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A Shoe, a Broken Watch, and Marbles

How Objects Shape Our Memory and Our Future

Abstract

Desire objects – that is, personal items of the missing or killed found at the sites of mass atrocities – are often understood as the last tangible link to the absent person. In this article, I try to conceptualise what is happening in this human-object relationship and how this relationship is shaped when desire objects move through different social circuits. I demonstrate how the emotional energy charge changes with the objects' transition from one circuit to another, which consequently leads to the alteration of the perceived value of the desire objects. Using the biography and the ascribed agency of desire objects, I trace how human-object relations shape political action.

Introduction

Objects are all around us: we buy them, we build them, we sell them, we repair them, we break them, we give them away, we trade them, we replace them. We are surrounded by the material world. In fact, material culture co-constitutes our life. Things and objects have no value apart from the human transactions, attributions, and motivations that endow them with meaning. Hence, their meanings are always inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their trajectories. Things bear historical witness to the affective relationship of people with the material world as well as with ideas and feelings. Much of the research that relies on material culture sees objects as tangible markers of past experiences and, by association, as evidence and carriers of memory. Whether we understand them as “material witnesses”¹ or “surviving objects”,² scholars across disciplines agree that such objects constitute powerful narrative devices as they direct us on how to structure and plot a story.

In this article, however, I will discuss a very narrow category of objects found at the sites of mass atrocities, which I call “desire objects”. Personal items of the missing/killed found at the sites of mass atrocities, such as mass graves, concentration camps, places of torture, and sites of terrorist attacks, are often understood as the last tangible link with the absent person. They are desire objects – but not in the sense of commodities, when a desire to acquire objects stands against the ability to purchase them. Rather, they are such because those objects instigate emotional responses that reflect different sorts of desires regarding loved ones: a desire that they might come

- 1 Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9953.001.0001>; Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk, “Introduction: The Surviving Thing: Personal Objects in the Aftermath of Violence,” *Journal of Material Culture* 25, no. 4 (December 2020): 381–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183520954514>.
- 2 Paul Harvey Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007).

back from the dead; a desire that their memory may be prolonged in the face of their unjust death; a desire that some sense can be made of their loss; or a desire to come to peace with the violent passing of a family member. Desire objects represent the desires and hopes of people to whom the objects are significant. Those who establish human-object relationships screen into them all kinds of desires – a strong feeling of wanting something or wishing for something to happen. The logic of how and why the desire objects are kept privately or donated, then preserved individually or publicly, collected, displayed, left to decay or destroyed, or, in fact, transformed into political symbols, is often obscured or taken for granted. However, their transition from one social circuit to another and the ways in which they aggregate emotional energy and are ascribed value may result, I suggest, in various moral claims and political action. Political action as “action designed to attain a purpose by the use of political power or by activity in political channels”³ is used here mainly to demonstrate how different biographical trajectories of the desire objects affect a broad spectrum of political involvement.

I define desire objects through three conditions that help us distinguish them from other objects. First, they are present during a death that is not regarded as being part of a “natural” cycle of life. The events linked to desire objects *must* involve: a) a party responsible for intentionally killing or inflicting harm; b) a violent act; c) a deep feeling by the surviving party that an injustice has been committed. Desire objects refer only to personal items that belong to civilians or people who are perceived as “innocent” and did not die in combat as soldiers and fighters. Second, desire objects are scarce and their “survival” ignites an instant link between the killed and the act of killing. Third, desire objects provide a direct link to the “crime scene” where the atrocity is still part of a living memory, whereby those immediately affected are themselves direct carriers of the memory of an event. The objects represent both hope and despair, the ghostly leftovers of lives never fully lived since “things and objects can ‘speak’ to the beholder and may contain the spirit of the past”.⁴ They are silent, yet, under the right conditions, they maintain a promise of the resurrection of the dead. They are scarce and irreplaceable, and their survival makes them potent with powers far beyond their usual mundane function. How these bonds between people and objects are forged, and how this sudden significance of the desire objects is shaped beyond their importance for the close community and those who are directly affected by the atrocity, are the main foci of this paper.

This article is a work in progress and should be read as such. It proposes a conceptual model to show how and why desire objects, when moving from one social circuit to another, change their value and shape human-object relationships in some extraordinary ways. This is the story of a shoe, an ID, a photo, a marble, and many others personal items found after extreme forms of violence – and yet it is not about any particular object, but about desire objects as a category. I follow the trajectories of various desire objects in order to establish their shared patterns of movement, with those patterns pointing to the changing nature of human-object relations. This seems to be crucial as, with each movement, desire objects are allocated different meanings that may lead to a wide range of political actions. Hence, the model presented here does not account for any specific object but aims to sketch possible tra-

3 Merriam-Webster, “Political Action,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed 15 November 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/political%20action>.

4 Tanja Luckins, “Collecting Women’s Memories: The Australian War Memorial, the Next of Kin and Great War Soldiers’ Diaries and Letters as Objects of Memory in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Women’s History Review* 19, no. 1 (February 2010): 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020903444635>.

jectories that explain how it is that desire objects which start from a similar categorical venture point – sites of mass atrocities – end up, at times, producing a wide variety of political actions.

Human-Object Relations and Bereavement Objects

Finding an object that belonged to someone close is often accompanied with sentiments or different degrees of emotions. After their loved ones have passed, during the process of mourning, people get attached to different personal items, and personal items play a crucial yet often ambiguous role. The bereaved, religious or not, are often deeply attached to the material legacies of the deceased, and the memory of the deceased is indelibly tied to places, objects, images, and bodies.⁵ Attachment theory,⁶ which utilises examples from animal and human behaviour, shows the powerful bonds between humans and the disruption that arises when these bonds are jeopardised or destroyed. Objects play a role in grieving because they are embedded in the construction of identity and “trajectories between persons”.⁷ It has been well established that, during a grieving process, objects play a crucial role. Whether we understand them as “transitional objects”, objects that help us move from one stage of grief to another,⁸ or as “melancholy objects”, objects that signify absence,⁹ objects are central to understanding the experience and process of grief that transitions with and through objects. However, within the mourning process, objects also transition in terms of their status, value, and meaning,¹⁰ and they function as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence.¹¹

Finding objects belonging to those who have perished differs from possessing bereavement objects belonging to those whose passing is understood as an inevitable part of the “circle of life”. This distinction matters greatly, as these objects generate a different intensity of emotions and, even more importantly, the “regular” bereavement objects carry limited power when it comes to generating feelings and discourses beyond the realm of the close and loved ones. When personal items are recovered from locations where recent atrocities have taken place, objects relating to a sudden and unjust death bring an emotional potency that resonates with a much wider audience. The proximity of the atrocity, together with the explicit innate violence which is embedded as the main feature of the rescued objects, increase the relatability and the emotional impact the objects produce on the wider communities. A sudden and

5 Maurice Eisenbruch, “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Bereavement. II: Ethnic and Cultural Variations in the Development of Bereavement Practices,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 8, no. 4 (December 1984): 315–347. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00114661>; Therese Richardson, “Spousal Bereavement in Later Life: A Material Culture Perspective,” *Mortality* 19, no. 1 (January 2014): 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2013.867844>; Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Lorna Hockey, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*, Materializing Culture (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001).

6 John Bowlby, “The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds: I. Aetiology and Psychopathology in the Light of Attachment Theory,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 130, no. 3 (March 1977): 201–210. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.130.3.201>.

7 Aafke Komter, “Heirlooms, Nikes and Bribes: Towards a Sociology of Things,” *Sociology* 35, no. 1 (February 2001): 59.

8 D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2018[1958]). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429482410>.

9 Margaret Gibson, “Melancholy Objects,” *Mortality* 9, no. 4 (November 2004): 285–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270412331329812>.

10 Gibson, “Melancholy Objects.”

11 Hallam and Hockey, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*.

violent death is a specific case of loss that has unique characteristics and makes unique demands on survivors, as well as on their grief. This is because the survivors of a sudden death are more likely to experience what is characterised as abnormal or pathological grief and it is more likely that the grief will endure longer and be more difficult to resolve.¹² This grief is not easily resolved, not only because of the sudden nature of the death, but because it is intrinsically associated with violence and deep feelings of injustice. Survivors of a sudden and violent death experience have a strong need to understand why it happened and to make sense of their loss.¹³ Hence, the scarce objects that are in their possession, relating to the loved ones who have been violently killed, play a crucial role as they generate deep emotional power and attachments.

Therefore, desire objects affect people in the most profound ways. Any object that survives war, genocide, or forced migration is a powerful “material witness”,¹⁴ harbouring evidence of pre-conflict life, of violence, and of subsequent travels. Desire objects are relational: they help us to establish the meanings in the gap between realities and emotions, as a way to define who we are to ourselves and to others.¹⁵ Desire objects are emergent “sites of feeling” capable of triggering bodily reactions and emotional responses. Desire objects convey symbolic messages, referring to the nature and (actual or desired) status of the relationship between human beings. The power of the artefacts, in general, lies in the fact that their uniqueness, or their immediate associability with their owners, can generate meanings to oblige reciprocity through their symbolic value. Objects are “tie-signs”: signs of social bonds.¹⁶ Desire objects, in particular, are activated through bodies and minds, just as storytelling cannot be reanimated without places, events, and the imagination. As Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk,¹⁷ as well as others,¹⁸ note, personal items recovered from the sites of political violence, especially in the absence of a body, become potent embodiments of feeling and loci of emotional investment, of mourning, and of memory.

Therefore, objects relating to brutal and unjust deaths, even the most mundane objects such as a watch, a shoe, a wallet, or marbles, can rise in symbolic, emotional, and mnemonic value, often outweighing all other measures of value – particularly their initial economic value.¹⁹ The value of objects found after atrocities is closely connected to their generative power and the ways in which they acquire potency in order to transcend their original purpose. These objects develop biographies and careers of their own and are endowed with various qualities – sentimental, mnemonic, economic, evidentiary, and aesthetic – as they move between various contexts and are exposed to a host of meanings, ownership claims, and regimes of worth,²⁰ and to symbolic and ideological appropriations and interpretations. The forging of their

12 J. D. Fast, “After Columbine: How People Mourn Sudden Death,” *Social Work* 48, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 484–491. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/48.4.484>.

13 J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 5th ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2018).

14 Dziuban and Stańczyk, “Introduction,” 385; Schuppli, *Material Witness*.

15 James G. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700*, Material Cultures (London: Routledge, 2012).

16 Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

17 Dziuban and Stańczyk, “Introduction,” 383.

18 Sophie Baby and François-Xavier Nérard, “Les objets des disparus: Exhumations et usages des traces matérielles de la violence de masse,” *Les Cahiers Irice* 19, no. 2 (2017): 5. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lcsi.019.0005>; Layla Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss: Memory, Materiality and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War*, Critical Cultural Heritage Series (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011).

19 Gibson, “Melancholy Objects.”

20 Dziuban and Stańczyk, “Introduction.”

value is often reflected in the development of a collectors' market as we move further away from the time of the event.²¹ Hence, to understand the foregrounding of the trajectories of this specific category of objects – objects that are associated with a sudden, unjust, and brutal death – and against the different biographical configurations of the objects, we need to understand the multiple transformations in the ways in which they acquire meanings and values. Or, in other words, how and under what circumstances do a shoe, marbles, or an old watch, found in places where atrocities took place, give rise, or not, to political actions that are detached from their initial meaning?

Moving Circuits: Emotional Energy and Value

The main argument of this article is that the movement of the desired object – from one circuit to another – changes the emotional energy and the ascribed value of the object. Under particular circumstances, this may lead to ascribing agency to objects, which leads to various political actions. Emotional energy is the main driving force in social life.²² Randal Collins (2005) defines emotional energy as the amount of emotional power that flows through one's actions and does not refer to one specific emotion. Emotional energy refers here to a dynamic created by inter-human relations that mobilises and generates feelings, aggregated over time. According to Collins' model of Interaction Ritual Chains,²³ emotional energy is carried across situations by symbols that have been changed by emotional situations. The participants focus attention on the same thing, they are aware of each other's focus, and they become caught up in each other's emotions. Hence, emotional energy is the emotional charge that people take away with them from an interaction.

Though the notion of emotional energy speaks, in a narrow sense, about inter-human interaction, I suggest that it can also be applied to human-object relations to show how it shapes the value of the object, and consequently the potential political action, namely, action staged to advance certain political agendas. To that end, it is important to understand both the biographies of objects and how these gain agency. The biographic approach to objects²⁴ asserts that "objects have social lives".²⁵ At the heart of the notion of biography are questions about how ways, meanings, and values are accumulated and transformed between objects and people. Certain objects acquire very specific biographies, and consequently acquire values, as they move from place to place and from one social circuit to another. The agency of objects is under-

21 This is especially the case with objects from World War Two, particularly those connected to Germany.

22 Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

23 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

24 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.003>; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 169–178; Jody Joy, "Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives," *World Archaeology* 41, no. 4 (December 2009): 540–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438240903345530>; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, 64–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.004>; Sandra Dudley et al., eds., *The Thing about Museums: Objects and Experience, Representation and Contestation: Essays in Honour of Professor Susan M. Pearce* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1v2xskk>; Williams, *Memorial Museums*.

25 Carl Knappett, "Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Object," *Journal of Material Culture* 7, no. 1 (March 2002): 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183502007001307>.

stood as “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act”.²⁶ The agency of objects, their ability to affect, and their divergent biographies are not consistent in terms of their significance but, rather, they change while circulating in different value regimes. Consequently, there are different paths, diversions, and strategies (both individual and institutional) that make the creation of value a politically mediated process. As will be demonstrated later in this article, desire objects are attributed different types of value as they move through different social circuits – emotional, economic, mnemonic, evidentiary, aesthetic, or symbolic value. The value that the desire objects attract will change during their “life cycle” through their movement in different societal circuits. The more that the desire objects are exposed and circulated, the more likely it is that their value will grow, reflecting the demand for their multiplication.



comics by: Aya David Ramati, age 11

Biographies of Desire Objects and their Movement From one Social Circuit to Another — a Model

Consider a mass atrocity. Time passes by and, at the same location as the atrocity, a family is having a picnic. Suddenly someone finds a lovely, rusted watch on the ground. The watch belonged to a person who was executed there. Let us imagine that the watch is returned back to the home of the family of the deceased. For them, this is the most precious treasure. The watch gets a special place in the house – maybe it is placed on a wall, or kept in a drawer in secrecy, or elsewhere, because that is the only thing that actually remains from the person who was killed. However, for all sorts of reasons, the surviving family members may decide to donate this scarce object to a museum or other relevant institution. Sometimes the emotions attached to the object are unbearable and too difficult to handle, or there is a desire to utilise the objects as educational tools or to prolong the memory of the deceased and/or the event through which the loss was experienced. But once a desire object becomes displaced and is moved to another circuit – like a public display – we have a completely different setting, a different audience, a different emotional charge – all of which consequently results in the alteration of the object’s value. Yet the lifespan of desire objects, at times, does not come to an end with a museum display. Instead, the objects – often not as material, physical objects but as images – start to be circulated through popular culture, mass media, and educational projects, through which they become grounded and embedded as a particular set of meanings. Finally, some desire objects will gain the potential to translate human-object relationships into a set of moral claims and political actions, moving yet again to another domain. The emotional energy charge, the value of the desire objects, and the audience again alter, resulting in a variety of political actions with diverse moral claims. However, with the move-

²⁶ Laura M. Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 109–137.

ment from one circuit to another, the scope of the desire objects becomes narrower, and with each transition fewer and fewer desire objects will have the potential to become significant for a wider audience. Many of the objects will simply remain silent and bleak reminders of a past atrocity, but some will rise in value and will ignite moral claims and political action.

The Rediscovery – in Between Ordinary Life and the Afterlife

The rediscovery represents the moment at which the desire objects suddenly surface. Their discovery marks the invisible boundary between the ordinary life of any object – they were bought, made, given, exchanged, used – and the afterlife of the objects, in which they survive their owner’s lifespan and their mundane function becomes altered into new meanings, projections, and desires.

Desire objects appear from the depth of death pits, muddy forests, idyllic hills, murky rivers, abandoned prisons, schools, churches, factories, and shelters, from both unexpected and remarkably central places, carrying secrets of torture, agony, suffering, execution, and death. Most often, they vanish and sink together with their owners into an irreversible and definite decay and demise. But sometimes, just every so often, like precious hidden gems, they survive, they appear suddenly, they become rediscovered and kept. From there, their second life on earth begins with an uncertain trajectory: some will end up being well kept and preserved in dark and cold storage rooms where they will be used to establish victims’ identities; others, in a state of putridity, will be discarded as useless and destroyed. Yet, others still will be brought back to the family members of the deceased who will recognise them immediately, and cry tears of hope and despair.

In the aftermath of war and conflict, things are often rescued by survivors or the families of victims, inherited, retrieved by forensic experts, or looted from war graves. The importance of material culture is that it “allows for a documentation of crimes, including those that have been subject to covering over and erasure”.²⁷ Those objects that are discovered and become classified as items which belonged to persons who disappeared in an atrocity await a rocky and uncertain journey. Many objects that are found in isolation, and especially those that are exhumed with the remains of the deceased who remain unidentified, are in a state of limbo. In Rwanda,²⁸ just as in Bosnia and Herzegovina,²⁹ Kosovo,³⁰ and other places, forensics experts, activists, or simply neighbours search areas suspected of being the site of an atrocity as they seek corpses, body remains, bones, and any personal objects that could help bring about the identification of the victims. Apart from corporal remains, they carefully set aside any personal items and every scrap of clothing they recover in the hope that

27 Dziuban and Stańczyk, “Introduction,” 383.

28 Many forensic experts, such as forensic anthropologist Melissa Connor, worked in Rwanda on the identification process which relies on items that people carried with themselves.

29 In 2005, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) published a third *Book of Belongings* regarding missing persons from the Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and containing 930 photographs of clothing and personal objects found with the mortal remains of some 350 people. Until the development of DNA analysis, and its first mass implementation in Srebrenica, all identifications were based on a comparison of ante-mortem and post-mortem data and objects on the bodies. In the first few years, this was also the case for Srebrenica.

30 Cooperation between the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the ICRC in Kosovo in 2001 led to efforts to ascertain the fate of persons reported missing in connection with the ethnic violence and the conflict in Kosovo. The OSCE has published a *Book of Belongings* for Kosovo, containing 750 photos of clothing and personal effects that were found on some 200 bodies recovered during the year 2000.

some survivors are able to identify the remains of their loved ones. These are then packed, and stored and classified as evidence, and photographed in the hope of being recognised by the victims' families.

Yet, paradoxically, throughout the process of their discovery, when these bodies are unravelled, and the remnants of soft flesh, clothing, personal possessions, and bones are separated from each other, skeletal structures are fully disarticulated and the bones pooled into a vast collective. Often, this actually results in the loss of their identity,³¹ beyond DNA identification. This, an almost surgical attempt to preserve the remains, both the skeletal parts and the personal objects, is followed by the sterilising procedures that preserve human remains as a means of revealing their identities and potentially tracing their cause of death. Major³² convincingly points out that these procedures are also done in order to preserve the items as valid evidence in court, where the once-again tortured bodies, subsumed to bare bones, magnifies the emotional importance of the discovered objects. In the absence of a tangible body of flesh and bones (as opposed to only sporadic bones), the personal items discovered become, for the relatives, the major point of emotional encounter that possesses material agency.³³

Before, and if, they ever reach the relatives of the victims, the items become classified and deposited in dedicated facility units. A good example is the Podrinje Identification Project mortuary, founded in 1999 and built as a facility for the systematic examination and identification of recovered mortal remains. There, 3,500 body bags containing the remains of the victims of the Srebrenica massacre, together with numerous personal items, give a sense of the devastating magnitude of the atrocity.³⁴ The Podrinje Identification Project mortuary, located in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, provides a valuable insight into the standardised practices of the storage of such personal items.³⁵ For one, we see that these artefacts tend not to be displayed but are, instead, neatly stored in brown paper bags, and the thought of their presence alongside the human remains is enough to evoke strong emotional responses. Those storage units are generally not opened for the audience but, mostly, for the relatives who are invited to come and to try to identify the objects. Occasionally, the forensic anthropologists provide a tour of the mortuary to the participants of various summer schools, international volunteers, or those involved in peace-building projects.

Yet, those objects are still not on public display. Many, if not most of them, even after being discovered and collected from the scenes of atrocities, will stay reposing in the darkness of those cold storage units, dispersed either amongst dedicated mortuaries and forensic collection facilities, or in the court evidence rooms. And, though the importance of obtaining personal items is widely recognised when it comes to the grieving process of the victims' families and their friends, the future for most of them is gloomy. Due to various circumstances, the majority of the personal items

31 Laura Major, "Unearthing, Untangling and Re-Articulating Genocide Corpses in Rwanda: Déterrer, démêler et réarticuler les corps du génocide au Rwanda," *Critical African Studies* 7, no. 2 (4 May 2015): 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2015.1028206>.

32 Major, "Unearthing, Untangling and Re-Articulating."

33 Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach* (Berlin: Springer, 2008).

34 Admir Jugo, "Artefacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Symbols of Persons, Forensic Evidence or Public Relics?" *Les Cahiers Irice* 19, no. 2 (2017): 21. <https://doi.org/10.3917/lcsi.019.0021>.

35 Christopher Bobyn, "If Bones Could Talk: Reassembling the Remains of Srebrenica," *Balkanist*, 11 July 2016, <https://balkanist.net/if-bones-could-talk-srebrenica/>.

will not find their way into the hands and homes of the families of those who were killed. Even worse than that, a large amount of the personal items will be intentionally destroyed.³⁶

Desire Objects on the Private Circuit — ‘Did my Son Ever Exist?’

Some desire objects are sent back to the private homes of the people who were killed. Though there is no meaning inherent in things themselves but, rather, the meaning of things derives from human relationships,³⁷ the desire objects are qualitatively different from other objects as they possess the inseparable attribute of innate violence. Looking, touching, or smelling a desire object becomes instantly linked to an act of violence: there is a guilty part, someone committed an act of violence intentionally, hence the death itself is tightly connected to violence and injustice. For the grieving party, both the family members of the killed/missing and the wider community, those desire objects represent their hope for claiming some sort of justice, because those survived objects oblige those who survived to never forget the person they have lost and the events surrounding their death – and oblige them to learn from what happened.³⁸

The innate character of violence associated with desire objects produces a wide variety of emotions. Raw emotions of deep sadness and loss are usually accompanied with the discovery of desire objects. In fact, those emotions shape and engrave various desires into the surviving objects. When Huso Halilović, a Bosniak survivor, recognised the remains of his father Bajro in a mass grave in Kamenica, near Zvornik, he found Bajro’s watch and comb, which instantly became Huso’s most precious possessions: “When I see these items, I’m flooded with tears; I remember how his watch was always on his hand and he was combing his hair every morning. Those are the only mementos I have.”³⁹

Desire objects create their own sensory habitat, both physically, through constructing a material world with its own set of sensory properties, and culturally, through emphasising and valuing certain types of sense impressions over others.⁴⁰ Objects give a physicality to the memories. Containing the smell, touch, and emotions of the dead, they hold memories of the landscapes in which those killed were executed. They contain the smells of the mountains and forests, in particular the soil and flora, of suffocating mouldy prison cells or places where the executed were detained, of journeys that victims were forced to take before they were killed, and of other real and imaginary destinations on the victims’ last journeys to death. Watches, wallets, shoes, or glasses, they all possess a distinct texture and smell – whether a yellowing paper, smudged pencil, indentations on objects, dirt, rust, mud, or blood – they all capture the material of the absent and the imaginary potential to express desires around the sudden, violent, and unjust death. Regardless of whether we are

36 More than 1,000 artefacts, including forensic evidence and personal items found in 1996 and 1997 in mass graves with the remains of the victims of Srebrenica, were purposefully destroyed in 2005 and 2006 in The Hague by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). A quarter have yet to be identified.

37 Komter, “Heirlooms, Nikes and Bribes.”

38 Jugo, “Artefacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

39 Midhat Poturovic, “Srebrenica Victims’ Personal Items Help Keep Memories Alive,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 7 February 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/srebrenica-massacre-victims-personal-items-help-keep-memories-alive/30416483.html>.

40 Gosden and Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects.”

talking about World War Two, the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda or Bosnia and Herzegovina, or a terrorist attack such as 9/11, small items such as wallets, photographs, coins, postcards, diaries, and letters were, in many instances, the only material things left for bereaved relatives and, as such, became substitutes for the absent body.⁴¹

The importance of sensory stimuli in triggering emotions is apparent in the stories of survivors. For example, Djulka Jusupović carefully handles a tobacco box made out of cans of United Nations-delivered food, along with a piece of flint used to make fire during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴² She keeps the items in several plastic bags. They are still as dirty as they were when found on her husband, Himzo, when his body was excavated from a mass grave.⁴³ But for her, these objects carry an emotional burden too heavy to face. She rarely looks at the objects as, each time she takes them out, she instantly remembers the words too painful to process – the words forensic experts told her when they handed the objects to her: “Himzo, after being shot, may have been still alive when buried.”⁴⁴ In the same way that the narratives of their deaths have become part of the story of their lives, the acquired attributes of desired objects – soil, rust, dirt, blood stains, smells they carry – as well as their changed physicality – missing parts, indentations, scratches – become a significant part of their post-mortem-reimagined identity.

The massive importance of desire objects is clearly seen in their absence. Take, for example, Munira Subašić, but also many others who were in her position. It was only in 2013 that Subašić could finally bury the remains of her son Nermin, one of 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys who were killed in 1995 when Bosnian Serb forces captured the United Nations-protected enclave of Srebrenica. The remains were two bone fragments found in grave sites twenty-five kilometres apart. Until then, Subašić had lived an ongoing nightmare for more than twenty years:

[a]ll signs of Munira Subasic’s 20 years of child-rearing have disappeared. There are no old photographs of her missing son, Nermin; no letters, no furniture, no old clothes, no remains. Her years as a mother could have been a dream. In fact, she can’t prove her son ever existed.⁴⁵

The totality of the destruction often causes this unbearable feeling of inability to distinguish what is reality and what is imagination. Objects may be absent yet present all at the same time in a state akin to ambiguous loss, an unresolved state of grief felt by individuals towards a loved one who has disappeared and whose fate remains uncertain.⁴⁶ Desire objects create this fragile link between sanity and insanity, between the real and the imagined, between life and death. Ahmed Hrustanović, in his struggle to keep alive the memory of his dead father, reflects on this fragility of being “in-between”: “[s]ometimes a man, in these fears and emotions, asks himself, ‘Did I really have a father?’ But then, when I see a letter, when I see a photo, I feel relieved.”⁴⁷

41 Luckins, “Collecting Women’s Memories.”

42 After three years of the Serbian siege, the population ran out of lighters or matches and improvised, just as cavemen did. “Someone would make fire with this in his garden in the morning, then everybody would come with a piece of wood to light it and take it home to make a fire”, Jusupović said, describing life in a town that was on the brink of starvation before the bloodletting began.

43 Aida Cerkez, “Srebrenica Women Tell Tale of Loss through Objects of Memory,” AP News, 9 July 2015, <https://apnews.com/article/f46c3715e175403a964bf1147fb9daa>.

44 Cerkez, “Srebrenica Women Tell Tale of Loss through Objects of Memory.”

45 Kristin Deasy and Dzenana Halimovic, “Srebrenica Survivors Feel Pain after Evidence Destroyed,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 September 2009, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1814205.html>.

46 Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

47 Deasy and Halimovic, “Srebrenica Survivors Feel Pain after Evidence Destroyed.”

Donating Desire Objects — a New Life on the Horizon

Some desire objects, after peripeteia and various unforeseen trajectories, do end up in the hands of the grieving relatives. These objects are much needed and desired, but they simultaneously produce diagonally opposite feelings. Scattered newspaper articles and blogs contain testimonials of the family members of the deceased and report two ways in which the families of the killed/missing form relationships with the desire objects.⁴⁸ On the one hand, having the objects brings about immense happiness. To be able to see, touch, and smell probably the last thing that had a direct connection to the deceased automatically brings back memories and an assurance that they really existed. Often, the eraser of the physical evidence of a life is so profound that those who survived wonder if they had really existed. Having tangible proof that they were not just a figment of the imagination brings back a certain level of security and continuation. Being able to situate and focus their memories on the surviving objects that have an ability to instigate memories and connect the dispersed pieces of a past life into a relatively coherent life narrative is of the utmost importance for the meaning-making processes that take place after atrocities. On the other hand, palpable evidence also buries the hope that, in some miraculous way, those who perished will suddenly reappear and be truly alive, and not just alive in dreams and nightmares. The return of the desire object resembles the end of the frantic search for signs of life, for hopes that none of this really happened but, instead, that the very presence of the objects univocally says that those who suddenly vanished are gone forever.

Therefore, for those who spent days, months, and years in search of those who disappeared without a trace, the encounter with the desire objects produces an intense emotional impact. All their sleepless nights and tears, their pre-atrocity memories – always selectively shaped to create a vision of a happy life – together with their hopes and desires for the future, they all come together, succinct and intense, when faced with the desire object. To the uninformed observer, a broken watch, a muddy shoe, a torn t-shirt, or dusty marbles might seem like just any other used or disposable object when, in fact, it could not be further from the truth. Desire objects concentrate and draw upon an astonishing amount of emotional energy that, as we will see, has the potential to alter realities.

Testimonials show that, once reunited, the family members of the deceased will keep the objects in the most tender and caring manner, placing them in cupboards or hanging them on the walls to display them, or hiding them in drawers, cabinets, or another private place, far from the eyes of others. Desire objects almost instantly become sacred possessions for the relatives of the deceased. They are the link between the dead and the living. But if that is the case, how and why do the families of survivors or victims decide to part from these objects? What is the rationale for such a decision? What are the visions of the future they inscribe onto desire objects and what do they hope to achieve?

48 Cerkez, "Srebrenica Women Tell Tale of Loss through Objects of Memory"; Deasy and Halimovic, "Srebrenica Survivors Feel Pain after Evidence Destroyed"; Lamija Grebo, "Cipele 'Mrtvare': otisak vremena i svjedočenje o Srebrenici," *Detektor*, 22 June 2021, <https://detektor.ba/2021/06/22/cipele-mrtvare-otisak-vremena-i-svjedočenje-o-srebrenici/>; Jugo, "Artefacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina"; Medison Horne, "9/11 Lost and Found: The Items Left Behind," *The National 9/11 Memorial & Museum*, 10 September 2018, <https://www.history.com/amp/news/9-11-artifacts-ground-zero-photos>; Poturovic, "Srebrenica Victims' Personal Items Help Keep Memories Alive"; Vesna Besic and Talka Ozturk, "Srebrenica Genocide Victims' Belongings to Be Shown as Lesson," *Anadolu Agency*, 8 February 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/srebrenica-genocide-victims-belongings-to-be-shown-as-lesson/1728124>.

Desire objects, once displaced from the private realm, begin to act as witnesses or testimonials, meaning that they replace the absence of the dead with the presence of the object. Ahmed Hrustanović, a Bosnian genocide survivor, in his struggles to keep alive the memory of his dead father, painfully reckons: “I decided to donate these letters and some of the photos to the museum. I have already given some originals and I will give some copies [of others].”⁴⁹ Similarly, Hajra Ćatić never found her younger son, who was aged only twenty when he was killed. More than two decades since his death, she is still searching for him. “I have his wallet, I have his vehicle registration certificate. In his wallet was an ID, meaning a card from my son that I couldn’t find. Well, I only have those things, I have nothing more. I’ll donate everything to the museum. It is of great importance that everything is collected in one place, that means a lot.”⁵⁰ Amra Begić Fazlić, who lost her father Resid during the genocide, said that they did not know how to protect her father’s belongings. “I donated my father’s last letter, wristwatch, and glasses that he sent us via Red Cross vehicles.”⁵¹

The objects become agents of authenticity – a valid authority and a reliable “witness” to what took place in the given atrocity – which makes them extremely emotionally powerful.⁵² However, while the emotional charge is heightened for those who are directly connected to the desire objects, in line with the theoretical model of Randal Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chains,⁵³ once the desire objects are displaced to public displays, their emotional potential significantly decreases, and they need to be supplemented with other means to increase their emotional input for a wider audience.

Public Display and the Circulation of Knowledge

Indeed, once the desire objects from dark storage chambers and private homes go on public display, such as in museum collections or artistic exhibitions, they need to be re-narrated. The desire objects reach those public spaces after already having acquired their initial value of authenticity – as objects that are embedded in an innate feature of violence, death, and destruction, potent with emotional energy and perceived through particular biographies. Through those features, desire objects gain their social value which goes beyond the singular significance they possess for the family of the deceased, becoming artefacts of worth for a wider community. This is because, once they become displaced and re-placed as artefacts of public importance, their perceived value alters, from an emotional and bereavement value for those who see in the desire object a direct link to their missing ones, to objects that transcend those immediate and private linkages and are compelling enough to relate to wider audiences. This transformation comes about as a result of what is perceived as their biggest virtue both for the wider audience and the expert community – because they are engraved with violence, they carry the virtue of authenticity, which is highly valued and appreciated. Authenticity, broadly understood as “reliable, accurate representation”,⁵⁴ is a vastly important feature as an evidentiary authority to the

49 Poturovic, “Srebrenica Victims’ Personal Items Help Keep Memories Alive.”

50 Deasy and Halimovic, “Srebrenica Survivors Feel Pain after Evidence Destroyed.”

51 Basic and Ozturk, “Srebrenica Genocide Victims’ Belongings to Be Shown as Lesson.”

52 Jugo, “Artefacts and Personal Effects from Mass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

53 Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

54 Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *Inquiry and the Craft of Argument*, 14 March 2017, <https://rampages.us/newmusicmachine/2017/03/14/35/>; Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 20 February 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/authenticity/>.

given event. Hence, the desire objects that carry traces of places, actions, and the temporal dimensions of violence, immediately become associated and tightly linked with the notion of “authenticity”.

Once those glass marbles, muddy shoes, bloody garments, broken watches, rusty necklaces, mouldy letters, or any other desire object, (re)enter public spaces, their authenticity becomes recognised as an authority and, hence, this has value for the broader public. As they carry the value of authenticity, desire objects become singled out as artefacts that transcend their simple materiality. Authenticity embedded in the desire objects acts as the nexus between the spatial and temporal dimensions and provides a rare window into being simultaneously both “here” and “there”, “now” and “then”.

However, simultaneously with the growing value of the desire objects, they also change their initial emotional energy potential. Once removed and displaced from the private realm – cabinets, drawers, walls – the desire objects enter the sterile spaces of museums and galleries. There, while being presented for their “authenticity value”, they lose their contextual surrounding. Hence, the transition from private to public requires additional manipulation to bring to the fore their narrative potential. This is because, if left alone, without further contextual tools, they are in danger of fading away and becoming ossified artefacts that are no more than another dead thing.⁵⁵

Memorial museums and, in particular, museums that focus on the Holocaust, genocides and human rights, create spaces that aspire to provoke social change and ideological messaging and to empower human rights. Such museums rely on desire objects. Therefore, their placement is carefully calculated to instigate a very particular reaction from visitors. As the goal of desire objects is to create an emotional reaction that would ideally lead to the production of knowledge and a discursive reflection aligned with the norms and values of human rights, desire objects need to be re-contextualised and their value amplified. This is done because the manner of presentation and interpretation of the objects is meant to have a significant impact on the visitor, otherwise the desire objects will stay still and emotionless, unable to provoke a desired emotional input. Their re-imagination reflects and extends to how the visitors engage physically, mentally, and emotionally with the items on display, how the visitors sense the venue and the location itself, and how the interpretative tools and systems are used.⁵⁶

Museums, and particularly those ones associated with places of death, violence, and massive human rights abuses, differ from traditional history museums in several key ways, but most notably in their dual mission to impose a moral framework for, and contextual explanations of, a violent event. Therefore, the techniques used to amplify the discursive message are vast and include the use of strong imagery and graphic material, the extensive use of photo documentation, video and audio projections, recorded or written personal stories, artefacts and the (re)-creation of authentic spaces, or other technological or interpretive solutions and multimedia. Museums spend hours of staff time and large amounts of money designing special events that will

⁵⁵ It is important to stress, however, that in many places, such as Rwanda and Cambodia, personal items are exhibited without narration. They are left to speak for themselves, yet they are not positioned as the main feature of the exhibition.

⁵⁶ Kirsten M. Bedigan, “Developing Emotions: Perceptions of Emotional Responses in Museum Visitors,” *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 16, no. 5 (30 March 2016), 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.204969>.

appeal to the visitor's need to have "something going on",⁵⁷ in a struggle to combine both education and entertainment. Often a variety of experts are employed to create the "ultimate" experience, including historians, anthropologists, sociologists, curators, artists, architects, creatives, and marketing advisors, to best relate the visitor experience and evoke strong visitor responses. As visitors to museums are a demanding audience, and as they ask for constant stimulation (not just cognitive input), the fear of them remaining as passive observers pushes the creators of museum and artistic exhibitions to employ a wide variety of technological, educational, performative, theatrical, and other tools (and tricks) to propel emotional labour and harness emotional energy that can be translated into discursive and normative change.⁵⁸

To reach that goal, everything has to be planned to the tiniest detail. There is careful consideration of where the desire objects will be placed, how thick or thin the glass cover should be, and what the font size and style of the text should be when narrating the objects' existence. Even the choices of colours, the lighting, how motion and stillness are contrasted, what parts of the desire objects should be exposed and/or obscured, where each object is placed, have to be tailored and managed. The purpose of these is to enhance the "communication" between the artefacts and the ultimate flow between different spatial sections, to connect the divided sections in the staged environment, and to best create strong emotional engagement. Hence, everything has to be calculated because it should simultaneously attract visitors and give them a worthy, emotional experience, potent of a transformative effect. The child's glass marbles, the muddy shoe, the stained garment – most often none of these can stand alone, because, contrary to what is often claimed, none of them tells a story solely by virtue of their existence.

Therefore, each desire object, once displayed, needs additional elements to provoke an emotional response. The objects, if left alone, lose their narrative force, and they must therefore be accompanied by text that narrates their story: what the object is in the display, to whom it belonged and how that person died, where it was found, who donated it ... Cognitively connecting the visual with the story has greater potential to create an emotional response. Furthermore, adding to it photos of the place in which the object was found, such as a factory, a forest, a field, or a mass grave, links and testifies to the authenticity of the object. If available, also putting a photo of a person – ideally wearing the garment or the shoes – or a child playing with the marbles, brings to the fore a complete narrative sequence.

Emotions play a key role in the encounter between visitors⁵⁹ and desire objects. Because desire objects are embedded in the act of violence, they have a tendency to unsettle visitors, triggering shock and anger, but also wonder and excitement. Most places of death, disaster, and atrocity negotiate painful pasts, ethically problematic situations, politically oriented discourses on memory and heritage,⁶⁰ and strong emotional and affective reactions such as pain, fear, empathy, and even catharsis.

Once the link to the immediate knowledge and lived experience of the object is broken, it is necessary to "add and edit" the story behind the object-person relationship in order to enhance the emotional energy in the encounter between the desire

57 Thomas A. Woods, "Getting beyond the Criticism of History Museums: A Model for Interpretation," *The Public Historian* 12, no. 3 (1 July 1990): 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378200>.

58 Bedigan, "Developing Emotions."

59 Visitors' motivation to go to museums varies significantly: from educational or heritage purposes to entertainment and emotional experiences. This, however, will not be discussed here due to a lack of space.

60 Nataliia Godis and Jan Henrik Nilsson, "Memory Tourism in a Contested Landscape: Exploring Identity Discourses in Lviv, Ukraine," *Current Issues in Tourism* 21, no. 15 (13 October 2018): 1690–1709. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1216529>.

object and strangers. Strangers, when encountering the desire object in displays, often have in mind only a very blurred context of the atrocity to which the desire object belongs. They also lack the intimate knowledge of the life of the deceased – and those gaps must be further narrated in order to trigger emotional energy. Once the desire objects become displaced from the victims' home, they linger in a void that has to be re-contextualised with additional tools, such as the positioning of the object in the space, photos of the killed, precise lighting, and audio, video, or textual testimonials. The effectiveness of the desire object to induce an emotional charge to the visitors depends on the capacity of the simulacrum to create an “authentic replica”, not necessarily of the event per se, but of the absence and void that followed the event. In other words, visitors are invited into a space which has been designed to elicit an emotional response from the viewer.⁶¹

The more emotional energy is created, the higher that the value of the desire object will be, as more people will acquire an emotional bond with the object. What matters is the cumulative process of the emotional energy which includes the hundreds and thousands of people who face the object. Here, the value of the object is directly connected with the plurality and synchronisation of emotional energy. Hence, what we can see is that, while both the emotional energy and the value of the object are at their peak in the private sphere, once they are moved to a public sphere the singular emotional energy drops but the collective emotional energy increases. Consequently, the value follows the growth of collective emotional energy which keeps adding to the value.

Yet, the emotional charge experienced by the visitors does not come as a *tabula rasa*. While the desire objects – such as broken glasses, bent watches, muddy shoes, blood-stained garments, worn out wallets, or torn IDs – may have similar (yet unique) biographical trajectories, their agency may differ significantly. To grasp this difference in their agency, we need now to focus our attention on the distinct existing pre-knowledge of each of the objects within their own category. While desire objects and their meanings originate in a specific context and are linked to a specific atrocity, the model I propose here suggests that – regardless of the given atrocity in which the desire object appears – there are overlapping trajectories that point to the significance of the circulated knowledge around the object itself, which is crucial for objects to “elevate” to the status of a widely recognisable symbol. To clarify this point, I will briefly use an example of the shoe of a victim.

‘A Victim’s Shoe’ – Ascribing Agency to a Desire Object

The biographies and agency of desire objects operate on both spatial and temporal axes. Yet, while the biographies of desire objects mark the linear movement of a specific object from one circuit to another, the agency of desire objects is determined by the frequency of their circulation. In other words, a watch, discovered in a forest where people were executed, may go from a storage facility to a courtroom, then to the home of the deceased, and possibly to a museum or other public space to be publicly displayed. There is a certain linearity to this movement – often not predictable, but still traceable. The journey a desire object makes, from its inscription to its final destination, is distinctive and unique to each object’s biography. Agency, on the

⁶¹ Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203020920>.

other hand, works differently as it is not linked to one particular object, but to a bigger category of objects: it is no longer about the trajectory of one particular shoe, but about the entire category of victims' shoes found in the places where the atrocity took place. From the onset, the desire objects possess agency because of their instant impact on individuals. However, for this agency to become significant, the given object has to become culturally, politically, and socially encoded as "meaningful" beyond the singularity of the object's biography. If that is the case, how do certain categories of objects become "meaningful"? Why do some objects become culturally, politically, and socially resonant while many others may be impactful but yet are short-lived, isolated islands whose emotional energy is likely to evaporate?

As mentioned previously, agency is directly linked to the repetition and circulation of both the object itself and its images and replicas. This process happens over time, and it is not a linear process but operates in a circular, wave-like manner. It does not follow the chain pattern of moving from one destination to another in a direct way. Though the physical object itself, found in the place where an atrocity has taken place, may also travel from one exhibition to another, one museum to another, one city to another, one country to another, its physical travel is fairly limited. However, the circulation of the visual and narrated images, which takes place simultaneously, is more profound. It points to the ways in which memories travel both spatially and temporally. This is how an object manages to transcend its bare materiality to become encoded with particular meanings.

The documentaries that replicate the images of the object, the movies, photos, or novels that narrate the emotional engagement with the object, the history textbooks, newspaper articles, academic publications, museum and exhibition catalogues and flyers, the oral testimonials – they all pave the way for the cultural, political, and social encoding of the desire objects. The more the image of the object is circulated and charged with a unified connotation, the more significant it becomes. Or, to put it bluntly: one victim's shoe is just an isolated island, even a pile of shoes acts as just an archipelago, but once the images of victims' shoes become replicated and circulated via different media and educational projects, only then does their meaning become culturally, politically, and socially fixated and accepted (to some extent) globally. A single victim's shoe is nothing more than an individual story of an unjust lost life in an atrocity; a pile of shoes is the testimony of mass-scale life destruction during the course of a particular atrocity. It is not only their specific texture, their smell, their histories, but also the images of the victims' shoes that become widely distributed and which elevate the shoe to a level of abstraction resembling a general sense of loss, death, and destruction.

We see, for example, how the enormous piles of shoes, after the liberation of concentration camps, had a profound impact, in terms of the scale of the horror, when it comes to what transpired during the Holocaust. An eyewitness report of Majdanek after its liberation, by one of the thirty-four Western correspondents brought to the camp through the efforts of the Polish Committee of National Liberation, describes this storehouse: "[i]t was full of shoes. A sea of shoes. I walked across them unsteadily. They were piled, like pieces of coal in a bin, halfway up the walls ..."^{62, 63} The empty shoes of the victims of the Holocaust, as seen at the extermination camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, bear silent witness to the systematic attempt by the

62 Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 55.

63 Richard Lauterbach, "Murder, INC.," *Time*, 11 September 1944.

Germans and their collaborators to exterminate the Jews of Europe, as well as other groups the Nazis deemed threatening or inferior.⁶⁴

Once the testimonials started to surface, the horrific trajectories of the shoes became known. Their biographies, the distinct ways in which they were collected, categorised, and distributed, show the dark side of human beings' capacity for destruction, when shoes become the thin line between life and survival, between death and disappearance. Similar stories about the piles of shoes started to appear. The chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto from 1943 provides detailed testimonials on the shoe economy.⁶⁵ A number of survivors, such as Abraham Bomba and Abraham Sutzkever, wrote about the arrival of the shoes in the ghetto following the disappearance of the people who wore them.^{66, 67} Zinovii Tolkatchev, a Belarusian-born artist, created, during an intense thirty-five days, approximately thirty works depicting the horrors he saw and learned about at the Majdanek camp – the first account of the Nazi atrocities. In these works, shoes immediately became recognisable as visual symbols depicting the Holocaust.⁶⁸ His “Preparations for the Massacre”, part of his Auschwitz series of 1945, stresses their fate: camp uniforms are placed beside the pile of shoes. The painting depicts similar scenes, such as a pile of human skulls or heaps of shoes, of which some 800,000 pairs were found in the camp.⁶⁹ In his *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi describes it concisely: “[d]eath begins with the shoes: for most of us, they show themselves to be instruments of torture”.⁷⁰ Shoes are the actual object that made human life disposable. The Nazis regarded the slave not as “a capital investment but as a commodity to be discarded and easily replaced”.⁷¹ Shoes became a synonym for the systematic plunder that accompanied systematic slaughter.⁷²

The level of shock amongst the public regarding what transpired in the ghettos and concentration camps became clear as more evidence was brought to light. The works had wide audiences, and they paved the way for numerous artists to further elaborate on this topic. Marc Klionsky's 1962 “Pile of Shoes”, for example, shows the desolation of shoes set before a barbed-wire fence, alluding to the fate of the imprisoned. From 1985 to 1989, an Austrian survivor, Elsa Pollak, made her famous work, a ceramic sculpture of a pile of old shoes from men, women, and children, entitled “All That Remained”, echoing the already globally well-known images of the piles of shoes, at that time displayed in a number of Holocaust museums. A decade later, in 1998, the documentary “The Last Days”, directed by James Moll and produced by June Beallor, Kenneth Lipper, and Steven Spielberg, told the stories of five Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. It shows piles of abandoned, empty shoes and signals to the viewer the enormity of the loss by metonymically materialising what had been rendered immaterial.⁷³

64 Ellen Carol Jones, “Empty Shoes,” in *Footnotes: On Shoes*, eds. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 197.

65 Jones, “Empty Shoes,” 204.

66 Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 568.

67 Abraham Sutzkever, untitled poem.

68 Mirijam Rajner, “From the Shtetl to the Flowers of Auschwitz and Back: The Creation, Reception and Destiny of Zinovii Tolkatchev's Art,” in *Images of Rupture between East and West: The Perception of Auschwitz and Hiroshima in Eastern European Arts and Media*, eds. Urs Heftrich et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 155–185.

69 Rajner, “From the Shtetl.”

70 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2013[1958]), 34.

71 Michael Berenbaum and Arnold Kramer, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 108.

72 Jones, “Empty Shoes.”

73 Jones, “Empty Shoes.”

These are just scattered examples of the generative process through which “a victim’s shoe” became a recognisable trope of death, suffering, and destruction. The process coincides with the global reception of the Holocaust on a cosmopolitan scale,⁷⁴ although with varying connotations in the United States, Germany and Israel.⁷⁵ Documentaries, photo exhibitions, artistic works, literature, movies, commemorations, the establishment of Holocaust museums, survivors’ testimonies, oral history projects and history textbooks – they all vastly contributed to the almost global recognition of the iconic Holocaust images of the “Holocaust victim shoe” and the “piles of shoes”. The Holocaust shoes received, over time, multiple meanings and functions acting as remnants, metonyms, and monuments, all of which became a recognisable *lieux de mémoire*.⁷⁶ The wide circulation of the victim’s shoe as a reference point was enabled by the amassing of artefacts (shoes) from the sites of destruction and concentration camps, where museums repeat the conventions of metonymical displacement. The recognisable trope of the victim’s shoe functions as a historical trace, as a simulation of the past and its irretrievable loss, in an over-determination of history and memory.⁷⁷

The victims’ shoes, as a reference point to death, loss, and destruction, and as a resource to communicate past atrocities, continue to be greatly exploited as the most potent tool to mark both the Holocaust and other past atrocities and historical injustices. There are many examples and, in recent years, we have seen this usage of the victims’ shoe trope continuing and growing. In 2005, on the banks of the Danube River in Budapest, not far from the Hungarian Parliament building, the “Shoes on the Danube Promenade” memorial was erected, and it contains sixty pairs of old-fashioned shoes. In 2014, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and due to the seventieth anniversary of the liquidation of the Majdanek camp, the exhibition “Shoes of the Dead” was opened in Dresden. Hence, the motive of a victim/s shoe/s has been repeated as a refrain in many exhibitions, artistic installations, and museum displays. In a similar way to “Footsteps of Those Who Did (Not) Cross”, the 2021 exhibition at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre or the “Mrtvare” (The Dead Things) photo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Bosnia, the 9/11 Memorial Museum was announced as a “Home to the Shoes of Survivors”. The Kigali Genocide Memorial, as well as other memorials across Rwanda, display victims’ shoes, and in 2021 the Tuol Sleng museum launched a moving new exhibition of victims’ clothes, including their footwear. Having said that, this article cannot adequately address all the differences and significant nuances in the ways in which these exhibitions often reproduce the perpetrators’ gaze and de-individualise the victims⁷⁸ and, in various

74 Starting with the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (1946), and continuing with the Nuremberg Trials (1947), the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum in Israel (1949), the establishment of the Yad Vashem Museum (1953), the Eichmann trial in Israel (1960), the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt (1963), the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (1961), the broadcast of the TV series *Holocaust* at the end of the 1970s (a major turning point in the media representation and the “Americanisation” of the Holocaust), the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1980), and Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* (1985), we see a rapid growth in Holocaust memorialisation, first in Europe and Israel, and then, in the decades to come, across the globe.

75 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (February 2002): 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431002005001002>.

76 Sharon B. Oster, “Holocaust Shoes: Metonymy, Matter, Memory,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, eds. Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 761–784. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33428-4_41.

77 Jones, “Empty Shoes,” 215.

78 Williams, *Memorial Museums*.

contexts, create very different political and emotional work and performances of memorial script.⁷⁹

Yet, to understand why a victim's shoe is potent enough to produce an emotional charge almost universally, we need to account for the shoe as an object category. What makes shoes different from many other objects is their multiple and well-established meanings through popular culture, literature, art, music, movies, and sport. Shoes, as a category, operate on multiple levels of recognition and are associated with numerous activities and emotions. We use shoes to walk, to hike, to run, to dance, to jump. We wear them, buy them, dispose them, keep them, and collect them. They are tightly connected to gender and erotica, social status, rituals, consumption, lifestyle, habits, and much more. However, whatever associative linkages we make with our encounters with shoes in day-to-day life, they are always connected to life and livelihood. Hence, what happens in an encounter with an empty shoe – a victim's shoe – is the immediate clash between images associated with life and joy and those of death and void. This emotional contrast explains why other objects are less potent in ascribing agency to desire objects: suitcases, for example, are associated with travel, displacement, and home; watches with time; and wallets with monetary transactions. What we see here is that the scope of the contrast decreases and with it also the potential emotional charge.

Political Action

So, how can the agency ascribed to objects initiate political action? We have palpable evidence clearly showing that objects, when ascribed agency, become an integrated language of political action. They have the potential to communicate both our past grievances and our visions of the future. Because our focus is not on objects as we often regard them – as a prop or an ornament – we fail to see how human-object relationships shape political action.

Even a brief (and unsystematic) look at some recent actions sheds light on the role that the agency of objects can have in forming our political actions. During the very first few weeks of the Ukrainian-Russian war, people started bringing their shoes to the Danube promenade in Budapest as an anti-war protest. Similarly, activists put shoes outside Georgia's parliament to remember children who had died in Ukraine. The same political protest took place in Belgrade and in many other places across the globe, with shoes being piled up. These political actions clearly ascribed agency to shoes in order to communicate resentment regarding the ongoing war. Shoes, contextualised as a symbol of death, void, and destruction, offered a clear and widely recognisable vocabulary to express particular moral claims. This silent communication was possible due to the repetition and embedding of "victims' shoes" as being already grounded in a symbolic meaning of death and destruction. It was also possible due to the repeated use of shoes in political actions across the globe. For example, in 1994, a "Silent March" took place, collecting and displaying 40,000 pairs of shoes, symbolising the number of Americans killed by guns in one year. In 2008, in San Francisco, 1,558 pairs of shoes were displayed to represent those who had jumped to their deaths from the Golden Gate Bridge. In 2010, Serbian activists placed hun-

79 Susan Henderson, "Clogs, Boots and Shoes Built to the Sky": Initial Findings from a Sociomaterial Analysis of Education at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum," in *Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, Crisis and Challenges*, ed. Peter Cunningham (London: Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association, 2013), 678–689.

dreds of pairs of shoes in solidarity with the Srebrenica genocide victims. In 2012, to commemorate the victims of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, 8,372 shoes were displayed in a square in Ankara. In 2012, the Australian Road Safety Foundation's Fatality campaign gathered fourteen hundred pairs of shoes, representing the average number of people killed on Australian roads each year. In 2015, huge demonstrations were held in Paris, collecting 10,000 pairs of shoes to warn of the effects of climate change. In Mexico, in 2016, shoes were gathered to honour the victims of drug cartels. That same year, Croatians protested for better jobs by placing their shoes in Zagreb, representing the people who were forced to leave the country in search of work. In 2018, 4,500 pairs of shoes were displayed in front of the Council of the European Union in Brussels to represent every person killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the last decade. That same year, 7,000 pairs of shoes were laid on the lawn outside of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., to remember children killed by gun violence. Also in 2018, a Dallas theatre company asked the public to donate their shoes to honour victims of gun violence. In 2018, Israelis protested against violence towards women by placing women's shoes on the main square in Tel Aviv. In 2020, 440 pairs of women's shoes were hung on one of the city walls in Istanbul. In 2020, one hundred and sixty-four pairs of nurses' shoes were placed on the lawn of the Capitol: a vigil for colleagues who had died from Covid-19 was held in Washington, D.C., with one shoe for every nurse who had died. In 2021, "Eyes Wide Open: The Human Cost of War in Iraq" created an exhibit of 800 sets of combat boots bearing the names of American soldiers killed in Iraq. In 2021, shoes and notes were left outside the Spokane Public Schools building in the United States in protest at the state vaccine mandate.

The fact that these cases differ greatly from each other, in their intent, context, and political and social circumstances, demonstrates exactly the importance of this model: with the movement from one circuit to another, desire objects change their value and their meanings. With each additional movement, some objects lose their relevance while a few gain additional meanings and applications. Only a small number of objects – not specific objects but objects as a category – will be incorporated into a widely recognisable vocabulary of political action. But not a watch, nor a wallet, nor marbles, as they all belong to categories of objects that have limited pre-established social and cultural meanings: though they tie us associatively to some aspect of life, none of these objects is crucial for life itself. Shoes, on the other hand, cannot be separated from life and liveliness, nor can we, regardless of our cultural or religious backgrounds, social status, age, or gender, imagine modern life without shoes in some shape or form.

A victim's shoe has become a widely identifiable trope that transcends national boundaries and specific historical events. However, although it serves as a common transnational vocabulary, it expresses various claims and sentiments. While what is common to all of the political actions mentioned is the close linkage between empty shoes and death, the moral claims and sentiments attached to them differ significantly. They include strikingly different moral claims: from the "right" claims and expressions of solidarity, grievances, and injustice for a variety of victims (such as victims of war, gun violence, traffic accidents, domestic abuse, pandemics, or terrorist attacks), to the demand for accountability and government action (job cuts, climate change). Interestingly, the range of the vocabulary extends to separate temporalities, addressing both past and future events. The vocabulary of human-object relations is both backward- and forward-looking, with both of these perspectives providing a much needed transnational communication channel and the global language of action.

The range of moral claims in which shoes are symbolically used to promote a certain agenda still needs much deciphering. What meanings do people ascribe to shoes when protesting? What does this vocabulary of political action tell us about ideological frameworks that inspire and what inspires them? In other words, how do the various trajectories of a desire object cement meanings and how do they shape – and how are they shaped by – ideological thinking, most notably by that of human rights and nationalism?

Conclusion

Desire objects are like no other objects: they are personal items that link individuals and their unjust and sudden death. Above all, they are *personal*. They bear both a literal and figurative DNA of the deceased. Hence, desire objects are potent in bridging the gap between individual and collective grievances as they can point to what transpired during an atrocity. However, both the desire object's value, and the emotional energy that it produces, changes and decreases once the object moves from the private to the public realms.

The main focus of this ongoing research is understanding how human-object relations affect political action. Not all objects will have agency. On the contrary. In fact, only an exceedingly small number of objects will be able to provoke political action. Now, the main question to pose is: under what circumstances do objects manage to transcend their materiality and functionality to shape meaningful human-object relations? I claim here that desire objects, as personal items found in places where atrocities have taken place, are a good place to start this enquiry, as they are immediately associated with death, violence, destruction, and injustice, all of which draw strong emotional reactions. The emotional energy desire objects ignite, and their changing value that develops via their biographical trajectories, are fundamental for objects to be ascribed with agency. Yet, even then, only a few will rise to become included into what seems to be a universal vocabulary of political action. To gain this status of an embedded recognisable language, their meaning must be both widely circulated and vernacularised, but it must also be in stark contrast to their mundane purpose. Hence, "a victim's shoe" is a fitting example of how, when something is widely circulated, there can be a clash with the mundane meaning of that object.

Many questions remain unresolved. What is the impact of political actions propelled by human-object relations? How does this vocabulary shape distinct and unpredictable moral claims? How do those moral claims feed into different ideological views? What can they tell us about remembering atrocities? And, most importantly, what visions of the past and the future do they carry? Or, to put it figuratively, what is the void that we wish to fill in those empty shoes?

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