictory notions, the first on the basis of their untarnished, undisturbed journey from the shop floor to the current collector, and the second on the basis of the density of their journey, and the many hands they have passed through. These are two very distinct ways of thinking about contact with the past.

Those who appeal to the collectible and its toyness profess a faithfulness to the original existence and consumption of the collectible as a toy:

Proper childhood objects, real toys that are made to be played with, not kept in their boxes and catalogued by somebody (Victoria, interview with author, April 2007)

It's very important that a toy soldier is something that is made, mass-produced for children to play with. That is a toy soldier. None of these (gesturing beyond) are toy soldiers. None of this modern stuff are toy soldiers because they're made for collectors (Jeffrey, interview with author, March 2007)

The idea is to show these things off as they were meant to be, as toys, they're not pretending they're model railways, leave that rubbish there, they're toys (Vincent, interview with author, December 2006)

In our collection something that is truly rare was never meant to be collected (Roger, interview with author, December 2006)

These collectors challenge the idea of mint condition, and appeal instead to the marks of wear on many toy collectibles as a physical embodiment of authenticity in the toy. Although each collector may be collecting a different toy, which differs substantially in terms of its physical integrity, the collectors' appeals to toyness transcends these differences. Physical wear in their view has an ability to conjure

up the past and offers a material trace of the previous lives of the toy. These collectors' appeals to playability and toyness affect not only how they view the collectible itself, but prescribes a particular way of collecting that is, in itself, true and authentic to the collectible and its original auspices.

By contrast, those collectors who feel that origins are best approximated in the mint condition collectibles they covet, have great faith in the ability of the surface of the collectible to yield up clues to the past. Their idea of originality is based on a physical proximity of the collectible to its site of inception, fresh off the shop floor, or just off the production line. For them "the erosion of physical integrity is associated with a parallel loss of cultural information" (DeSilvery 2006: 318).

It's just about the quality of the item, first the original quality of the item itself. If the item is undamaged or it's un-run or if it's got very good paintwork, it's got all the transfers on there, no damage on it, that's the number one thing (Douglas, interview with author, May 2007)

Condition is everything (Ronald, interview with author, October 2007)

The original millennium falcon he had as a kid that got played and played with and some years ago I managed to pick up the exact same one, same box, factory sealed...and that has a lot of value (Paul, interview with author, May 2007)

Both groups make contact with origins in a very different manner, and the tensions exist not only between collectors, but within each of the collector themselves. All collectors who spoke of toyness also valued condition and had pristine pieces in their collections they were proud of. Likewise, those who valued condition over everything else spoke to the appeal of wear in reminding them that

their collectibles were once toys held in the hands of children. The different sources of authenticity are, indeed, something that collectors actively negotiate. John speaks of “tolerat(ing)” less than pristine goods “because of the rarity of them” and Derek talks about the contradictions between toyness and condition:

In fact a lot of these objects look a lot nicer well used and bashed around than when they’re pristine. But the collecting mentality immediately clicks into place and if you’re faced with something in mint condition all the bells of perfection start ringing in your mind...we do get in a situation which I’ve been in very often where you’ve favourite two objects and one’s very weathered and lovely and the other’s pristine, well which one do you get rid of? Well the obvious thing is that you always get rid of the rotten one, you know, but often the rotten ones are much nicer than the good condition ones (interview with author, December 2006)

Derek’s grappling is exemplary of the dilemmas collectors face when building their collection as an homage to origins. A collector’s view of their collectibles is influenced by systems and hierarchies of value beyond their own. This may include the market value of an item, as well as the wider community’s views on such toys and the idea of “authentic” collecting. Derek’s reflection underlines how authentication is a careful negotiation of the exceedingly diverse registers of values upon which the collectible’s meaningfulness is based.

The tensions over the multiple sources of authenticity are also implicit in the debates surrounding restoration. Those collectors who restore their collectibles usually align with the idea that condition is of paramount importance. Chapter Four on the market considered restoration as evidence of the extent to which market prerogatives of condition influence collector’s treatment of their collectibles. It looked in detail at Derek’s description of how these market prerogatives led to the breaking of what were otherwise sacred trains. In a twist

of irony, restoration activities, made up of material “interferences” with collectibles, are interpreted by those who support restoration as an enhancement of the authenticity of their collectibles (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). Collectors in this vein use restoration as a means to increase the authenticity of their collectible. Restoration, as Patel explains, is “cleaning, straightening, stripping off old paint or plating, polishing brass, and restoring the parts to a good useable state” (interview with author, May 2007). Roger discusses his views on when restoration is acceptable, noting that restoration is fine as long as “you do it right” (interview with author, December 2006). While Roger agreed with Bill’s sentiment that “where you’re actually repainting and doing dodgy work we strongly dislike that and what we absolutely cannot stand is forgery,” he did also assert that he “think(s) it acceptable to take two pieces of the same age and to make one good piece out of two perhaps not so perfect pieces” (interview with author, December 2006).

The complicated lines drawn in and around restoration were evident throughout the transcripts. Collectors spoke of restoration as a means of preservation and enhancement yet they were also fervently critical of such practices, including John who notes “I know there are people who buy these and they’ll see that there and they’ll get you know, I’ll have this done and that done and it will be perfect. No. It loses its originality in my opinion...if it’s got small marks or whatever, it’s part of its character you know” (interview with author, September 2007). John’s comments take us right back to the central debate among collectors over the various sources of originality and the contradictory merits of

mint condition against pieces which materially reflect their passage through time. The irony of the possibility of restoring a collectible item to its original state speaks to the range of interpretations collectors have of origins. For some collectors original means true to an object's passage through time, yet for others it is about arresting time, and having a collection of items just as they were the day they were produced. Roger refers to his restoration as a correction, as if the wear and tear or the decay of the item somehow detracts from the object's presence: "I have a list of what's wrong with something it's not got a roof or the wrong wheels or thus, and I get the right bit and I put it on the item, yeah and it does correct itself" (interview with author, December 2006). Roger's catalogue of errors could read to another collector as a list upon which provenance, history and authenticity could be established.

Aside from exemplifying how wider market and community values mediate collectors' engagement with their collectibles, the issue of restoration illustrates how malleable the concept of originality and by extension authenticity is. It is so diverse in some cases in fact, that it almost comes at a surprise that there is any consensus whatsoever over the valuation of collectibles. Collectors' simple statements such as "you can't get any better than owning an original item of the subject that you're collecting" obscure the complexity of negotiation that goes in to deciding what is and isn't "an original item" (Robert, interview with author, March 2007). When evaluations are made there is a notable degree of bickering in the community over particular pieces, and constant negotiations around the hierarchies governing their evaluation. Authentication is perhaps,

above all, a very tentative work in progress, with no fixed result. In this way authenticity becomes a field upon which political, financial and cultural battles are fought out among collectors. A closer examination of this field helps us identify “the social mechanism by which the value of different interpretations of authenticity is negotiated and renegotiated over time” (Spooner in Appadurai 1986: 220). Part of what makes the collectibles accrue a certain power are the reputations, and financial gains at stake around them, that is, their extension through social and cultural space and time.

Ideas of right and wrong abound alongside prescriptions for proper collecting, and various glory stories of the ultimate authenticity. All collectors are reaching towards an ideal of some sort, which motivates their collecting activities and gives meaning to their collection. The values they engage with in the process of reaching for this ideal in turn also engage the collector with their collectible. The collectible in this process comes to have a presence in the eyes of the collector on the basis of a combination of sheer effort and personal investment by the collector, but also because the collector is aware of the value his or her collectible holds in a wider community.

The shifting lines along which authenticity is decided in collecting communities shows that the idea of the sacred or authentic item is constantly defined and redefined, built and rebuilt. Thus the authentic item, or collectible whose presence is notable can be anything from “hand-painted” to having “never been unwrapped” to “spot on” as we saw in the opening of this chapter. How collectors speak around the *inauthentic* is equally telling of the sliding scale that

is authenticity. The inauthentic is largely a case of a collector trying to take advantage of the gains to be made on the market by forging authenticity. “Making counterfeit boxes” is “what happens when there’s money to be made” (Neil, interview with author, May 2007). The authentic then, is largely the result of a glut of collectors who are driven by profit rather than by a passion for the collectibles themselves. These individuals are described in exceedingly negative terms as those who have lost all appreciation for the collectible and do not hesitate to turn a profit by “embellishing it, repairing it, improving it,” with “it” being the originality of the piece in question (Joe, interview with author, April 2007). As an auctioneer Joe explains how these alterations detract from the value of the piece and are becoming increasingly difficult to detect.

eBay has also emerged as a central site of the inauthentic. Collectors when asked about eBay overwhelmingly speak of the risks involved, and tell stories of being misled by tricky sellers. Not only has eBay, in flooding the market with never before accessible collectibles, wreaked havoc on registers of rarity within collecting communities, it has, according to a good number of collectors, precipitated a rise in forgeries. Michael describes how “the stuff on eBay now you’ve got to be careful because reproductions now of vintage, they’re so hard too spot, you know to spot the actual fake ones” (interview with author, October 2007). Likewise, Helen tells me of “a bad experience on eBay about four or five years ago” where she “bought a bear, I think it was about 1400 pounds and I got it and it was rotten. I mean there’s going bald, you can have a bear that’s bald as

anything no fur left...I lost eight hundred pounds on that bear" (interview with author, March 2007).

These stories, which abound in the interviews, operate as a new field upon which expertise is established. Collectors have devised new ways of collecting securely on eBay. They are capable of spotting fraud, questionable sellers and inauthentic pieces. As such new forms of glory stories surface featuring these new skills. Collectors use eBay as a way of widening their awareness of what is potentially available in a given collecting milieu, and some knowledge of the dramatic changes in orders of rarity and authenticity is essential in order to collect successfully. Browsing on eBay has emerged as a central activity for a substantial amount of collectors. It is a way for them to know the parameters and value of their collection. Robert explains his efforts to "keep a record of all the interesting things on eBay. I save the finished auction pages and the images, so I am building up a reference of values and what's out there" (interview with author, March 2007). These new tools and techniques of authentication demonstrate that as collecting communities and environments change so too do the forms in which values are assigned to collectibles. The market regulates the attachment collectors have to their collectibles in ever evolving ways.

Looking at how toy collectibles are sold and marketed between collectors both on and off eBay is indicative of the components that go into building a collectible's authentic presence. A cursory search for antique bears on eBay brings up a wealth of descriptors such as "original wool stuffing," "generally very good original condition;" "original label" and "Straight 'out of the attic' condition

from a deceased estate” ([www.eBay.co.uk](http://www.eBay.co.uk)). In these descriptions, as with the explanations provided by the collectors I spoke with, establishing provenance and origins is central:

It’s hard to find them with the original clothing so we try and look for original clothing or find people who can make clothes with old fabrics (Julie, interview with author, April 2007)

If you find a bear with provenance or history it’s very valuable. If you get a photograph or a letter...but it’s very rare to find a bear with provenance...a little boy with the bear and a letter from the family to say this belonged to, it’s just so hard to find (interview with author, March 2007)

George describes the process of marketing collectibles’ at auction:

In some cases it [having an original photograph] makes the bear worth twice as much, ten times as much. With one image it can just go crazy and there’s lots of museums who buy that sort of thing because you know, it tells a story (interview with author, March 2008)

Selling collectibles is about associating them with their origins as best as possible. When no original photographs are available George “will ask for a copy of it,” and Julie will find a seamstress who can work with old fabrics and create clothing for her dolls that is the closest approximation possible. All of these activities are an attempt to add value to the bear, and to increase its aura.

George’s comment on how an association with origins “tells a story” touches on the extent to which selling is also about bringing collectibles to life, contextualizing them in a time era, and capturing people’s imaginations. In selling, collectors fetishize the collectible as commodity, in Marx’s sense of the term, making it magical and inserting it into a larger narrative. It is in this process that the attachment between collector and collectible develops and as Dittmar

offers “consumers assign possessions almost magical and fairly unrealistic powers” (1992: 106). Julie confirms how bringing a toy to life in selling fosters an attachment between collector and doll. She details how on eBay “I’ve a sense of what I need to write. If you write this is Marie and she comes from Paris or whatever, sometimes you can capture people’s imaginations that way...and maybe that’s what it is, maybe it sparks something in their imaginations” (Julie, interview with author, April 2007). In the same vein Helen names her bears on her website: “You name then yeah and that actually makes them a person once you name them” (interview with author, March 2007). In addition to Helen’s and Julie’s cases eBay is replete with calls imploring buyers to see teddy bears as little people with personality, habits and gender: “he loves to sit on the laps of bigger bears where he can make himself comfortable. Have you got room for him in your hug?” (eBay.co.uk).

Helen, in naming her bears is attempting to sell much more than the bear as object alone, she is selling the stories of its consumption, its history, and its multiple presences throughout the span of time. It is this accumulated presence that makes her bears different from those sitting on the shelves of toy stores at the local mall. Helen is selling an imaginative landscape every bit as much as a bear. She is trying to foster a depth of attachment between collector and collectible. To do this she traces the bear as an artefact extended in time and meaning. All of the collectors above are selling what Kiendl would call the internal collection, meaning all those things that the collection puts a collector in touch with, which

they too gather: histories, the past, and other associations that are not strictly a part of the collectible as physical object (2004).

The idea of the internal collection also points to the imaginative practices underpinning collecting. Collecting is about much more than the gathering of material goods. Dealer collectors' appeals to invented stories when selling is an example of how imaginative and narrative practice engage collectors with their collectibles. Collectors weave and extrapolate narratives out of what are in reality small bits of historical fact and the choices collectors make in putting together these narratives provide insight on how authenticity is defined at any given moment in time. In keeping with the concept of the extended artefact, invented narratives demonstrate how collectibles assume a remarkable intensity on the basis of the stories, dramas, persons and places they are attached to.

### **The Complete Set**

What is this "completeness"? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection (Benjamin 1999: 204)

The drive to completion, itself an ideal of collectors alongside origins, is a fundamental component of collecting. Looking at how completion denotes authenticity is to understand the collectible as a particular type of object, defined by its membership in a wider series of objects. Indeed toy collectibles such as trains and soldiers were initially produced as sets themselves, and thus to collect them is to in effect, build a set of sets. Douglas explains how the idea of the complete set was built right into Hornby's production of "things like hedgerows and then they did put out trees and...they made all the cows and horses and

stuff...they were trying to make a complete train set for the pre war boy”

(interview with author, May 2007).

It is the drive to completion that defines the intensity of collectors' collecting activities. This drive, appearing as an appetite, and an obsessive fixation, is a hallmark of the intensity the collectible comes to hold for collectors.

James aptly lays out the drive to completion:

The collecting mentality is one of, most collectors will always you know, they're always after the next thing, they're never satisfied...particularly with the guys collecting the antique stuff you've always got that guy looking for one set. He's been collecting for fifty years, but he's never found that one set made by Britain's in their Paris office in 1936. And he's looking for it and the trouble is so are ten other people and there might only be two sets in existence and its always that need to try and get a better set you know, with the modern collector it's trying to build that display, is my display complete...(interview with author, March 2007)

The momentum propelling collectors forward is the challenges they come upon in building an authentic amalgam of items known as the collection. The drive towards completion is not unlike the collector's nostalgic attempts to approximate the past. Like nostalgia, completion is also an attempt to come as close as possible to a perceived ideal. The older collector's longtime fixation on finding his one missing Paris office set, which James describes, is just such a drive for completion. The authenticity the collector feels will be bestowed upon his collection in finding such a set is evidence of his faith in the material record's ability to preserve, and bring forth intangible knowledge. Indeed as discussed in previous chapters, collectors are individuals preoccupied with filling in the gaps

of their collections, always in pursuit of what they, time and time again, term the full story. Roger and Bill explain:

R: It's completing the story, we know we'll never get there which is great, if there was a definitive list that Meccano made and every single variation they've got and it's there in black and white I think the interest would be far, far less. It's the fact that we don't know what's there...

B: you're constantly, constantly looking for logical patterns, the kind of sequence in which things change and that's the kind of detail which is just completely unknown and which we're trying to sort out and it's frustrating and enjoyable when you get the sequences which just don't perfectly fit...it is a puzzle  
(interview with author, December 2006)

Roger and Bill are the quintessential connoisseurs, collectors occupying themselves with the task of tracing out their collections in relation to Hornby's somewhat ambiguous history of output. As they explain, it is the challenges posed in trying to get the full story that make collecting so exciting for them, and which afford a great opportunity to make their mark of expertise within the wider collecting community. The full story they seek to tell is the ultimate authoritative account of Hornby trains. Indeed the Oxford English Dictionary details how the two main threads converging in authenticity "seem to combine ideas of 'authoritative' and original" (1993: 795), hinting at how authenticity bestows the ability to author the history of Hornby.

Completing the story of a collectible or set of collectibles, whether the story of their production historically, the particular provenance of an item, or the consumer history of a given good, is about animating and laying out the context from which all items in the collection are made to relate to one another.

Attempting to complete the story is then to define the contents comprising a

collection, and to evaluate each piece according to an overarching hierarchy of value. The further Bill is able to complete the story, and the more details he is able to piece together in his catalogue the stronger a case for authenticity he is able to make for his collection and expertise. The challenge as Nakamura describes it, is that “the allure of the thing lies in the way in which it can never be completed, never be fully or perfectly discovered; and it is always set in motion, propelled by human relations. In this way the thing always exceeds its own narration” (in Meskell 2006: 23).

Robert also talked avidly of his efforts to complete the story as his collection is based on a single artist’s output. For Robert tracing the activities of this artist meant he has “built up a portfolio of his early work you see how Bonzo grew, developed, and became this iconic figure. Because as he goes through his work you see little dogs. And you see them growing up almost, you know how he developed the idea” (interview with author, March 2007). Not unlike Roger and Bill tracing the minute variations of Hornby trains, Robert too looks to the small details for cues as to the history of his collectibles. Completing the story and filling in the gaps, as Robert tells it, is to know not only the provenance and origins of the collectible but to be able to explain how it got from its origins to what it is today. It is a sketch of an entire history along which any Bonzo reproduction can be assessed. As Robert notes “the challenge is to gather as many examples of different things as I can” (interview with author, March 2007).

The story, as it functioned throughout collectors accounts of their consumption of collectibles is what gave shape to their collections. It was the

thread pulling it all together into a cohesive whole where every item had its function. What is important about the story is that the process of working through such a puzzle is a highly engaging, imaginative activity in which collectors animate their collectibles into possible scenarios. In this process two things happen. First, the object is made into a collectible, and second, a set or background upon which the collectibles are made to mean is constructed. What is crucial here is that the set is not necessarily inscribed into the object. Hornby trains and William Britain's may have been originally produced as sets, and this is to an extent reflected in their collection, but it is in no means a definitive guide for collectors. Collectors of toy collectibles vary extensively in the lines they collect along given their surrounding circumstances of access and financial limitation.

Henry explains the complication:

I quite like the idea, it's boring I suppose, of collecting by number, so Britain's produced two thousand of these sets and if you can't afford the full set at nine thousand pounds why not try and get once from each set...but then you start thinking about set number one, which was made in 1903, was still being produced in 1960, and it went into about twelve major variations. You know, which way so you go, it's not horizontally or vertically similar is it...there are so many ways of doing a collection, how you make your decision I don't know (interview with author, May 2007)

The complete set or story one chooses their collection to tell is far from straightforward. Collections can tell any number of stories and indeed the story of a collection changes as the collection evolves and as both collector and market change. One collector may read the story of a collection from a completely different angle, or disagree with the story as it is constructed. Authentication, or the creation of collectability in any given item, needs to be continuously asserted

and re-asserted according to the shifting parameters along which it will be interpreted.

Roger's detail of "the thrill" of those "items that have been discovered that people didn't know existed" sketches the idea of collecting as an exploration, and detective work wherein mysteries are solved and new things brought to light. Yet as Bianchi explains, the patterns and puzzles that Roger, Bill and Robert seek to explain are in themselves constructions: "identifying a set, imposing a pattern and establishing reoccurrences and differences, *is not inscribed in the objects that comprise it*, but must be *discovered*...as part of a collection, an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and reframed into new ones" (Bianchi 1997: 276, emphasis added). Thus in the process of looking for patterns and making sense of their collectibles in relation to a wider set the collector is in fact *creating* the collectible.

Not unlike Foucault's archive in which "the capacity for the archive to yield up significant material to the researcher depends upon the modes of classification adopted by the archivist" collectors choose the particular patterns along which they display, and juxtapose and ultimately collect their pieces. Just as the act of archiving is an argument, in assembling their collections collectors are making statements about what is and isn't a collectible. They are configuring a filter "a kind of 'obligatory passage point' for all the others...the place in the network through which all the others must pass" (Osborne 1999: 52). In this way the object as collectible is a result of a collector's perceptions of collectability. It is not only that some collectibles become more desirable than others but that

objects *become* collectibles by virtue of their positioning and insertion into hierarchies. Although collectors' repeated appeals to provenance and originality do authenticate the collectible, this can only ever be a fleeting connection, a touch of originality if you may, because collectors are in fact consuming their collectibles in a remarkably different fashion from those boys and girls who originally owned them. These original owners were, after all, not consuming collectibles but toys. We can even go as far as to say that the collection authenticates the collectibles comprising it rather than the inverse.

### **The Authentic Presence**

What is striking and relevant to the entire question guiding this project is how despite their activities and efforts in situating their collectibles, the vast majority of the time collectors appeal to the idea that a collectible's authenticity emanates from the object. Collectibles are spoken of *as if* their authenticity stems from the very essence of the object itself, that anyone could appreciate their value as it radiates outwards from the very object. In her discussion of "how it is that certain objects attract the selection process and others do not" Pearce identifies this as a question about "perceived value and how value is created" noting how in the process of selection there is a "glow of meaning which shines out of the object itself" (2000: 25, 27). Questions of perception are the linchpin upon which my project hangs. It is more fitting to think of these moments of fetishization, such as Julie's admission that at fairs "if you're not looking for anything in particular the doll picks you," as the effect of perception and a particular way of *relating to* the object. Spooner confers reiterating how "authenticity is a form of cultural

discrimination projected onto objects. But it does not in fact inhere in the object but derives from our concern with it" (in Appadurai 1986: 226). Negotiating these questions of perception suggests that the hold collectibles come to have over collectors is entirely of their own construction.

This final section of this chapter examines two other manifestations of completion raised in the interviews. The first of these is the employment of dioramas or the construction of miniature worlds as a way not only to enjoy one's collection but to animate it in its historical context. Building dioramas is a way of engaging with one's collectibles in an imaginative way much like, but more immediately evident than completing the story. That a significant number of collectors employ their collectibles in these imaginative and visual scenarios paints a picture of consumption that goes far beyond mere accumulation. Building a diorama is an approximation of origins. As James explains "for me it's like trying to recreate specific moments in history...it's about recreating history in miniature" admitting later that as a result of an incomplete historical record "collectors can only do their impression of what they think happened" (interview with author, March 2007). The miniature scale of dioramas, that is their very material scale, means that something as complicated and detailed as the Battle of Waterloo can be reenacted in an accessible manner, within a contained set.

Building dioramas is a means of constructing and authenticating one's collectibles. As such it involves differentiation and detail. Enacting a diorama is how collectors immerse themselves in the historical extensions of their collectibles. By mobilizing their collectibles into storylines, dramas, and battles

collectors can be understood to fetishize toy collectibles so that they present as if they were animate and active. The crucial point here is that the animation is enacted by a collector; there is someone behind its coming to life. Enacting one's soldiers in a diorama, or running one's train on a railway shifts the basis upon which collectors connect to their collectibles. Collectors rarely relate to their collectibles as lifeless toys on a shelf, their collecting perception involves seeing the collectible as active within a history and a life story. What is ultimately important to this ethnography, as a study of how collectibles are mobilized to social, cultural and historical ends, is how collectors themselves relate to their collectibles. My findings testified to the predominance of fetishism in collecting activity. Pearce agrees, and once again reminds us to take these activities seriously: "the character of physical objects can only come by endowment from human beings. But this is not how any given individual at a specific time and place experiences the world of material things. For him, things, or some of them, have a power of their own to which he responds" (2000: 170). Collectors' fetish practices may appear as magical and whimsical but they are part of a much wider struggle for status and reputation as well as a measure of collectors' depth of commitment to their collections.

A second manifestation of completion as authenticity is the value placed on packaging and original boxes in collecting circles. The idea that authenticity judgments made on the collectible object have extended to the packaging of that object demonstrates not only the shifting registers of authenticity but also the changeable nature of collectability itself. We have already seen the lengths to

which Star Wars collectors go in employing Star Cases to protect their boxes, yet all collectors place high value on original boxes and packaging. Obtaining the original packaging is adding value, and a further authentication of the collectible which shows “that it’s complete” in the words of one collector (Harold, interview with author, May 2007). As Ronald explains “some people will pay as much for the box as they will for the toy” (interview with author, October 2007).

Packaging, and original packaging, in mint condition in particular, is the ideal in collecting circles, an added detail that ties everything in the collection together. “I think people just want to make their collections complete...and people will pay a lot of money just for empty boxes” (John, interview with author, September 2007).

Packaging is a way of contextualizing the collectible as if it just came off the factory line or “out of the shop” (Joe, interview with author, April 2007), and is a piece of the puzzle in trying to understand the collectible in its original consumer context. Packaging encases the collectible in, and enacts a bit of their original glamour. Described by one collector as “quite difficult to get a hold of, and very unusual” with the “more elaborate ones depict(ing) scenes” the boxes are used to help reinforce the value of these collectible pieces in a way that a tattered and incomplete train set salvaged from a junk sale is unable to (Joe, interview with author, April 2007). Collectors repeatedly drew on the past value of their collectibles, to further authenticate them emphasizing how “the toys were of great quality, these were very expensive toys and not many children had them” (John, interview with author, September 2007).

The box also imparts a sense of sacredness to the collectible. Nowhere is this more apparent than with those boxes which remain factory sealed. In cases where “if you opened and damaged the box you’d probably half the value of a thing” Vincent tells me about the use of “x-ray certification” to ensure that what’s supposed to be in the box is indeed in there (interview with author, December 2006). Likewise Roger commenting on a locomotive he managed to obtain still sealed in its original paper notes how even though “there are certain things you musn’t do” he struggles to keep his hands off it: “I think I’ll need to be physically restrained” (interview with author, December 2006). Roger’s struggles highlight the value accorded objects in factory sealed packaging. A collectible with its original packaging elicits a profound amount of respect in collecting communities, and as such it accrues substantial value, influencing the manner in which collectors handle it. Thus a continuous cycle of influence, negotiated within the collecting community, exists between the valuation of a collectible and the requisites of care this value entails.

The authenticity attached to the complete set whether in completing the story of the collectible, or constructing entire enclosed worlds in dioramas is instructive on a number of levels. It emphasizes the extent to which it is within sets that collectibles are made meaningful and associated with their histories. In this way collectibles only become meaningful in relation to other objects. In somewhat of an irony, collectors are able to achieve a depth of attachment to a collectible by placing it in a set, and contextualizing it within a wider material world. To repeat Benjamin’s words at the beginning of this section, completing a

set “is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand,” by giving voice to and contextualizing the extended world wrapped up in this presence (1999: 204).

## **Conclusion**

In detailing the various registers of authenticity in collecting practice the extent to which authenticity is a construction quickly became apparent. Authenticity is an argument made by a collector about a particular piece, or group of pieces, referencing both the collectible’s provenance and physical integrity. Authentic value emerges as something built and rebuilt in collecting communities, wherein collectibles are made meaningful and may be attributed a certain degree of presence against a sliding scale of complex value hierarchies. Authenticity as a value is ever changing and for an appeal to the authenticity of any given item to have lasting effect requires a degree of renewal, whether a continued uncovering of the historical merit of the collectible, or the careful restoration of the collectible to an agreeable state. What is fantastically authentic one day can quickly become commonplace as other similar pieces flood onto the market.

An examination of authenticity among collectibles, and authentication as a practice, underscored the extent to which the value of collectibles is influenced by a diverse range of factors from the market, to expertise, to personal and wider community opinion. The value of an object is never a given, and its aura requires “re-activation” (Benjamin 1968). In this way it becomes clear that authenticity is not “inscribed in the objects,” but instead placed on the object as the outcome of an interrelated negotiation of person, place and thing (Bianchi 1997: 276).

Collectors not only produce authenticity in their relation to their items but actively create the object's very quality of collectability. In building the provenance of the item, and in highlighting its unique physical and cultural features, a collector is effectively indicting the object into a new commodity phase wherein it will circulate in, and be consumed in specific ways.

Authentication is the indictment of the object as a collectible commodity with specific associations of value, rarity and prestige. It is a process where objects are often rescued from obscurity and used to forge new fields of collectability. This forging often involves an initial de-commodification of the object and its subsequent re-commodification on the basis of new value hierarchies of provenance, and condition. The shifting commodity phases of the collectible supports the development of a theory of consumption beyond purchase and Kopytoff's insistence that "commoditization...is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being" (in Appadurai 1986: 73). Sketching an object's provenance, caring for it in particular ways, and subjecting it to restoration are all activities marking that the object is no longer a toy but a toy collectible. As toy collectible the object is subject to constantly shifting sets of valuations, economic, cultural and social, which are reflected in its commodity candidacy. Although the market chapter pointed out the centrality of the market to collecting as a practice, there are collectibles which are kept out of exchange for longer periods of time. However these collectibles are never alienable, their value is always subject to the market whether they are being exchanged or not. As such, the commodity status of any collectible is a matter of

degree. “From the point of view of consumers, commodification is not so much a durable state as a series of passing moments...just as capital goes through certain moments in its circulation ...commodities go through a series of moments, of which exchange for money is just one moment” (Sayer 2003: 345, 346).

Given the substantial evidence that authenticity is the outcome of a social moment between collector, collectible and wider community, it is fascinating that collectors speak of the authenticity of the collectible as an attribute emanating from the very object. Despite their detail of negotiating complicated registers of value, collectors relate to their collectibles *as if* they have an authentic presence and power. The source of their value and the tensions among collectors over authenticity are obscured when collectors speak of the “feel” and “character” of authenticity as a quality emanating from the very object itself: “It’s just the character of the piece...it just simply has a feel to it, I can’t describe what that is” (Robert, interview with author, March 2007). Collectors consume their collectibles as if they are magical items, engaging in practices of enlivening and animating them into various scenarios. The imaginative component of collecting in Pearce’s words “is immensely significant to collectors, because it is the fire out of which come the relations between objects which makes every collection more than just the sum of its parts” (2000: 358). In the process of animating one’s collectibles; in imagining their journey from shop floor to children’s nursery; their survival through world war one and two, collectors demonstrate that they relate to their collectibles as if they were more than matter.

In describing how “once you buy one you just understand they’ve just got *something*, a history, and no two are the same” Helen ascribes to the idea of authenticity as a presence of the bear, rather than the outcome of her active research into the provenance of the bear and her longstanding cultivated appreciation of them. The bear for Helen has entered the domain of fetish whereby “sacredness in a collection may also be impartial or enhanced through the contagious magic of the objects’ creator or of prior owners of objects with special provenance” (Belk 1995: 96). Out of Helen’s appreciation for German bears comes an infectious passion for all things Steiff wherein Helen studies up on a detailed history of the bears’ makers, the young children who would have owned them, where they lived, even how they would have dressed them, building a background upon which the bear is animated by a wide swath of historical, social, cultural and personal meaningfulness. Quite simply, what Helen is collecting exceeds the stuffed bear sitting on the shelf before her. It is the historical dramas the bear has seen, the places it has been and those who have loved it. Building a case for the authenticity of an item makes it magical. In the process of discovering a collectible every detail becomes potentially relevant, and the item resonant.

Likewise collectors’ long glowing descriptions of their collectibles, the quality of the handiwork, the heaviness of the object, and its provenance are conveyed as if they emanate from the very object itself. Derek talks about the “genuine article” which “encapsulate locomotiveness” conflating its “heavy quality and old manufacture” with its total overall authenticity. John speaks to the

allure of a particular train: “it’s just the quality of it, you know you saw some of the private wagons, the colours, how vibrant they were and you know gold lettering, and it’s as if it’s absolute quality, it’s just the quality of the thing, it stands out” (interview with author, September 2007). The authentic, a tangle of tangible and intangible values and histories is effectively collapsed into the collectible with collectors appealing to “words like ‘magic,’ ‘talisman’ and ‘spell’” to account for and attempt to concretize the extended meanings not apparent in its tacit physical presence (Pearce 2000: 172). To borrow again from Benjamin, collectors relate to their collectibles “as a harmonious whole” (1973: 61).

An examination of how meaning is invested in collections is imperative to understanding the value of the collectible. Presence is the outcome of a particular way of relating to and perceiving the object. The collectible, is made to mean not only on the basis of its relation to an individual collector but in light of its complex and extended circulation through a wider community. The collectible is not a mere vessel through which collectors profess their expertise and express ideas of genuineness and authority, but instead something they actively respond to and mobilize. Authentication then is an argument built on both material and cultural foundations. Yrjo concurs:

First, it would be a mistake to assume that objects are ‘just given’; objects are constructed by actors and they make sense, name, stabilize, represent and enact foci for their actions and activities. Second, at the same time it would also be a mistake to assume that objects are constructed arbitrarily on the spot; objects have histories and built-in affordances, they resist and ‘bite-back’ (Yrjo 2005: 310)

Practices of authentication provide a compelling glimpse into the tenuous negotiations comprising how the object comes to be meaningful, and get to the very heart of collecting as both a cultural and material negotiation of the world. The negotiation of authenticity reiterated the value of approaching the collectible as extended artefact, a material good embedded in social, cultural and political webs. Viewing the value accorded authentic collectibles in collecting communities has also illustrated the discrepancy between “how a collector in practice and in a specific time and place experiences the world of material things” and the actual source of “the character of physical objects” (Pearce 2000: 170). Working through this ambiguity allows us to account for the fact that collectibles become meaningful on the basis of a history of collectors’ perceptions of them. These perceptions of presence are a collector’s way of reconciling the variability of a collectible’s authenticity over time with the relative stability of the collectible’s materiality. Learning about where this authentic presence lies, and charting how collectors negotiate this presence, is to understand how collectibles are enlivened through their interaction with those who own them.

## Chapter Six Control and Order

“I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not want to accumulate things and to accumulate them systematically, you know, in the way collectors do, with boundaries and so forth”  
(Derek, interview with author, December 2006)

The ordering of collectibles is a central, if not defining feature of collecting as an activity. Ordering and by extension controlling or fixing collectibles into chosen sets, sequences and systems is what gives the collection its shape and separates the amateur from the professional. “Since the Enlightenment, being a connoisseur has meant specialized knowledge about an area of collecting and the corresponding ability to classify collectibles according to acceptable taxonomies...in other words, the amateur collector is a passionate subjective consumer, while the connoisseur is a rational, objective expert” (Belk 1995: 45). Ordering shows that collecting is far more than the mere accumulation of material goods. Collectors’ ordered efforts to fill in the gaps of their collection, and solve the puzzle of its historical production are evidence of the collectible as an extended artefact.

Ordering collectibles is about making meaning with a group of material goods, and juxtaposing them in particular ways to make historical, value and social statements. In this light I see ordering as archiving in Foucault’s sense of the term, and collectors as archivists. In Foucault’s archive ordering is a practice of differentiation wherein all objects are slotted into a wider field of meaning. Expertise is being able to put lines through vast amounts of material to create singularities. Ordering is “a fine, discriminating gaze that is able to isolate, on the

basis of experience and example, items of significance out of a mass of detail” (Osborne 1999: 58). To order is to sort things in a particular way, and it is to argue for something. In this way collectors are not unlike curators who “arrange the archived objects in exhibitions, which creates new ‘facts’...power comes not from the mere collection of objects, but from arranging archival objects into ‘facts’ about or cultural memories of the world” (Gehl 2009: 49). Collectors mobilize the material world in specific ways to say something. This practice requires a complicated management of the various hierarchies and values threaded through any given collection and the community in which it is judged. As such, an examination of the ordering activities of collectors provides valuable insights as to how collectors negotiate the components of their collections into moments of social production.

This chapter examines how order and control surfaced in my study of collectors as part of a larger attempt to sketch the collectible’s necessary membership in a larger series, and to analyze cases in which objects come to have a hold over collectors in significant ways. Control was a central factor in the original design of this project. Working from Gosden’s conceptualization of the “particular *grip* that material culture gets on the bodies and minds of people, moving them across space and attaching them to new values” (2005: 3, emphasis added), it was my intention to assess the “grip” or hold collectibles had on collectors as indicative of the value of objects. Hearing collectors describe the intensity of their attachment to their collectibles demonstrates how objects are attributed a form of power or resonance in a process where the lines between the

animate and inanimate are blurred. It posits that the order of a collection is a structure, decided by the collector in tandem with the community to which they belong, according to which her or she is then able to make sense of every component. Ordering is essential to how collectors take what are often disparate pieces and make sense of them. It is where a grouping of collectibles becomes a collection, and a comprehensive statement, however tenuous and evolving it may be.

Working from this guiding hypothesis, this chapter introduces the centrality of ordering and control to the overall enterprise of collecting. It discusses the marked differences in the manifestation of order and control between teddy bear and doll collectors in opposition to toy soldier and train collectors. This analysis questions how the form of the collectibles affects the manner in which they are collected and demonstrates that ordering is a balance between a hierarchy of the historical and cultural facets of a given collectible as well as the assessments made of its physical condition. This section outlines the multiple lines along which order is established in collections, and how order, far from fixed is, in fact, constantly evolving within a collection.

The first section is an analysis of the collectors' narratives about control and their collectibles grip over them. These narratives, as detailed in Chapter Two's discussion of possession, often take the form of stories of the other, another collector, or a friend of a friend, and provide insight as to how collectors define what it is to lose control and become overwhelmed by one's possessions. Alongside their reverence for their chosen collectibles, these narratives function

as evidence of the power attributed collectibles: their seductive capacities, and the magic collectibles come to hold for collectors. The second example is a detailed analysis of a show and tell moment, when Roger invited me to view his private collection of trains in his home. Paying particular attention to the importance ordering plays in his display choices, this analysis determines what factors play a role in the presentation of a collection. Roger's account of his collection on display is also evidence of the close relationship between control and ordering in collecting activities. The third and final example is a case study of Derek, a collector very much driven by an overwhelming compulsion for order and control. An orderer extraordinaire, much like Douglas, the market player extraordinaire outlined in Chapter Four, Derek's collecting activities exemplify the role ordering and control play in the collection.

### **Ordering and Collecting**

Marilyn Strathern asserts that “the basis for classification does not inhere in the objects themselves but in how they are transacted and to what ends” (1991: xi). A marked difference in ordering and control between train and toy soldier collectors on one hand, and doll and teddy collectors on the other, was present among collectors. This discrepancy requires further consideration. Stated simply, there just wasn’t the same depth of preoccupation with order, systems and sets for bear and doll collectors as for Hornby and William Britain’s collectors. These latter collectors were transfixed with filling gaps in their collection, completing the set, and their collecting activities largely concerned the ordering of their collectibles according to definite, circumscribed sets. Bear and doll collectors did ascribe to

some ordering, in the form of the age of the doll or in relation to the manufacturer of their pieces, but their collections were governed by much less prevalent and looser systems of order. Bear and doll collectors spoke not of specific gaps in their collections so much as their attachment and connection to particular collectible pieces.

The division of toy collecting groups by gender surfaced throughout the interviews. Female collectors, largely of dolls and teddies, were subject to discourses around rigour and expertise, which considered their emotional and personal connections to their collectibles as less than expert. These women were not positioned by the wider community, and nor did they position themselves as “relentless erud[ites]” absorbed in a larger genealogical project (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 76). They argued instead for the depth of their connection and appreciation for their teddies and dolls, scoffing at the ridiculous measures their male colleagues often go to and their distanced objective relation to their collectibles. “It comes down to a sex thing, women will pick up something if they like it, they buy with emotion whereas men are totally different” (Helen, interview with author, March 2007). I understand these gendered conflicts within the community, over the assignment of commitment and expertise, through Bourdieu’s field of cultural consumption: “The advantage of the concept of the field is that it allows one to think *relatively* about the shifting terrain of power relations that underlie local worlds where the interactions of structure and agency are played out in ways that are patterned but quite variable” (Draus and Carlson 2009: 397). The gendered divisions between collecting groups are evidence of

how material goods are mobilized in the constitution of social groupings and their accompanying value judgments. It is in relation to material goods that our “subjective dispositions [are] gendered” and enacted (McLeod 2005: 19). In Bourdieu’s framework “gender is an ‘inherited’ and embodied way of being that is shaped in interaction with social fields [and their attendant material forms], constituting a repertoire of orientations and dispositions” (McLeod 2005: 19).

The difference between these modes of collection, and the importance of ordering can, in part, be attributed to the original commodity form of each collectible. Although there are some national dress dolls and a few groupings of bears, bears and dolls were largely not produced as part of a wider set as implicitly as Hornby trains and William Britain’s soldiers. Not only is the Hornby train itself a set with various pieces comprising the string of one entire locomotive, Hornby also produced all the accessories needed to nestle your train into its own miniature world, from tracks, to outbuildings, to trees, cars and people. Likewise William Britain’s soldiers were produced in sets organized by regiment. Buying William Britain’s originally would have meant purchasing the set, as well as any other buildings, trees, people and fortresses required in the building of a diorama. The specific membership of such toys in wider sets and their miniature size was reflected in the degree of detail according to which they were collected. The collectors I spoke with reflected and paid homage to the original manner in which their collectibles were collected. Although their consumption is to different ends than the original children who would have consumed the dolls and trains, traces of how child would have played with the toy

do inform its current collection. A doll would be owned and cherished by a young girl largely as a singular item whereas young boys would be seeking to build their train sets to ever-greater detail, and to stage battles between competing regiments. This symmetry between the toy and the toy collectible is evident in collectors' appeals to the idea of certain collecting activities "fit(ting)" the collectible, and the conventions of 'proper' collecting (Helen, interview with author, March 2007).

The collection is defined by the ordering activities out of which it was constructed: it is the obsession, systematic accumulation, and selection governing collecting that contrasts it with mere possession and sets it aside as a particular form of cultural consumption. Unlike 'regular' consumption of commodities on the market be they clothing or food, the connections collectors have with their collectibles are sustained. Whereas clothing and food are marketed and consumed according to the imperatives of obsolescence and continued profit, that is our old wardrobe seems to look outdated as we add ever new pieces, and our food purchases have a definite expiry date, collectibles often become *more meaningful* as new pieces are added and the collection evolves. This is not to say that collecting is not influenced by the profit imperatives of consumer capitalism. Indeed collectors obsessively consume ever greater volumes of collectibles in their drive to collect, and are subject to the discourses of the market. However collecting is particular in that the meaning of the collectible as commodity and the compulsions governing the purchase of a collectible are of a completely different

register. Collecting as this chapter will demonstrate is characterized by an almost religious attention to detail and order.

Collecting is an elevated form of possession wherein a single collectible is a mere component in a larger collection and overall system of ordering. In this way in collecting “an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and reframed into new ones” according to a new purpose (Bianchi 1997: 276). As we saw in the previous chapter on authenticity, the origins or context of the collectible are honoured but ultimately in service to the employment of a totality of items which have little resonance in its original context. Collectors never relate to an object alone, but to a collectible, an extended artefact teeming with meaning and value by virtue of its circulation through social networks over time. The collector plays a crucial role in making sense of these meanings. As Van der Grijp notes “advanced contemporary collections require specialization: ‘the sheer accumulation of books does not constitute a library. It is also their organization, the ordering mind inhabiting and ruling them’ (Blom 2002: 200, 205 in Van der Grijp 2006: 45).

The statements made and values asserted through a collection are variable and thus require ordering and reordering. This activity of ordering is about enlivening or immersing oneself in the extension of the object in place and time. Foucault explains:

There is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical...then the process of establishing order among things; nothing that demands a sharper or a surer, better-articulated language; nothing that more insistently requires that one *allow oneself to be carried along by* the proliferation of qualities and forms (1970: xix, emphasis added)

In ordering, a collector immerses him or herself in an often-contradictory network of meaning, in an overall attempt to materialize intangible meanings in his or her collection. This juxtaposition is not immediately evident to every viewer, indeed as we will see in the case of Roger's display, a certain level of knowledge and familiarity is required to discern such statements. This fixing and the animation such a transaction involves parallels Pomian's understanding of the object as a mediator between the invisible and visible (1990). Pomian outlines the extent to which we use the visible, in my research a collectible as material good, to explore, order, hold on to and understand immaterial meanings or what he refers to as the invisible (1990). Ordering is a process in which the relative durability of the object is employed in an attempt to control the more tenuous meanings and values implicit in such objects. Connerton agrees reminding us to think of "the idea of representing as a re-presenting, as causing to reappear that which has disappeared..." (1989: 69). Collecting then is a re-presentation and animation of the historical production and consumption of collectibles. This finding is in keeping with Chapter Three on nostalgia as well as Chapter Five on authenticity's observation as to how immaterialities like memories of the past and concepts of originality are materialized in the collection.

Collecting and ordering can be seen as a productive activity, a site of meaning making. As Belk notes "collectors create, combine, classify and curate the objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection emerges. In this process they also produce meanings. More precisely they participate in the process of socially reconstructing shared meanings for the objects they collect"

(Belk 1995: 55). “The transformation of material into heritage mode” as Pearce puts it, is evidenced in the element of discovery present in the transcripts.

Whether “suddenly discovering something that you hitherto didn’t know was out there” or “look(ing) for what you didn’t know about” (Robert, interview with author, March 2007, Bill, interview with author, December 2006) collectors describe the process of ordering their collections as a moment of discovery, whereby unexpected new meanings, patterns and resonances emerge. Similarly “the archive contents and relevance always contains potential surprises as the life history trajectories by which material travels backwards and forwards between the known and the unknown, between rubbish, junk and sacred priceless records and icons have a high degree of contingency” (Featherstone 2006: 593). Ordering as a way of making sense is challenging, exciting and a pleasure. Vincent explains how “it’s very much the big kid in me, there’s a certain age that kids get to and they love to put things in line, or make a power of all their possessions in one group you know and its very satisfying to see all these things lined up” (interview with author, December 2006).

Given that ordering is a central process by which meaning emerges in collecting and that the collectible comes to make sense as an extended artefact, it is no surprise that John’s exposure to large numbers of Hornby locomotives at the auction house affected his attachment to his collection. In this moment the collectibles lost their magic for him because their order became apparent to him all at once. Neither the product of his own effort, nor a gradual unfolding of pieces of the puzzle piquing his interest, John’s employment at the auction house

subdued the potential for discovery when ordering his own collection sequentially piece by piece.

In the process of collectors animating the extension of their collectibles in space and time, a wide range of information impacts its position within hierarchies. Robert explains how in ordering his collection he has “animated it in the form of how the artist developed this phenomenon and how the phenomenon took off” (interview with author, March 2007). Robert’s collection is a reconstruction of a given artist’s work and a representation of his entire “output” in material form (interview with author, March 2007). The order, chosen by Robert, along which to accumulate his collectibles and by which he decides which items are relegated to boxes and which sit in display cabinets at home, is the product of an extended and ongoing immersion in and animation of the history of his collectibles. To draw once again from Foucault, in the process of being “carried along” by a “proliferation of qualities and forms” the order against which Robert not only displays his collectibles but understands and interprets them is born (1970: xix). A sense of order is the outcome of a great deal of imaginary engagement and contextualization once again reiterating collectors’ imaginative work plays in the hold their collectibles come to have over them.

The imaginative component of collecting was also apparent because ordering is not just about placing objects onto shelves according to a particular system, but also about engaging with collectibles in dioramas and miniature worlds. Joe Richard’s garden of soldiers is exemplary of a complex ordered world according to which Joe mobilizes his collectibles, assigning particular soldiers to

different parts of the garden and sorting them by rank. What is more, Joe's garden is the ordering of much more than regiments of lead soldiers, it dwells in the realm of politics, religion, history and nationalism. Joe Richards:

It's very mental I mean you know...England is the most developed and I mean there's an English colonial settlement there and another one there, and England's down there, and I rotate the divisions, they rotate every two years, I take them all out and they go somewhere else and I get another batch and there's an actual system of the way they work, they go from one to the other  
(interview with author, April 2007)

Joe's detail of the rotations governing his collection, and his admission that "there's an actual system," conveys how order emerges in diverse forms across collections. It also reflects how Joe's own personal views and interpretations of military supremacy come to inflect how he chooses to construct his garden world. In the process of ordering collectibles are made commensurate with wider cultural and historical frameworks. Speaking on the pleasure of collecting, Vincent details the satisfaction of "the historical understanding of it" and "the fact that you can see how things have evolved, how things have developed" (interview with author, December 2006). Vincent is constructing a wider universe of meaning around the collectible. In arguing for this world of meaning, relevance and interconnection with the collectible he is then making the collectible itself extensive with these meanings, reinforcing the association so it, ideally, appears as natural and given to the very collectible itself.

Collecting, as it's almost always a partial glimpse of an ideal totality, necessitates a great deal of imaginative embroidery, whereby collectors bridge the gaps their collections are unable to cross, for one reason or another, through the

deployment of a material good. This is best exemplified in the assembly and perception of collectibles as a set of examples. Collectors ordered their collections along a diverse number of different lines, but most commonly perceived their collection as exemplary:

You tend to want to get one of each (Julie, interview with author, April 2007)

The challenge is to gather as many examples of different things as I can (Robert, interview with author, March 2007)

Those are the best three examples I've managed to find in that type (Harold, interview with author, May 2007)

Aside from speaking to the impossibility of assembling a complete set of one's chosen collectibles, the prevalence of the collection as example underlines that collecting is the mobilization of material goods to make statements that speak to and draw from a wider history, culture and hierarchy of values. In struggles for recognition collectors forward their collectibles as exemplary arguing in great detail, and outlining their own attachment to the collectible to establish them as outstanding. Indeed a great deal of the din at collector's fairs was comprised of collectors enthusiastically showing off their finds to fellow collectors, or discussion the merits of the piece they had yet to locate. The mobilization of goods in collecting practice is accompanied by the stories collectors tell about their collectibles, reverent descriptions of minute details and dreamy reflections of finding the ultimate buy. These incantations play a central role negotiating, establishing and communicating the hierarchies of order governing collecting practice.

As my findings confirmed, order is always evolving within a collection.

Henry is exemplary of his fellow collectors when he explains how:

I have quite general ideas and rules, which I place on my collection. Probably what I do is to try and amass as many as I can with some vague idea, and at some point when your collection is playing out you think well I'll hone it off and sell some (interview with author, May 2007)

The lines governing a collection are complex. They are shaped by repeated encounters with collectibles, the collecting community and a developing knowledge of the field. No collector sets out with a definite plan of what they wish to collect that doesn't change to some extent. Collectors' plans are sabotaged by the availability of particular collectibles, financial limitations and changing interests. Order also evolves as new items are added to the collection, often widening and contesting a collector's understanding of the overall set. The meaning of collectibles, despite a staid physical immediacy, is doubly enhanced given they are often antique pieces from another place and time, and "are not fixed, but may shift substantially overtime and through space" (Knappett 2005: 110). Collecting is a manner of control whereby collectors at once desire the stability of the material record to yield insights into the past, *and* the mutability of the meanings of material goods so to be able to showcase particular insights.

Order within a collection also develops in negotiation with a world of potentially available collectibles. In this way the order of a collection is developed not only on the basis of the collection any given collector owns, but in relation to a wider possible collection. Ordering extends to the imagined ideal collection as John reiterates noting "it's not just about the day and what you did or didn't buy,

it's also about reference material, you know what prices things made" (interview with author, September 2007). Collectors base the order governing their collection on an existing set of goods whether or not they are in their possession.

The varied lines along which collectors carve out their collections is vast, testifying to the different levels of focus, and ideas of rigour existing in collecting communities and speaking to the myriad ways collectibles can be juxtaposed.

These lines of order include train collections ordered according to region, mechanical function, or production year; bear collections on the basis of condition, maker, or size; as well as toy soldier collections of bands, of particular historical battles, and of different scale. Some collectors perceive their collection as an assembly of examples, one of everything, while others gather multiples of the same objects focusing instead on minute variation and detail. The lines across which order is established in the collection are exceedingly diverse, the product of political posturing and negotiation. What is more, multiple layers of ordering are at work, and actively negotiated within any given collection. It is this negotiation, as we will see in an analysis of Derek's collecting activities, where the material components of collectibles are mobilized to symbolic ends, inserted by collectors into an overarching order of value.

For collectors, an ability to order is a sign of expertise setting serious collectors apart from amateurs. Order is a facet of the natural progression of the collection. As collectors explain, the development of their collecting usually involves a fine-tuning of the order governing their collection to greater levels of discernment and rarity. Lewis explains how his collection gradually became

ordered along lines of age and rarity: “I collect Britain’s toy soldiers, the very early ones, and when you’ve got as many as I’ve got, I’ve been doing it for eighteen years now you tend to want the earlier ones. So I just keep the earlier ones” (Lewis, interview with author, May 2007). The collectors repeatedly imparted how they started out wanting everything and then gradually culled their collection as they became more aware of the value of specific items and their personal preferences. Julie explains how “when you’re in your thirties and forties you want all of them and you want to keep collecting but then when you get to your fifties you start thinking of I’ve got to do something about this, I got to get rid of some of them so then you start selling some and buying better ones” (interview with author, April 2007). Most often this shift in ordering is the result of a combination of factors from space limitations to changing interests.

Collectors’ collections develop through stages of marked obsession with a particular item or set of items and eventually wane only to be replaced by another.

The evolution of ordering in a collection speaks to the complexities by which value is established in collecting communities. Looking at how collections evolve and mutate tells us a great deal about the networks of meaning that come together in a collection. It also speaks to the always tenuous nature of ordering despite what the physical stability of a collectible might promise. The fairly clear lines governing order according to physical properties, such as colour and size become more complicated as layers of provenance and meaning influence the arrangement of the collection. In displaying their collections collectors make decisions based not only on their perceptions of the collectible as a physical

object, but on a set of symbolic values tied to the object by the collector. A famous previous owner, for example, might make an otherwise pedestrian highly revered.

Despite its complexity, collectors welcome ordering as a challenge. In ordering a collection becomes more than an accumulation of goods. It is by virtue of ordering that collectibles come to life, and resonate for collectors. Ordering is a meaningful and a necessary practice of engagement. As Bill noted on the challenge of ordering given the incomplete history of Hornby: “if I thought that all I was to do was to buy different things that I already knew about then most of the interest would go out of it” (interview with author, December 2006). Bill reiterates ordering as a point of engagement with the collectible, a crucial facet of collecting. Stewart supports noting “it is not acceptable to simply purchase a collection *in toto*; the collection must be acquired in a serial manner” (in Belk 1995: 92). The effort of accumulation lies in ordering and making sense of a group of collectibles, as well as in the struggles and effort this requires along the way. It is no surprise then that collectors with financial might, such as the invisible bidder from Chapter Two, are suspect. The invisible bidder given his financial strengths was able to rapidly build his collection his monetary worth assuring there were virtually no barriers to his accumulation. Here we see how the manner of collecting matters every bit as much as the collection itself.

To order a collection is to be “caught in a constant vacillation, between an ideal of wholeness and the anxiety of incompleteness...” (Cardinal in Van der Grijp 2006: 7). The ideal whole motivating collectors is the complete set.

Benjamin reflects on how in his book collecting “dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings and the like” ultimately came together in “a harmonious whole,” part of a process he later characterizes in *The Arcades Project* as “the struggle against dispersion” (1976: 61, 1999: 211). This whole or ideal forms the backdrop of the collection giving shape and value to every acquisition, guiding the collector onwards. As Douglas remarks “the beauty of what I’m doing is that I have a defined realm of items which are available. And I can get one of everything. I never will...” (interview with author, May 2007).

Despite the continuing efforts of collectors to approximate this ideal, I found that collectors were equally anxious about completeness as they were about incompleteness. This again reiterates how the collection is more about the process of collecting, or the journey, than the collection itself. Completeness signifies the end of the collection, and this death of motivation was undesirable. As such collectors modify the order governing their collections according to ever more unattainable ideals.

### **In and Out of Control**

The general assumption is that we seek to manipulate the world of goods in rational fashion in order to satisfy human wants by using and extracting utilities from what we own...but, in fact, our relationship with our possessions is far from reasonable, and broadly speaking, the more we cherish them, the more unreasonable it becomes. We consistently buy things we do not want, purchase things we cannot afford, use things in ways for which they were not intended, and hang onto things which other people think would be better to throw away...the emotions which flow between things and people (Pearce 2000: 163)

Collectors negotiate a tricky balance between possession, passion and control.

Collectors and non-collectors alike, characterize collecting activities as

exceedingly intense, driven and bordering on the obsessive. Speaking with collectors about the grip their collectibles have on them, and how their collections are organized provides a wealth of information about how collectors define what it means to be both in and out of control as a collector, and is testament to the power they often attribute their collectibles. Collectors on occasion were remarkably open about the extent to which they were held in the grip of their collection. Noting how “once you start you can’t stop,” Michael conveys the appetite that lies at the heart of most collectors’ collecting activities, and the extent to which such a passion must be balanced or controlled. Indeed the metaphors used by collectors to describe collecting include as a “disease” (George, interview with author, March 2007); or “an obsessive thing” and “an addiction” (Ronald, interview with author, October 2007); noting how the mark of serious collecting is when “you start collecting things that you don’t really like because of its association” (Charles, interview with author, October 2007).

In details of display practice and in descriptions of the practicalities of storage, it emerges that collectors constantly negotiate a level of control over their collectibles in keeping with Pearce’s reminder that “collections are objects of love, but they are also objects of dominance and control” (1992: 51). Collectors’ accounts sketch a picture of being possessed by their possessions to varying levels, and a depth of engagement that is at once absolutely necessary and completely threatening to the development of the collection. Joe Richards reflects on the size of his collection up in the attic:

It’s got to the point now that I can’t remember what I’ve got. I’ll buy something and then I’ll get back and find out that I’ve already

got it (laughs)...I've got to be a bit careful about buying now...I'm afraid it's overpowering, it's so even when I look at it I sit down and I say oh I forgot what I got here (interview with author, April 2007)

The sense of fatigue and yet at the same time delight conveyed in Joe's passage is in line with most collector's efforts to maintain a healthy control over their collecting activities. Few collectors have organized their collections so as to be able to access any particular piece on demand and space was a major issue mentioned by almost all collectors. Joe's comments hint that he feels as if his collection has gotten away from him and is teetering on the edge of being an undifferentiated mass. Ordering and the hierarchy of collectibles are at the heart of what distinguishes collecting from mere possession. It is the order and control of the collection that makes it relevant and purposeful. A collection's meaningfulness lives in the relationships between its component collectibles. As such, collectors like Joe struggle to ensure that their acquisitions fit into and are made sense of in relation to a governing structure, to do any less can signal a loss of the control, expertise and relevance of the collection.

Despite deference to narratives of others when asked about the grip of the collectible on the collector, some collectors were open about their struggles to control their collecting activities. Bill reflected on how when beginning his collection "it really was an obsession because we [he and his wife] really did nothing else. The hours when we weren't working we were chasing all over the country buying trains" (interview with author, December 2006). Their obsession to gather trains was eventually controlled through Bill's establishment of his catalogue, a way of ordering the collection toward a purpose and of coming to

grips with the collection as it accumulated. Bill's story exemplifies many collectors' constant attempts to rationalize their activities, so to be viewed as serious collectors and experts in control. The process of gaining control has interesting parallels with how objects are embedded in the systems, markets and knowledge surrounding them.

Coming to grips with his obsession, via the construction of a catalogue within which all of his collectibles could be ordered and grasped in a rational fashion, is a work in progress for Bill. As he notes the catalogue always lags behind his acquisitions and finding space is a constant necessity. Likewise Lewis openly details how "we [he and his mother] live in a house full of everything... yeah you know she's got a bedroom upstairs and she sleeps on the couch downstairs, she can't get into her bedroom" (interview with author, May 2007). The value attributed collectibles by collectors, their depth of engagement with these goods and the extent of their personal, social and financial investment in their hobbies means collecting habits often become all consuming. Because collectors revere their collectibles to such an extent, elevating them to magical proportions in imaginary scenarios, and mobilizing them as valuable components in wider political, social and financial negotiations, collectibles are related to, and some to appear *as if* they were in control of the collector.

Both Bill and Lewis, in the process of being completely preoccupied with their collecting activities, have attributed the collectible such a degree of power it comes to consume their energies in unexpected ways. An examination of control within collecting activities reinforces the hold objects come to have for us. Their

ability to motivate, is always an outcome of a way of *relating to* the collectible informed by a longstanding history of engagement and interest on the part of the collector. Not only do narratives allow us to glimpse how collectors define being in and out of control they display how *in practice* collectors consume collectibles as extended artifacts. As we have seen with Joe's backyard world of soldiers and Vincent's running trains in a darkened room, collectors engage their collectibles in imaginative scenarios attributing the object a value evocative of the social and cultural networks it is mobilized within.

In addition to Bill and Lewis' descriptions of the depth of their attachment to their collectibles, other collectors discussed their efforts to maintain control over their collecting activities. These admissions conveyed the sense that collectors do not always feel in control of their engagements with the material world: control requires maintenance. Even Lewis who admitted to a certain level of obsession reinforced later on in our interviews that he was ultimately able to "draw the line," emphasizing the necessity of having enough control to run the business out of which he makes his living (interview with author, May 2007). Clearly control in one's collecting activities is an ongoing negotiation with material worlds and collecting communities. Douglas also speaks in terms of the strategies he employs to loosen the potential control collecting could have over him. Douglas presents his collecting activity as balanced and measured, a pleasurable hobby: "I'm not wanting one of everything that's perfect, it doesn't have to be in a box or in perfect condition" continuing on later to also note how he is "quite happy to buy things worth five pounds on a regular basis" (interview

with author, May 2007). At the same time Douglas is contrasting himself against what he implies are other more obsessed collectors, who need everything to be mint condition perfect and who constantly make large purchases. In Douglas' framework these large purchases are wholly unnecessary and irrelevant to the establishment of a substantial collection. The other collectors Douglas alludes to in his comments are positioned as having lost all sense of limits, and have, in the process of becoming inordinately preoccupied with perfect condition, lost sight of the pleasure at the heart of collecting.

All collectors' stories of control testify to the depth of attachment possible between collectors and their collectibles. The underlying message within all of these comments is the collectors' wonder for the power of their collectibles, their ability to seduce, enchant to frustrate and to move them in particular ways. In reviewing such comments a picture of control within collecting begins to emerge. Control in collecting occurs on wide array of levels which span both the practical aspects of collecting: from ordering a collection along strict lines, to purchasing decisions, to the means of assessing collectibles, to ways of displaying and storing them in the home, as well as in relation to the emotional connections collectors have with their collectibles.

Prevalent in my findings, furthermore, are narratives of other crazy collectors, or those who become so possessed by their possessions they lose all semblance of control. These narratives are exaggerations, extreme accounts of a friend of a friend, someone who knew someone for whom the collectible completely took over their life and collecting activities. While they serve as

cautionary tales of the dangers of collecting, these stories also function as an appreciation for and reinforcement of the hold collectibles come to have over collectors. Collectors employed these stories throughout the transcripts as a way of illustrating their own relative normalcy and ability to control their collecting activities. They are a means by which collectors position themselves within the wider community. Perhaps nowhere is this more explicit than in my interview with doll collectors Julie and Rachel:

I mean we don't come under that category but some of the collectors are really, really mad if you like. That they think they're real and they talk to them...and some of the teddy's they won't have them in a bag in case they suffocate. We don't come in to that category do we, we're quite normal (interview with author, April 2007)

Out of these narratives of being in and out of control emerge contradictory definitions of what it means to have control when collecting. These statements address what it means to be an expert collector, what type of attachment between collector and collectible is appropriate and how quickly control can be lost. What also emerges is an appreciation for the collectible and its ability to take people over the edge. There is a sense, given the tone in which the narratives are told, that collectors are capable of identifying with their fellow collectors' loss of control.

Narratives surfaced throughout the interviews in the form of short references or casual mentions to those who have lost their bearings:

My girlfriend, she was, she still is a bear collector, and I mean she could max out every credit card in one sale (Henry, interview with author, May 2007)

In the space of ten years he's collected more than all of us together. And his aim is to open a museum. He'll make it but he's one of those guys that he'll burn out (Nick, interview with author, March 2007)

Generalists, yeah, and they've got houses full of stuff and they can never part with it (Charles, interview with author, October 2007)

There are obsessive people I knew of a woman who collected everything. I mean we went to her house once and you could not move, she had a whole, she didn't know what she had. It was so many different things, but she had things in big black bags (Helen, interview with author, March 2007)

Narratives also took the form of much larger, more detailed stories of the downfall of a particular collector such as the narrative of “the bloke who killed his wife” mentioned in Chapter Two. Joe Richard’s story of the ruin of fellow collector Timothy Smith is another example. Joe prefaced his extensive narrative by noting “I pride myself in being fairly rational about my approach to objects...compared to others, very strange people. I see Smith now and again...” continuing on to tell the story of Smith, a fellow collector intimately involved in the collecting community and to whose house Joe and his wife were invited for lunch. Joe’s detailed story, of the strange lunch at his home, and the frosty relationship between Smith and his wife gradually culminates in the downfall of Smith “a megalomaniac that wanted power; he wanted to create an Empire” by creating a rival group to the toy soldier society (interview with author, April 2007). As Joe describes,

The Bath group, the Brighton group...he wanted to go better than that and he went international and he decided he'd taken over Wales and apparently...he'd had a map on the wall and he's got flags in it you see and the area rep...but the final thing that gave it away was Mr Bobby Jones had taken over Italy you see (laughs) and in his mind any Britain's collector was an obvious enemy of

his. So he decided to sell all his Britain's...so he lost it completely. And he, of all places I'd see him peering through windows and things and that was it, you know. It wasn't till years later that someone -- I came across him in a psychiatric unit in North Oxford...he went completely (interview with author, April 2007)

Joe's narrative, one of many comprising almost the entirety of my interview with him, told of the gradual decline of a collector he once knew. As Joe puts it, "Smith went potty, he went absolutely potty," telling his story in a cumulative way noting the early clues to his certain pottiness, how Smith kept staging competitions and forming rival groups despite his others having failed (interview with author, April 2007). Joe's tale is exceedingly dramatic, and most certainly exaggerated for effect. It is difficult in fact to think of anything more dramatic than a collector driven to insanity and ending up in a psychiatric unit, perhaps only the case of a bloke killing his wife over the possession of his collection.

It is worth noting that Joe trips up in telling his story, first noting that "someone" saw Smith in the psychiatric unit and then quickly correcting himself to note it was he who saw Smith. This slip underlines Joe's embellishment of the story. Joe's story is a performance designed to detail the extremes to which some individuals are driven in their attachment to their collectibles and in their collecting activities. By paraphrasing his story with a note on his pride of being "fairly rational" in his own collecting activities Joe immediately contrasts his own longstanding collecting activities with those of Smith. Despite the fact Joe has constructed and maintained an entire world in his back garden for more than fifty years, he is an individual in control of his collection - a rigorous expert for whom collecting is a harmless pastime. The underlying themes however, which emerge

from Joe's story, especially given the context of further stories Joe told of fooling journalists who visited his collection, and of the difficulties he had with other members of the community, speak to a more tenuous and competitive hold on his collecting activities. Not only did Smith go "potty" he was entirely unsuccessful in usurping the control of the soldier society of which Joe was a key player. Within Joe's narrative lie cues as to the negotiations all collectors undertake to control, order and succeed in their collecting field.

Smith lost control, his downfall an escalation of an obsession with power, which as Joe tells it, bears striking resemblance to a battle one of his soldier collectibles would have taken part in. In framing the story by outlining the flags on the map and Smith's "own little army of members," Joe implies that Smith's excessive obsession with toy soldiers culminated in a complete inability to separate fiction from reality and that his entire life became a battlefield. A loss of control in Joe's story was defined as an inability to properly distinguish between the animate and inanimate. Smith became so all consumed with his rival society, and the betterment of his collection in the process that "the obsession looming up" as Joe explains, took over completely. Losing control then is the outcome of what Graeme Gilloch, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, would call porosity: "porosity refers to a lack of clear boundaries between phenomena, a permeation of one thing by another, a merger of, for example, old and new, public and private, sacred and profane" (1996: 25).

Strikingly this lack of clarity and blurring characterizes not only Smith's loss of touch with reality, but a great deal of all collecting activities. As outlined

throughout the project, collectors take part in processes of porosity when engaging with their collectibles' extension in time and space, when animating them in imaginative scenarios, and when personifying them. That porosity, a central facet of collectors' engagement and consumption of the material world, is also a factor in the downfall of many illustrates the tenuous line collectors walk between control and passion. According to the collectors' narratives above, control is achieved by those who engage with their collectibles as more than matter, yet never lose sight of their collectibles' ultimate status as inert material goods. In fact it is the collector's play between the lines of animacy and inanimacy that make the collectible so fascinating.

### Show and Tell

An opportunity to view Roger's train collection provided valuable insight into the ordering and control involved in displaying a collection. My show and tell moment with Roger and his collection was exemplary of both the tangible and intangible factors comprising a collection. The order governing the lines along which Roger chose to display his collection are the outcome of both a certain degree of imaginary engagement and a reflection on the very material qualities and forms of his train collectibles. Roger's presentation also underscores the centrality of the control and the juxtaposition of trains when making particular statements with a collection.

R: should I give you a quick tour of the collection?...Ok so this is my study and um, so basically this is the only display I have available to you for various reasons...and it's not just a random collection it's because I can tell you when these wagons were made.

RM: and they're catalogued by year

R: yeah exactly that is the criteria...you know I don't like it very much because it is not precise enough, because the time I did it which was about five years ago I didn't have enough of a collection to narrow it...there is a lapse of course and it doesn't make it neat...they went from this very dull not really railway like...and then they tried to make them more realistic around this time and then they sort of did a Technicolor things and I actually haven't got a very good selection...it's [Technicolor] not very well represented here... You're looking at a pretty good collection I think they are in truly amazing condition, I don't think there's anything in that condition of that period in the sale tomorrow for example...they were fantastically well made, they can take a lot of wear and tear the enamel was extremely good...I've got stuff which is almost like the day you got it from the shop...

RM: and your figures of people can you talk a little about putting them in?

R: they just, again, I am very specific because they came with the Hornby series I will collect them, I won't collect figures if they're Britain's I wouldn't be interested. So it's not just the figures to make it look good it's because they're part of the story. Yeah and things like these are a little eccentric they're all made by Hornby...

RM: and so how long would it take you to set up one of these?

R: ah not very long, the biggest time is working out what to put in it. It's not random I just don't look and say oh right I'll put that in, it would be a question of looking through the lists and saying right what should go...I mean like there you've got an M and S loco and it should be an M and S brake van, And again Southern Loco, Southern brake van, some you will find it doesn't work

RM: So there's a particular order?

R: yeah and then if you set it you know then the criteria of which are the showing off of items and these are the very desirable, very expensive, that's huge, very expensive. Nothing in here is, I say nothing but all the brake vans are common because you had to have brake vans and everyone had brake vans, open wagons like that are not rare. And that's not rare it's a very common wagon. And these are tin printed which aren't very desirable, but other than that they're all pretty rare...

This is an extraction of the larger "tour" Roger gave me of his collection, which included display cases, a workroom where Roger would photograph and work on his locomotives, and other rooms in his home where trains were stored in boxes.

What was immediately striking about Roger's presentation of his collection is

how it is most definitely a work in progress. In presenting his collection Roger could not ignore the weaknesses in the collection, its deficits and gaps. There was a strong sense that Roger had yet to really gain complete control of his contribution to the larger “story” of Hornby. Roger’s critique came across as modest, yet despite the fact that much more work remained to be done it was evident that Roger was proud of his collection, and spent a great deal of time actively ordering it to approximate an ideal. As Roger mentions numerous times, “it is not random” but instead a careful nuanced and well thought out selection of pieces representing a larger history of Hornby production.

The lines ordering Roger’s collection are both a reflection of his assessments of the physical integrity of the collectibles, their condition, colour, metallic composition, as well as the historical importance he assigns to each piece within Hornby’s output. These factors inform not only his acquisitions but his interpretation and subsequent ordering of his collection for display. Roger attempts to order his collectibles in such a way that the history of Hornby becomes apparent in the very shelves of his collection. The ordering of his locomotives on the shelf is not just a representation but a presentation. Roger’s efforts display a remarkable faith in the power of the material record to communicate less readily evident meanings. Lynn Meskell encourages us to consider such moments of play between the historical and social values of objects and their physical immediacy which make up a great deal of our interaction and relation with the material world noting if we: “move to a grounded understanding of things we must simultaneously consider immateriality, the need to objectify, to

abstract, and our embodied practices in the sphere of magic and making” (2006: 3). An analysis of Roger’s collection on display, his intentions and his attempts to present an ideal historical progression of Hornby’s output over time in the placement of train sets on shelves; as well as his attempts to conjure a miniature railway world of times past using figurines and accessories, is just such an embodied practice, a making visible, and a synthesis emblematic of what Meskell calls “the deployment of objects worlds in historic and contemporary practice” (2006: 7).

Other than arranging particular pieces of his collection to maximum effect, Roger also controls how, for whom and when his collection is open to others. It was a very special opportunity for me to view his collection but upon review various rules of touch and limitations to access, various controls that is, were in effect. That there was only one display “available” to me “for various reasons” is very much in line with the rules surrounding touch and access followed by most collectors (Roger, interview with author, December 2006). Joe Richards clearly stated how “nobody touches the garden except me” (interview with author, April 2007). As well, Harold noted how he “won’t let anybody touch” his collectibles (interview with author, May 2007), evidence of both the delicate material condition of collections and the wider networks of value and meaning woven through them. Ordering a collection into a display is about much more than physically arranging collectibles on a shelf, it is about research and consulting records, controlling access, and contributing to a larger project. “Not just random” a collection on display is the culmination of years of acquisition, ordering,

precision, knowledge and expertise (Roger, interview with author, December 2006). It is an attempt to materialize and make available all of the knowledge built up in and understood to be extensive with the collectible.

What Roger's show and tell reiterates very poignantly is that control over these diverse and wide ranging meanings is a work in progress. The "erudition" required of a genealogist is "relentless" (Foucault in Rabinow 1987: 76). As he takes me through his collection further gaps in the collection or its distance from an ideal become increasingly apparent to Roger. Even if he has not yet reached his ideal through material acquisition Roger impresses upon me his knowledge of the gaps in his collection, the specificity required by a truly outstanding collection, and his critical, rigorous approach to collecting as a way of bridging the discrepancies that exist. Control and ordering are, for Roger, the hallmarks of an appropriate collection, no choices he makes are haphazard, and every acquisition is always done with an eye to the greater whole.

Above all, Roger's description of his collection on display verifies how the meaning of a collection is to be found in the relationships between pieces of the collection, and in how the collector relates to their collectibles. A collection after-all is defined as a series of objects where "there's some sort of ancillary system that is assigned to them" (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). The collectible object, crucially, is always, by virtue of its collectability, part of a wider series of objects. Due to its membership in a larger collection the collectible is always already extended, meritorious according to its position in a series. A collection is a network of relations, complex, and multifarious. Dant explains:

The object is always singular insofar as it is produced, exchanged, possessed and used as a thing. But it always exists in relation to a series of other objects, more or less similar, more or less different, that give the thing its meaning, its degree of singularity and its place in material culture. Over time that set of relations changes and with it the meaning and value of the object in the culture (2000: 151)

Control is prevalent in collecting because the meanings of collectibles are ultimately uncontrollable. A collection is always necessarily a work in progress, a challenge, and an approximation. An unverifiable project, Roger nonetheless seeks to address the historical output of Hornby through the ordering of a group of collectibles into a collection. Roger notes that his series is largely governed by the year of production but other factors ranging from condition to suitability also impact each collectible's candidacy. Gaining control in collecting involves the management of relations not only between collector and collectible but between various collectibles. It also, as evidenced by Roger's collection, involves the imposition of "criteria" and frameworks to make apparent the relevance of the collection. As we saw in Roger's display, this process of making apparent is a synthesis. In displaying their collections collectors don't just physically order their locomotives on a shelf into a repetitive sequence in an effort to present physical variation over time but also attempt to tell the "story" of their collection, to somehow materialize and make apparent the intangible histories, and consumer narratives comprising them. Collecting is a materialization; an attempt to order, make sense of, and communicate the immaterial resonance of the collection via the control and ordering of the material collection. And it is this attempt, this enactment that is engaging, challenging, and part of the process in which the

collectible begins have a “grip” over collectors such as Roger “moving them across space and attaching them to new values” (Gosden 2005: 3).

Roger’s display practice and subsequent introduction to his collection manifest many forms of control, all involving an approximation of Roger’s ideal of Hornby’s production output. The degree of ordering and control was evident not only in Roger’s comments and display practices but in the minute detail that could dramatically shift the meaning of a collection. That collectors such as Roger attempt to deploy collectibles in particular detailed ways is an irony, for the significance of collectibles and their meaningful extensions are discovered through a process less about fixing and ordering and more about immersion into imaginary worlds, nostalgic reverie, and “allow(ing) oneself to be carried along by the proliferation of qualities and forms” (Foucault 1970: xix, emphasis added). Collecting is a continuous mediation of order and disorder.

### **A Controller Extraordinaire**

No other collector in my study spoke more to the importance of control to collecting than Derek. For Derek the control and ordering aspects of collecting were the *raison d’être* of his activities, and the principle arena within which he engaged his collectibles. A collection for Derek was defined by its degree of ordering, and collectors by their ability to control and engage with the material world in a rigorous and systematic fashion. “To me a collection becomes a collection when you’ve got three items in some sort of ancillary system that is assigned to them. I’m quite a purist in terms of what a collection is, a collection is not an assemblage” (Derek, interview with author, December 2006). Derek’s

interview was replete with accounts of control and ordering and their importance in shaping his attachment to his collection. Control has been central to Derek's collecting activities over time, from starting as a boy "building layouts" to his "tendency to write these turgid articles every year for the railway collectors association about these million variations you know, a detailed product history" (interview with author, December 2006). In underlining the importance of control and order to his collecting, Derek is positioning himself as an expert in opposition to amateurs who collect genres, and accumulate haphazardly. For "the experts it's about control you know that this is, that these are means of control, these emblems of control, you know signage and signaling, control and ordering" (interview with author, December 2006)

Whether cataloguing or running his collectibles, and despite Derek's claims that his days of "anally retentive cataloguing are over," it is abundantly evident that control is the central facet of Derek's collecting activity. Controlling and ordering, are the pleasurable parts of his collecting activities and what ultimately make the collection relevant to him. Control is not only central to Derek's definition of collecting as an activity, but to how he defines the very collectible itself. Derek underlines repeatedly how trains are necessarily part of a larger infrastructure:

Model railways are actually runnable in a way that no other vehicle is. You can actually run it like the real thing or it will perform like because railways are about controlling the movements of things on fixed tracks, you put yourself in the position of a signaler, you put yourself in the position of operator rather than a driver... You can run them very much as the real world runs them, the thing with the toy car is where's it going to go, what are you going to do, you know, there's no infrastructure. And on a railway you've got an

infrastructure, which can be endlessly played with. And because its infrastructure is complex it's endlessly satisfying...it offers an adult way of running the stuff which isn't merely about letting the thing go, flying it around and trying to do fiddly dee with it  
(interview with author, December 2006)

In their very material form, composition and layout, trains are members of a larger series of goods which afford collectors like Derek the opportunity to combine and recombine them “endlessly” in the process of making meaning with them. Derek explains how his collecting activities were fostered by the complexity of the miniature world he immersed himself in while running his trains.

Derek’s engagement with Hornby began as a drive towards authenticity. The manipulable size of Hornby trains, and their integration into complete miniature railway infrastructures make the Hornby train, in Derek’s eye a “true representative of the period” which “encapsulates locomotiveness” (interview with author, December 2006). The miniature, manageable size of Hornby trains is a central facet of their appeal for Derek. It is because of this size of Hornby, their detail, and their “chemical composition,” that Derek animates and enacts his train set-ups in not only a controllable manner, but in a way similar to how “the real world runs them” (interview with author, December 2006). Their miniature quality allows Derek to occupy the position of “operator,” and to establish a level of mastery over the infrastructure of his collectible world (interview with author, December 2006). This clarity of structure and system is a huge source of pleasure for Derek. It is an “extra boost” allowing him a degree of possession and control over his collectible world.

Derek's construction and operation of his miniature infrastructure is emblematic of collecting as an activity in which interpretations of physical properties and cultural meanings are continually being assembled. The collector forges a collectible's physical and imaginary character in a way that allows them to fleetingly possess moments in history, personages, and entire fantasy landscapes. Pearce agrees explaining how the miniature "help(s) to reduce a large and complex experience like the Somme or the Western Desert to a smaller and simpler scale of which one human can make some sense" (1992: 72). The coherence of the miniature facilitates an intimate entanglement with the realm of history, and drama. The physical quality of the collectible makes the inanimate world accessible and intelligible to the collectible in particular ways, on the basis of which they connect with and fill in the gaps of entire historical moments.

It was only because "you couldn't carry on running it all, in the end it's got to turn into a collection" that Derek gradually came to take part in more traditional collecting methods. This shift or what Derek refers to as a "phase of accumulation" did not signal the end of control in Derek's collecting activities but its continuation and manifestation in different arenas. In amassing his collection of variations, Derek sought to establish a clear sense of control by impressing a definitive order and systematic structure over his rapidly expanding acquisitions. Derek's well-established background in running trains, and his longstanding immersion in the animate world of Hornby guided the systems of classification governing his collection. Controlling and establishing his systems of order was a challenge. Derek notes "I've got my parents house stock full of possessions and

my own house is stuffed full of my possessions. And by stuffed, stuffed is the word" (interview with author, December 2006). For all of his expertise and efforts at control and ordering his collectibles had a substantial hold over him. Control for Derek was at once a manner of making sense of his collectibles, and a motivator to gather more and more of them. It was not just part of his practice of collecting, but integral to the depth of his engagement with his trains. Derek admits how even though "the ownership of all the things is unnecessary, you know, all you need to do is to record that reference...the collecting drive is such that you want to have the coach in the collection" (interview with author, December 2006).

Derek's employment of the word "ancillary system" when describing how he defines a collection is significant, illustrating how he thinks of a collection as a support for a more central theme. Ancillary implies the collection is a representation of or reference to a wider idea, its juxtaposition and order exemplary of something wider than itself. Derek contrasts the idea of a collection as an "ancillary system" with that of "an assemblage" by which we can only surmise he meant, based on his background in Art History, "a work of art made by grouping found or unrelated objects" (OED 1995: 74). Again, for Derek, the order governing a collection gives it its shape and allows it to speak to something greater. As Pearce concludes, drawing on Belk: "The collection as an entity is greater than the sum of its parts..." (1992: 49). The ordering of the fragments of the collection, and in Derek's case, the employment of those fragments in a resonant whole, is the point at which the collection made resonant. "Collecting,

especially of the classifying sort...offer(s) a means to seem to gain control of the world and of the past" (Belk 1995: 46).

## **Conclusion**

The play of the immaterial and material that constitutes the ordering and control imposed by Derek on his collection is evidence of the collection as a network of extended artifacts. Although perhaps less pronounced than in the case of Derek, control was replete throughout other collectors' accounts of their activities.

Whether ordering collectibles based on a negotiation of their physical merits, engaging them in imaginary scenarios, "intervening" and restoring collectibles, or coding them according to their place within a wider collection, control and order were a central facet of collecting. Ordering and hierarchy are at the heart of what distinguishes collecting from other forms of possession. Collections are archives: "not just a passive collection of records from the past, it is an active and controlling system of enunciation" whose "statements must not be taken at face value but are to be read as symptomatic of culture and its language" (Szczelkun 2002; Bates 2007). In constructing their hierarchies collectors argue for and make meaning with their collectibles in particular ways. Observing collectors allows us to understand how, in practice collectors relate to their collectibles in ways that blur the lines between inanimacy and animacy. Relying on a network of physical juxtapositions to speak to a network of immaterial significance collectors' attempts to control and order their collections are evidence that more than physical objects on a shelf are being arranged in any collection.

Ordering an expanding collection, minute details, endless variations and a host of variables from condition, to provenance, is always a tenuous process. Collecting involves a constant reordering of all components of the collection in light of new acquisitions coming into the collection, the wider collecting community and the market. The collection, like the archive, is uncontrollable and always exceeds definition. Both have “a high degree of contingency” (Featherstone 2006: 593). A collection is a practice of delicate balance and fine-tuning according to ever evolving governing hierarchies. Such processes of re-interpretation involve the animation of the collectible into imaginary sequences, and the collector’s consideration of the collectible’s extended resonance and provenance.

Establishing order within the collection is also dependent on how collectors relate to their collections, and the grip particular collectibles come to have over them. For all the rational ordering and control collectors impose on their collections, their passion and interests often signal a tendency towards a loss of control. Indeed collectors’ own accounts of their controlling activities and their narratives of other collectors who have gone “potty” are full of instances displaying the tenuous nature of control (Joe, interview with author, April 2007). Control in collecting is something negotiated, a facet of the interplay of passion and order, collector and collectible. It is something collectors achieve, and must maintain.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Conclusion**

As a sustained examination of the activities, communities, and social worlds of toy collectors, this project raises new insights into the process by which collectors become attached to their collectibles. As a researcher I was fascinated by the intensity of the relations collectors have with their collectibles, and how they mobilized them to social, political and economic ends. As such this project concerned itself with the processes of the cultural construction of objects and how people make sense of their social worlds through objects. By examining practices of meaning production in collecting communities this project adhered to a cultural consumption framework underlining how meaning is not inherent in objects, they instead become meaningful and powerful as components of a wider cultural, social and economic field. Using the works of Bourdieu, Foucault, as well as Hebdige, Dant, Appadurai and a host of others my project sketched out that field, its actors, systems, locations and relations peeling back its layers and providing insight specific to the use of material goods within the field. This was an exploration that reviewed the patterns present throughout my findings on the relations collectors had with their collectibles. Focusing on the practices of selling, authentication, identification, control, possession and nostalgia, the project theorized collecting as a particular, yet internally diverse mode of *relating to* the material world. What stood out from an analysis of these themes was the mutability of objects meanings; the imaginary practices of collectors animating their collectibles as if they had special powers; as well as the struggles of

collectors to construct the meanings of their collectibles in the context of wider cultural conventions.

Each chapter was organized according to an activity of collecting, examining not only what collectors thought about their collectibles but what they did with them. It demonstrated the myriad ways collectibles were mobilized to negotiate financial transactions, assertions of expertise and the tensions present within the collecting community. Questioning collectors' attachments to and engagements with their collectibles, it advocated assessing the presence attributed the collectible by the collector; and the collectible as an extended artefact, tempered by the markets, communities and value systems in which it circulates.

Toy collecting proved a remarkably productive case study from which to examine attachments to the material world. It allowed me an invaluable opportunity to view fantastic collections, to speak with engaged and enamored collectors, and to spend time in the spaces and communities of collecting. I was witness to the intricacies of the interactions of collectors, collectibles and collections. I saw moments of, and heard stories of competition, engagement, and disengagement, control and passion. Looking at how collectors transacted their collectibles inevitably led to tensions within the community, debates, bickering and struggles for definition. The tenacity of these tensions only further underscored the value collectibles come to hold for collectors as tools for negotiating or wielding power. Although my project emphasized the cultural construction of meaning it theorized the extent to which this construction is contested. Collectors were never completely in control to construct the meanings

of their collectibles as they saw fit. They were subject to community conventions, judgments, the market and financial limitations. What is more these challenges only further motivated them onwards, their collecting activities enchanted by a socially based ideas of the ‘perfect collection’.

Looking at the relations between collector and collectible in practice and situated in a particular time and place, this project underlined how “the character of physical objects can only come from endowment from human beings. But this is not how any given individual at a specific time and place experiences the world of material things. For him things, or some of them, have a power of their own to which he responds” (Pearce 2000: 170). Pearce’s comment supports my finding that collectors’ imaginative engagement with their collectibles was a central mode through which they forged their identities, located themselves in the present, and made historical claims. Working from Marx (1979) on fetishism and Harvey’s (2009) insistence that we need to take these practices seriously, no matter how whimsical they appeared to be, was key to understanding how a vast range of immaterial values imbue the collectible with value. Indeed looking beyond collecting practice as a collector gathering collectibles and assembling them into a collection on his or her shelf, revealed the immense depth of social, economic and cultural negotiations going on ‘behind the scenes.’ As I became more familiar with the collecting community, had the opportunity to speak with some very forthcoming collectors, as well as to observe the social maneuverings going on between what a collector said and what they did, the complex social implications of collecting became undeniable. “Collecting is a more powerful activity than

might first appear. It is not merely a reflection of the material world translated through the imagination of the collector; it is an active intervention in the social reality which is merely one construct among potential others" (Pearce 2000: 181). The imaginative practices of collecting that appeared at the outset as the dreamy and unsubstantial mutterings of collectors proved a highly productive avenue of interrogation.

These studies, of collectors' fetish practices were part of a larger set of mystifications going on in the community. Not only did collectors relate to their collectibles as if their very authenticity emanated from the collectible itself, the contradictions present in collector's positions on profit and financial gain in collecting betrayed a certain ambiguity between their professions on 'proper' collecting practice and their actual activities. The debates and contradictions over profit and passion was only one of many tensions played out within the community alongside debates over restoration and originality. Collecting proved a remarkably fluid and evolving practice which required collectors continually maintain and reinforce their positions within the community. This emphasizes the *mutability of meaning* at the heart of collectors' enchantment with their collectibles. The construction of meaning with one's collectibles was expansive, engaging and always potentially a means through which collectors could attempt to forward ever greater historical claims and assertions of expertise. This mutability of meaning and the potential contained within it is part of what lends collecting practice its cumulative character and collectors their intensity of attachment to material goods.

In addition to viewing collecting as a collector manipulating and arranging the material world into an intelligible whole, and given the way collectors attribute their collectibles particular powers, we also need to consider “the experiences that objects can create for human beings” (Kiendl 2004: 8). One of these experiences, illustrated in my project, was how objects are integral to the construction of identity and memory. Countless times collectors demonstrated the extent they mobilized their collectibles to carve out and sustain particular identities within the collecting community or to assert particular views of the ‘ways things were’. Friendships, competitive relations and legends of amazing acquisitions and collecting prowess were all constructed from collector’s collecting practice. Considering the social, cultural and economic negotiations involved in building a collection is to come closer to understanding “how is it exactly, that one object comes to signal or be something beyond itself” (Knappett 2002: 102). The social and political negotiations collectibles are mobilized within, and subsequently become indispensable to, imbue objects with value. Objects are very much tied up in and valued in terms of what they help us to obtain and in the statements we are able to make with them.

This project is relevant to those with interests beyond toy collecting in three principle ways: it addresses the role of material goods in social process, it is instructive on the difficulties presented when trying to locate the object, and it provides methodological insight into new ways of studying material culture. My development of and application of the concepts of the extended artefact and presence is useful for any research project exploring how objects are made

meaningful by those transacting them. Although framed around struggles for authenticity, collecting markets and nostalgia this project contributes to a much wider field of knowledge concerned with the relations between people and their things.

### **The Journey**

“I think there are people who actually see them very much as a starting point. And I certainly put myself in that second group where the objects are just a starting point...if you extend it to me and I can see that, how I can grab things from other things, see cross relationships between things, and I mean it’s led to great friendships, great stories...” (Vincent, interview with author, December 2006)

Vincent’s prophetic statement that “objects are just the starting point” resonates throughout this project on an empirical, theoretical and methodological level. As outlined in the introductory chapter, trying to understand how we make meaning in concert with the material world has amounted to a long journey of translation from empirical work to theoretical abstraction and back again. This project began by considering how it is that objects come to have a hold over us, compelling, seducing, frustrating and engaging us so intensely. Collectors use collectibles to assert their identities and shape their social worlds but in practice their relationships these goods are not nearly so straightforward. We respond to and are often not in direct control of the objects around us. The collectors told numerous stories of their homes completely stuffed with collectibles and of spending large amounts of money despite their better judgment. As well, objects are subject to forces of culture and economics beyond our immediate influence. As such a study of collecting practice highlighted how a collectible’s value is very much the

outcome of a careful mediation of both personal and wider cultural meanings. This tension between the individual collector and the community means the collectible is a powerful tool in practices of identification. Located at the nexus between a personal and wider cultural realm my project showed how the collectible was used in processes of self-identification and group membership. “Objects serve not only to reaffirm a person to themselves, they serve to integrate and position a person within a community” (Digby 2006: 182). The associations made between collector and collectible often proved, as we saw in the case of Jim MacKay, very powerful demonstrating how, if successful, the value assigned the collectible and the esteem held for the collector come to mutually reinforce one another.

My project initially engaged with three literatures each providing different ways of accounting for the value objects come to hold for us: the material culture studies literature, the collecting literature, and the cultural consumption literature. All of these literatures are threaded throughout this project however I notably constructed my own particular framework from theories of the cultural construction of objects, fetishism, identity practice and nostalgia. I also began at the outset by distancing myself from a tendency in the material studies literature to argue for the active character of the material world on account of its very physical properties. Theories of object agency, which developed out of this tendency as well as calls for object centered analysis were duly rejected. I do not deny that the physical properties of collectibles affect collecting practice. My analysis of the role of the miniature in ordering practices is case and point.

However, the value objects come to hold for us has nothing to do with the object as a physical entity and everything to do with how we perceive objects and construct them in particular ways.

Collectibles, as this project has repeatedly demonstrated, are objects rescued from the detritus of history by collectors. There is nothing innate to a lead toy soldier that makes it collectible. Indeed my position as an outsider looking in at collecting communities, unable to sort through what was and wasn't valuable, only underlined the processes of meaning making that go into transforming an object into a collectible. The cultural construction of collectability was a process in which otherwise ordinary items were elevated to magical proportions and subject to complex rules prescribing their care and consumption. Rather than perpetuating a false dichotomy, making unproductive distinctions, and building borders between the material and the symbolic, as I argue these positions on object agency do, the far more interesting question is how material goods, in all of their physical and symbolic properties, are transacted in the mediation of social hierarchies, markets and reputations. Collectibles are made to circulate through social worlds in particular ways, their 'power' a culmination of our negotiated perceptions and ways of relating to them.

My immersion into the theories of Bourdieu and Foucault was instrumental to grasping these processes. Bourdieu's sociology of cultural consumption and Foucault's theory of modes of classification and the archive have proven indispensable to locating the material good in wider negotiations of economic, cultural and social hierarchies. Bourdieu's concern with "the uses to

which culture is put, and the manner in which cultural categories are defined and defended” is exceedingly relevant to collecting and indeed to any practice of cultural consumption (Jenkins 1992: 130). His work provides the thread imbricating the material world with a much wider field of negotiations where identity, economic prowess and expertise are negotiated. Foucault’s continued focus on the importance of how things are assembled to make particular arguments or statements reinforces Bourdieu’s approach to the social and economic politics of consumption.

Aside from locating consumption within its social and political contexts, both Bourdieu and Foucault are notable for their outline of the importance of the material in social life, and their continued emphasis on how we both constitute and, in turn, are constituted by the material world surrounding us. This strain of Foucault and especially Bourdieu’s theories is often overlooked. Bourdieu, particularly in his concept of habitus, has been repeatedly accused of determinism. As a set of dispositions largely inculcated in childhood, often unconscious and presenting as natural, habitus is misread as something we are subject to and have little opportunity of avoiding. Bourdieu has also been accused of reducing material goods in the face of wider maneuverings in the social and economic spheres. LiPuma details: “In sum, we might characterize Bourdieu’s theory of culture as a kind of cultural functionalism...the issue is not the character of cultural symbols and categories, but their use as instruments of power – symbolic power” (in Calhoun 1993: 20). LiPuma continues on to note how “what

is unspecified is the relationship between what social things mean to people and the power they exert over them” (in Calhoun 1993: 20).

This line of critique overlooks Bourdieu’s reiteration that in using material goods we both construct and are then constructed by our social worlds. “Social actors are, at once, producers of culture and constrained by habitus” (Reed-Danahay 2006: 60). This recursive strain of Bourdieu’s theory is often shadowed by the enormity of the social forms, such as class and gender, he sees consumption situated within. Although Bourdieu clearly points out how the habitus “is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure” his attempts to break down and connect the social monoliths of class, gender and education is misunderstood. By focusing on praxis and the extent to which our negotiations of the social world are embodied, as well as recursive we see how far from fixed the social field is in Bourdieu’s theory: “value, itself socially constituted, is radically contingent on a very complex and constantly changing set of circumstances involving multiple social and institutional factors” (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993: 10). Objects are not consumed according to a preexisting social order but instead implicit in the very construction and reconstruction of this social order. Therefore, we do not reflect the world around us in our consumption practices but actively produce it.

Bourdieu’s ability to sketch the interrelations between the consumption of symbolic goods and the operation of a wider economic market is his defining contribution. Using Bourdieu we can understand how a collectible’s sacredness is formed in intimate connection with the market through which it circulates.

Bourdieu does not divorce the material from the social and economic but sketches their interplay. He underscores its centrality to all facets of social life. Rather than reducing a person's social world to nothing more than a result of their class position, Bourdieu explains how what we think of as the minutiae of social forms: cultural goods, gestures, and rituals, play an enormous role in the reproduction of social, cultural and economic forms. The value of an object is *socially produced*, contested, political and material.

Furthermore, Bourdieu explicitly grounds his theories in praxis, pointing out how people are influenced by culture and society but only through their experience and understanding of it. Bourdieu accords the material world a primacy in his attention to the situated nature of our sociality: "for Bourdieu who had a more materialist approach...the point of view was not something to be understood through symbolic analysis but through an analysis of the economic and social fields and the positioning of various social agents within these" (Reed-Danahay 2006: 13). The social exists and *is something done* in the interactions between people and their surroundings, both material and symbolic.

Not only is Bourdieu's theory of cultural consumption a fluid and negotiated approach to sociality, Bourdieu's struggles to defend his theory against charges of determinism are instructive to the critiques raised by the vessel debate. Far from reducing the material to nothing other than symbolic pieces in a wider struggle, Bourdieu in fact sketches how the material is implicit in the very constructions of such symbolic meanings. He considers the social as the outcome of a variable field of social, economic, cultural *and* material forces. As such this

project has argued in favour of a re-visitation of Bourdieu and has categorically rejected the classification of his theories as reductionist and symbolically preoccupied.

Although this project was situated within the worlds of toy collecting the valuable contributions it makes to the debates on the relation between the material and the symbolic are relevant to any number of studies about our interaction with material goods. Its consideration of the hold collectibles come to have on collectors, and specifically my development of the idea of the extended artefact and presence, could be applied to studies of branding, the consumption of family heirlooms or productively contrasted with the consumption of everyday commodities. The complications I encountered in trying to locate the collectible as a commodity, points to a need for further study into the commodity character of collectibles, in contrast with those of everyday commodities. My project contradicted theories that define cherished commodities as those placed outside of and completely separated from economic exchange, arguing instead that objects are enhanced in their very circulation in these systems of exchange. In examining collecting practices and markets it became immediately evident that a central influence on collectors' attachments to their collectibles was their economic value. Collectibles were mobilized for financial gain. Furthermore it was on the basis of this financial gain that collectors were able to assert their expertise, and network within the wider community. A study contrasting everyday commodities with cherished commodities could question the assumption that in commodification commodities are always reduced to their economic value alone,

and look instead at how commodification is the result of a play of cultural, social and economic value (see Foster 2008 for recent inroads on this topic). This comparison between everyday and cherished commodities could explore the multiple forms of commodities and phases of commodification by examining the role of advertising, and the market in reactivating the aura of the object.

### **Locating the Collectible**

The extent of the merger between collectibles and the network of values, hierarchies, personalities and markets in which they are embedded, made it exceedingly difficult to locate the collectible. This merger, or what Douglas refers to as “the question of where objects start and where they bleed into their context,” is testament to the object’s imbrications within social, cultural and economic worlds (in Riggins 1994: 20). My difficulties in locating the object are instructive for any study of consumption, whether of a collectible, a pair of shoes or a piece of jewelry. In establishing the value collectibles come to hold for collectors I look not at the collectible alone, as object centered analysis would encourage, but at collecting practice and how collectors employed material goods in the symbolic constructions of their worlds. In her prologue to *Bodies that Matter* Judith Butler comes to the same conclusion:

I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are.’ I kept losing track of the subject, I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably I began to consider that

perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand (Butler 1993: ix).

Butler's productive approach to the difficulties she encountered reinforce my theoretical choice to understand the value the collectible holds for a collection as something not inherent in the object itself but instead a function of how collectors mobilized collectibles in particular ways. Butler's observation reinforces the value of understanding an artefact as extensive with its social location, and as an unbound entity despite its physical integrity. It also underscores the importance of conceiving the value of the collectible as a facet of the presence attributed it by collectors, or of their particular negotiated perceptions of its enchanted character.

The collectible is a particular form of consumer commodity and collecting a particular form of consumption. In keeping with Foucault I see collecting as a continually evolving practice reflective of the historical paradigm in which it is located. There are threads of continuity from the curiosities cabinets of the past but the ordering and conventions of collecting today, not to mention what is being collected and by whom, have drastically changed. My discussions of eBay, and the new modes of collecting fostered by the Internet was an attempt to locate collecting, however much it appears to dwell on the past, in a contemporary context. As a practice of consumption collecting has significant parallels with the contemporary consumption of clothing but it also has many unique characteristics. Collecting is a particular form of consumption on account of its sustained character and the means by which value is negotiated in collecting communities on the basis of exceedingly complex practices of repetition and ordering. Furthermore, although collecting and nostalgia are increasingly

commodified, and the collecting market well established some aspects of collecting prove remarkably resistant to the encroachment of consumer capitalism. Collectors still barter, exchanging one collectible for another directly, and there is a decided suspicion of profit imperatives in collecting circles. Being too engaged with collecting for investment is seen as a compromise of one's commitment.

Outlining the particularities of collecting as consumer practice would require further study engaging and comparing between a wide range of consumer practices and commodities. Given further time I would undertake a study of virtual collecting, examining practices and communities online. This could include an exploration of the bookmarking and cataloguing of favourite websites, as well as studying online annotation platforms such as Delicious and Digg and the people who use them. Aside from exploring how collecting is modified in relation to virtual objects, it could provide great insight into new forms of community exchange fostered by the Internet. Studying the collection of what we would not traditionally define as 'objects' would be a provocative introduction to the impact of the advanced Internet age on the potential future forms of collecting.

### **Animating Perceptions**

Rather than believing that our studies enable us to arrive at certain truths with regard to the nature of material forms, we have a more limited aspiration: to make *sense* of them in a particular way, something which always has to be argued for and can be argued against (Tilley 2006: 11)

Our engagements and relations to material goods are variable, and contextual as a long history of material culture studies in Anthropology, such as Marilyn

Strathern's (1988) study of material culture in Melanesia have underscored. The relation between the collector and their collectibles is forged out of a wider context involving financial limitation, and issues of access. Collectors, build different kinds of collections with diverse foci. I observed reference collections, bibliographic collections, general collections, brand collections, 'what I like' collections, and library collections. Some collectors spoke exclusively of their emotional connections and attachments to their collectibles, whereas others spoke of the pleasures of cataloguing and control.

The variability of our way of mobilizing material goods is of relevance when exploring any community of consumption and highlights the importance of considering the context of each moment of consumption. This has methodological reverberations and suggests that practices of consumption such as collecting are best examined through a holistic method such as ethnography, which is able to situate the object in relation to the communities, markets, and hierarchies of value that make it meaningful. If we were to look at the object alone, solitary and static we would learn nothing of it. Instead we should view the object in practice, in the process of being consumed, and widen the lens further to include moments of consumption beyond purchase. My study's ability to capture both what collectors said about their things and what they did with them and the contradictions that surfaced between these provided valuable insights.

My study of toy collectors sought to assess the diverse processes by which collectors become enchanted by their collectibles. It focused on collectors' "contextual notions" (Meskell 2006: 6) or perceptions of material goods and how

these perceptions often meant that collectors fetishized their collectibles. This imaginative practice was exceedingly variable and situational, the outcome of a wide range of factors from the collector's interpretation of the condition of the collectible and its cultural value to their position within the community. In examining the moments in which collectors animated their collectibles, running their trains in a darkened room, and imagining their toy's circulation from a child's nursery to a Victorian doll hospital, it became apparent that collectors consumed the collectible as an extended artefact resonant across multiple immaterial histories and memories. The very value of the collectible for collectors lay in the worlds and memories their collections evoked, and the stories, whether historical or personal they were able to tell and animate using their collectibles.

From my analysis of the nostalgic activities of collectors, their immersion of collectibles into detailed historical scenarios, and from their tendencies to fetishize and personify their collectible bears and dolls it emerged that animation is a collectors' way of making present, or making visible. Taussig offers how "sympathetic magic is necessary to the very process of knowing" (1993: xiii). "More than accumulation or even using things to understand the world, collecting is about "trying to render thought thing-like" (Brown 2003: 5). Animation is about imbuing a material good with immaterial value as if we believe we can "awaken the congealed life in petrified objects" (Taussig 1993: 1). Despite the mystification these fetish practices involved, I took them seriously as a reflection of how collectors experienced their worlds and became enchanted by their collectibles.

The imaginary practices of consumption apply to a wide variety of cases beyond that of collectibles. On a regular basis we employ the things around us whether collectibles, clothing or books in an imaginative way to think about who we are, and who we wish to be. The imaginative affordances of objects are in fact heightened in consumer culture, through advertising and brand development.

Again the form and variation of our attachments to the material world can be situated in a particular historical and economic context. My project, as it engaged directly with these processes, was a peeling back of the layers of imaginative practice to expose the social, cultural and economic negotiations underpinning its value. I was able to locate the collectible as a commodity, and to see that despite collectors' difficulties in squaring their passions with their financial motivations, the collectible's economic value was of great importance. I was able to explore how collectors engaged with their collectibles nostalgically and understand how far from mere musings, these nostalgic practices were used to make value judgments and to identify one's location in the present. I was also able to expose the complex set of social rules and negotiations governing the distinctions of authenticity and condition among a set of collectibles despite the impression, on first glance, that such distinctions were nothing more than a measure of the physical differences between such objects.

### **Final Thoughts**

I was afforded extraordinary access to the homes and lives, personal thoughts and communities of collectors. Despite the stigmas attached to collecting, collectors proved remarkably willing to speak with me, and to provide insight into their

passion for a particular group of toys. I hope I have been able to dispel some of the common representations of collectors to show instead the extent to which their attachment to material goods is one of wonder, and enchantment with the wider world, wherein the collectible as object is just the starting point to an engagement with history, politics, community and markets.

My ability to ‘make sense’ of these complex engagements was far from straightforward and involved working through a tangled knot of theorizations around material culture, consumer culture, collecting culture and a large volume of equally tangled empirical data. From what felt at times like complicated mash of social processes, meanings, and practices emerged a productive examination of the processes by which collectors become engaged with their material worlds.

As I burrowed more and more into the project, networking with collectors, choosing appropriate subjects and arranging interviews, coding interviews, looking for patterns and contradictions, and making sense of what was emerging, the parallels between my own activities and those of the collectors I was studying became irrefutable. When asked by the collectors if I collected anything I inevitably said no, but I could have said yes, indeed, I am collecting collectors: breaking them into groups by toy collectible, looking for the gaps in my sample, and occasionally changing my direction to follow emerging leads. This dissertation is my collection, an assembly of interrelated pieces, ultimately contributing to a harmonious whole. It is, and will always be an unfinished project, with questions of access, time and financial limit plaguing its completion. Although I felt that my personal unfamiliarity with the world of collecting

positioned me in a very traditional, and at times voyeuristic role as ethnographer I see now that I have much more in common with collectors than I had thought.

Just as the object is only the “starting point” for the collector, questioning the hold that collectibles come to have over collectors took me on an empirical and theoretical journey to the frontiers of the animate and inanimate; the complicated tensions and social maneuverings; and to the moment in which objects were christened collectibles. The idiosyncrasies, cases, contradictions and incarnations encountered on this traverse are testament to collecting as a varied and magical enchantment with the material world around us.

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## Appendix 1 – List of Collectors

- **Bill** – 16 December 2006 - Collector of Hornby Clockwork toy trains. An expert in his field, has assembled a detailed compendium of every Hornby train he has been able to access. Colleague of Bill and Derek
- **Roger** – 16 December 2006 – Collector of Hornby Clockwork Toy Trains. Colleague of Bill and Derek.
- **Derek** – 16 December 2006 - ‘The Controller,’ collector of Hornby Clockwork Trains, as well as bicycle paraphernalia. Colleague of Bill and Roger. Started very young as member of Model Train Society.
- **John** - 11 September 2007 -- Dealer-Collector of Hornby Clockwork Toy Trains. Has been employed as Auction lots valuator.
- **Vincent** – 15 December 2006 -- Collector of Hornby Clockwork Toy Trains.
- **Douglas** – 31 May 2007 -- “Market Man” and Hornby Clockwork Toy Train Collector
- **Helen** – 9 March 2007 -- Teddy Bear Dealer-Collector. Collects German Made Steiff Bears
- **Harold** – 26 May 2007 – Dinkie Car and Capston Van Collector.
- **George** – 28 March 2007 - Employee at Auction House, Teddy Bear Collector.
- **Charles** – 4 October 2007 - Dealer-Collector of Toy Cars, Buses and Trucks.
- **Dean** – 31 March 2007 -- Toy Soldier Collector
- **Linda** – 22 April 2007 – Doll Collector
- **Robert** – 8 March 2007, Collector of Bonzo, A dog character created by artist George Studdy in the 1920s.
- **Patel** – 24 May 2007 - Hornby Train Collector
- **Joe Richards** – 6 April 2007 - Longtime Collector of Toy Soldiers, Widely Renown in the Community
- **Julie** – 22 April 2007 - Doll Collector
- **Rachel** – 22 April 2007 – Doll Collector
- **Henry** – 30 May 2007 - Toy Soldier Collector
- **Nick** – 31 March 2007 - Toy Soldier Collector
- **Larry** – 15 December 2006 - Hornby Train Collector
- **Lewis** - 26 May 2007 - Prominent Dealer and Toy Soldier Collector
- **James** – 31 March 2007 - Toy Soldier and Figurine Collector, Works in Toy Soldier Industry
- **Paul** – 26 May 2007 – Star Wars Collector and Dealer, started business with son
- **Neil** – 26 May 2007 – Collector of Corgi Toy Motor Cars
- **Michael** – 4 October 2007 – Star Wars Collector
- **Max** – 4 October 2007 – Star Wars Collector
- **Edward** – 31 March 2007 – Toy Soldier Collector
- **Jeffrey** – 31 March 2007 - Toy Soldier Collector

- **Ronald** – 4 October 2007 – Collector of Toy Buses and Cars
- **Victoria** – 2 April 2007 – Curator of Toy/Childhood Collection at Museum
- **Barry** – 20 October 2007 – Dinkies Car Collector
- **Victor** – 20 October 2007 – Spot On Car Collector
- **Alastair** – 5 November 2007 – Star Wars/Memorabilia Collector

## **Appendix 2: Method**

This ethnography of toy collecting consisted of interviewing collectors, observing their interactions in collecting spaces, and studying numerous websites and publications specific to their communities. I accessed the collectors primarily through a snowball sample, using a key contact with a figure in the collecting community to elicit further interviews with other collectors. I approached collectors both online, by sending out a general appeal for volunteers on community sites, and offline, in approaching collectors directly at fairs and auctions. This sampling method proved highly successful although it did mean I tended to speak with those collectors more tightly integrated into collecting communities and those for whom dealing was a substantial part of their overall collecting activity. 33 interviews were conducted in total.

Interviews took place at fairs, in collectors' private homes and at cafes. Whenever possible I attempted to interview the collector in the presence of their collectible so they would be able to show me their collection and talk about their favourite collectibles. Observation took place at fairs and in collectors' homes but also at collecting shops, and auction viewings. There was a productive interplay between what collectors talked about and what they did. I paid particular attention to how collectors interacted with their collectibles and to the various social negotiations taking place in collecting spaces.

The interview schedule was developed throughout the entire interview process. Very soon after the initial interviews interesting themes surfaced which were then incorporated into the interview schedule. It was purposely kept open-ended and questions were adjusted according to their reception. The schedule was employed during the interview as a rough guide, and the interviews were largely directed by the collectors' indications of areas of importance.

Following my attendance at fairs, gatherings and auctions I took notes of my impressions and observations. These notes often fed back into the development of the interview schedule and helped underline some of the subtle politics and negotiations going on within collecting communities. They were also indispensable to working through the practices and activities of collecting.

The fieldwork began following ethics approval, and was conducted according to the requirements outlined in the ethics proposal. Although the research had potentially very little harm for the participants, all signed consent forms and were made fully aware their participation was at all times voluntary. There was some concern that despite my employment of pseudonyms in the final report some collectors would be identifiable within their tight-knit communities. Collectors were made aware of this possibility up front.

All of the interviews were transcribed. Analysis involved reviewing the transcripts, observational notes, catalogues and websites for themes that surfaced

and patterns that ran throughout the transcripts. Analysis was conducted not only on the basis of patterns but on contradictions, between what different collectors said and between what collectors said and what they did.