Collecting objects, becoming human subjects: The fetishism of collection in modern myths and narratives

punctum.gr

BY: **Francesco Piluso**

ABSTRACT

Despite sharing some structural analogy with the processes of technical reproduction and commodities consumption, implying the passive cult of the serial objects and their fetishized value, the practice of collecting fosters the active role of the collector in restoring the historical and cultural meaning of material things. The simple syntactic logic of collection is enriched by accumulating new elements but mainly through their constant reassembling in original dispositions. The practice of collecting in modern mythology and narratives attests to human fascination and a fatal attraction to specific sets of objects. This is the case of some Disney and Disney-Pixar animated movies such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Wall-E* (2008), where collecting is a fundamental factor in the process of humanization of the main characters, who undergo a physical and existential transformation through the subjective consumption and resemantization of material remains. A blinding light emanates from the familiar relics collected by Jonathan in the movie *Everything is Illuminated* (2005). The memory of the past and the beginning of a new story transcend the limits of the collection and require the subject to break free from the objects' enchantment.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: **09**

Issue: **01**

Summer **2023**

ISSN: **2459-2943**

DOI: **10.18680/hss.2023.0009**

Pages: **153-170**

KEYWORDS:

Fetishism

Mythology

Material culture

Commodities

1. The myth of collection: reconstructing the subject-object relationship

A collection represents an ambivalent relationship between a human subject and material objects, which are, in turn, related to each other. Both subjects and their object(s) do not have a fixed role preceding the collection. Instead, they are defined as reciprocal terms of the relationship established by collecting. In

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

this article, I will analyze narratives in which the subject collector undergoes an existential transformation and, in some cases, even a process of humanization through their interaction with the collectible objects. Far from having a mere instrumental role, the collectibles assume a crucial value in the mythological arch of the story. As a whole, the collection is the main object of desire that drives the narration and the same process of subjectivation undertaken by the collector. To understand the mythological meaning of these stories, we must give credit to material objects beyond the realm of narration by recognizing their agency not as a mere fictional trick but as an *actual fetishist* aspect derived from being assembled in a collection. To this end, in this first section, I will focus on the semiotic logic sustaining human fascination and fatal attraction to specific sets of objects.

1.1. Commodity fetishism

Collecting reveals the multifaceted *nature* of material objects as they are not single-purpose and discrete units but complexes of multiple features. For example, functionality is only one among the plural dimensions of material things: a denotative meaning whose apparent naturality is never independent of a specific social discourse and common code of valorization – that is, as we will see later, the actual source of the objects' fetishization. However, the Western epistemological framework or, more simply, common sense itself dictates functionality as the material object's fundamental value, with no purpose other than serving the individual subject.

In this regard, Marx denounced the fetishist aspect assumed by consumer goods in capitalist modes of production: commodities are charged and animated by a relational value, the exchange value, that seems inherent to each of them, while their original *use-value* as single products of human labor is mystified. Over the years, numerous semiotic studies have attempted to deconstruct the fetishist aspect of material objects, particularly consumer goods, in our consumer society. In this regard, a very compelling analysis was conducted by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1991), in which the author sheds light on the advertising discourse promoting products by attributing to them extraordinary powers and ideological values – such as beauty, prestige, social and individual distinction – to increase their appeal in the eyes of the fascinated consumer. Although this type of commercial discourse aims to imbue consumer goods with connotative meanings superimposed on their basic functionality, objects are still conceived as mere attributes of the subject, tools in the hands of the human actor (or passive consumer) – an epistemological framework shared by the same critique to consumer society, which denounces the ideological nature of the commercial value/semiotic meaning assumed by the object, without questioning its presumed role as a mean for subjecthood.

Drawing on Marx's notion of fetishism and reframing it in the context of advanced consumer culture as critiqued by Barthes, Jean Baudrillard (1981) adopts a semiotic perspective to individuate objects' fetishism not in their *ideological content* but as strictly

linked to their *commodity form*. In this regard, the French author talks about a "fetishism of the signifier," characterizing commodities for being conceived and shaped in autonomous series: a specific semiotic form that breaks both their natural (denotative use-value) and ideological (connotative meaning) link to the subject, providing them with a pure differential, relational *exchange-value*. According to Baudrillard (1981: 118), "Object Fetishism never supports [economic] exchange [value] in its principle, but the social principle of exchange supports the fetishized value of the object." The merit of this subversion is to individuate the relational, semiotic, and consequently, fetishistic aspect in the structure of the objects themselves as their principle and not as the result of the false consciousness of an alienated subject, whether they be a worker or consumer. In other words, fetishism is the fascination with the socially codified character of the object: a relational value that does not substitute or mystify its subjective origin and end but reflects on its artificial[1] mechanism of production, consumption, and signification (*sign-exchange value*).[2]

What Baudrillard and later Latour (1991) emphasize is how fetishism is implicit in modern epistemology, *despite*, or rather, *through* its efforts to avoid fetishistic tendencies by reducing the object to a mere reflection and passive *intermediary* of the subject. In this way, Western metaphysics fails to recognize the active role of *mediators* that material things play, both in their mutual relations and interactions with human beings, in the constitution and structuring of the *social fabric*. Here, the 'social' is understood not as a superstructural domain but in the more relational sense of 'association' (see Latour 2005). In attempting to defend its metaphysical status by denying the actual fetishist power of the object-*factish* (Latour 2010), the human subject finds itself excluded from this network of *hybrid* (human and non-human) actors, from this *collective* (Latour 1991; 2005) in which it is physically immersed but fetishistically experienced as something distinct from itself.

---

[1] The etymological meaning of 'fetish,' derived from the Portuguese *feitico* derived from the Latin *facticius*, means 'artificially made.' According to Baudrillard (1981), the *fictional* aspect generally associated with the fetish is due to a linguistic distortion of the term, which turns out to be the main reason for the mystification of the object as a product of human physical and linguistic labor, and so the main factor of its fetishization. In other words, the (con)fusion between 'artificiality' and 'falseness' registered in the notion of 'fetish' implies that the same aspect of artificiality is firstly criticized to be then affirmed as the true original essence of the object.

[2] Drawing again from Baudrillard's theory (1981:113-114): "[p]olitical economy is this immense transmutation of all values (labor, knowledge, social relations, culture, nature) into economic exchange value. Everything is abstracted and reabsorbed into a world market and in the preeminent role of money as a general equivalent […] The equally essential, equally generalized process has been largely neglected — a process that is neither the inverse nor the residue nor the relay of production: that immense process of the transmutation of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. This is the process of consumption considered as a system of sign exchange value: not consumption as traditional political economy defines it (reconversion of economic exchange value into use value, as a moment of the production cycle), but consumption considered as the conversion of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. At this point, the field of political economy, articulated only through exchange value and use value, explodes and must be entirely reanalyzed as generalized political economy, which implies the production of sign exchange value in the same way and the same movement as the production of material goods and of economic exchange value. The analysis of the production of signs and culture thus does not impose itself as exterior, ulterior, and 'superstructural' in relation to that of material production; it imposes itself as a revolution of political economy itself, generalized by the theoretical and practical irruption of the political economy of the sign."

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

1.2. **Losing control**

Baudrillard's and Latour's perspectives are extremely useful because, by focusing on the serial aspect of commodities and, more generally, on the collective order of material things, they point out some structural analogies with the collection form, opening up alternative trajectories in the relationship between material objects and human subjects. To this end, Bianchi (1997) defines collecting as a specific "paradigm of consumption," emphasizing the relational value of the object underlying any subsequent fetishist valorization. The author identifies seriality as the essential feature of a collection, meaning that material objects are organized in an ordered set of connections recognizable as a whole – i.e., the collection. The first act of collecting is to define such a collection set, to delimit its boundaries by "narrowing down the field" (Bianchi 1997: 276) of the immense amount of commodities and material things that populate the world to create a more manageable, subjected-oriented world of objects.

The exotic, natural, artificial, or even 'supernatural' objects characterizing many collections from the Renaissance until the eighteenth century were similarly chosen and ordered in the bourgeois *intérieur* to create a miniature replication of the outside world in its extraordinary variety. This way, the collection acquires a physical dimension in the so-called *Wunderkammern* – a room of wonders functioning as a "mirror of the world with all its mirabilia" (Bianchi 1997: 276). The over-detailed catalogs, classification norms, and rules of visual arrangement accompanying the collections are part of this process of 'familiarization' with the object, contributing to the collectors' socialization. They arrange the objects in their private spaces as a game field for expert players, capable of sharing, understanding, and appreciating the choices of the subject collector rather than the value of the single object. These social ceremonials, determined by the sharing of common codes and prescriptions, often assume the form of religious rituals, in which the object of cult increases its mysterious and sacred allure, its fetishized value.[3] A first attempt to detach the object from its 'primitive' and 'savage' environment and make it more familiar within the domestic, both subjective and

[3] The ritual exposure of the collection, and the sharing of its internal logic is analogous to the rituality characterizing the auctions of artworks – probably, the objects of collection par excellence. To this end, Baudrillard illustrates how the participants in the auctions manipulate the value of the artworks by burning and transforming their exchange-value into pure and fetishized "sign exchange-value." This operation is aimed at the creation of an exclusive and elitist community of experts, sharing a common code of valorization: "Behind the purchase (or individual reappropriation of use value) there always remains the moment of expenditure, which even in its banality presupposes something of a competition, a wager, a challenge, a sacrifice and thus a potential community of peers and an aristocratic measure of value […] In fact, what is called the 'psychology' of the art lover is also in its entirety a reduction from the system of exchange. The singularity that he asserts – that fetishist passion for the object lived as an elective affinity – is established on his recognition as a peer, by virtue of a competitive act, in a community of the privileged. He is the equal of the canvas itself, whose unique value resides in the relation of parity, of statutory privilege, which, as a sign, it maintains with the other terms of the limited corpus of paintings. Hence, the 'elitist' affinity between the amateur and the canvas that psychologically connotes the very sort of value, of exchange and of aristocratic social relation that is instituted by the auction."

social, space is suddenly disowned by the enigmatic expression of the same object that cannot refer to anything else than its material presence as a pure object. Then, the ritualistic game of collection can be understood not as a comprehension or interpretation of the world but as a (failed) test of its interpretability (Grazioli 2013).

This universe of objects in reduced scale maintains the endogamic structure of the world of commodities, intensifying its fundamental character of non-relationship and incommunicability. The collectors strive in vain to reconstitute a discourse about the object they could control and comprehend, a discourse whose referent par excellence is them. Baudrillard underscores this when he wonders "whether objects can indeed ever come to constitute any other language than this: can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?" (1996: 108). Subsequently, the collectors are doomed to failure: they are simply transforming an open-ended objective discontinuity into a closed subjective one through a language that has already lost any general, socially shared validity or significance, and its link with its lonely speakers is thinning out.

Consequently, the collectors endeavor to possess an increasing number of objects. In doing so, they are not driven by the capitalist greed to accumulate exchange-value but by the fetishist need to find themselves, their subjecthood, as the ultimate and chimeral final object.[4] However, due to the fetishist structure of the collection, this desire is condemned to remain unsatisfied. As highlighted by Diazzi[5] (2013: 360), "the word 'collection' seems to be connoted by a sort of 'evil infinity' [...] every collection is destined by its nature to the same incompleteness and inexhaustibility that characterizes the unappeasable tension from which the desire takes origins." According to her, the serial structure of the collection exemplifies the metonymical chain of desire as theorized by Lacan, in which the existence of an empty slot constantly enhances the desire despite acquiring a new partial object.

1.3. **House arrest**

The perpetual character of desire and collection often results in new accumulation. *Wunderkammern* become crowded with more and more objects defying any attempt at classification and systematization. The space of the collection exceeds its original room, spreading throughout the bourgeois house. This is a typical aspect of domestic

[4] This dynamic has been analyzed by different disciplines according to different theoretical and epistemological perspectives, from Charles Sanders Peirce's *chain of interpretants* and dialectic between *Immediate and Dynamic Object* to Jacques Lacan's *chain of signifiers*. To this end, it is also useful to consider the notion of 'interpassivity' as theorized by Robert Pfaller (2014, 2017) and extensively investigated by Stacey Thompson (2020) concerning the issue of collecting.

[5] In reference to Eco (2009).

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

spaces in the Victorian age and the main symptom of a widespread obsession with objects at the time. As Mullins (2014) notes, Victorians often imagined how even the most mundane objects create meaning in consequential and circuitous ways. Charles Dickens was an acute observer and precious witness of such a collecting attitude. In *Sketches by 'Boz,' Illustrative of Every-Day Life, and Every-Day People*, he detailed a "little front parlor" in London, where attention is focused on quotidian objects, whose ordinary and silent presence is covered and, at the same time, marked by their physical contiguity with other material objects:

> [T]he carpets covered with brown Holland, the glass and picture frames are carefully enveloped in yellow muslin; the table-covers are never taken off, except when the leaves are turpentined and bees' – waxed, an operation which is regularly commenced every other morning at half-past nine o'clock – and the little nicknacks [sic] are always arranged in precisely the same manner (1836:87).

This redundancy prompts us to refrain from reducing material goods to mere functional aims or representational mechanisms; instead, it urges us to confront the utterly multivalent and ambiguous presence of everyday things that routinely pass by without conscious reflection. Dickens's detailed sketch complicates materiality by pushing us to see things as 'recursive' in their capacity to weave the social fabric. This vision of materiality aspires to grant things genuine and autonomous agency (Mullins 2014). Everyday life and materiality pose significant challenges to traditional interpretative frameworks because their unexpressed nature, transience, and ordinariness resist coherent narratives and attribution of meanings: if ordinary objects often reveal ideological homogenization, it is for the same reason that they retreat from critical apprehension (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1987, 1991; Mullins 2014).[6] Collecting ordinary things is a way to recognize, control, and somehow reduce such a fetish aspect of material things inhabiting the world; yet, the indiscriminate hoarding of everyday objects risks tightening the stitches of their silent plot and concentrating their power in the narrow space of the house without any possibility of a meaningful and ordered distribution (Borland and Siddons 2013).

The practice of collecting constantly oscillates between the attempt at subjective control over the objects and the frustration for their overwhelming and enigmatic presence, too objectified to be subjected. This mirrors the movement characterizing objects'

[6] To this end, Mullins (2014: 49) argues that "such objects will not necessarily reflect who we are in some historically accurate or 'objective' form, and theories of the everyday always caution against such essentialism; instead, those material things illuminate the critical dimensions of our lives that we are unable to articulate, consigning them to the status of ordinary and submerging them within monotonous repetition."

fetishism: from the fascination with the artificiality of its codified meaning, implying a voyeuristic gaze toward the enclosed order and autonomous mechanism of seriality, to the total fusion and confusion[7] with the entire space of collection, which eludes any comprehension while comprehending the subject, until its complete absorption. The *Wunderkammern*, the bourgeois *intérieur*, and the Victorian house gradually transform into prisons for the collector, who finds escape impossible from the sacred temple of a fetishist cult (Rizzi 2002).

1.4. **Ruining the collection and collecting from the ruins**

Walter Benjamin's extensive work on the collection (1969, 1969a, 1985, 1999) offers the collector a captivating escape from the enchantment of objects. The author delves deeply into the act of collecting, considering it a fundamental task in the work of the historian. Benjamin constructs the model of "the good collector" around the peculiar figure of the child, keen on collecting the scraps of the adults' activities on material things to develop a subjective relation and narration with these residual elements. Free from any functional, ideological, or traditional historical value, these remaining materials can reveal their authentic face to the child, who, in turn, is eager to establish intimate and immediate physical contact with them. Benjamin is undoubtedly aware of the fetishist relapse of such a fusional relation: children risk being bewitched by the *mermaid* call of the objects and absorbed within the material world surrounding them. Nevertheless, through their ludic and destructive activity (Thompson 1979), children are capable of desecrating the material idol (the fetish), breaking it into multiple fragments for new playful elaboration and narrative connections.[8]

Similarly, adult collectors should avoid projecting and alienating themselves into the collectibles or the whole collection. Instead, they should strive to rework the collected material, constantly creating new meaningful reconfigurations. Each element of the collection constitutes a potential and asymptotic totality by its partiality, and the collector is tasked with catching and echoing such a metonymical rhyme. The apparent casualness

[7] This physical connection can be approached from the viewpoint of Donald Winnicott's (1971) notion of the 'transitional object' in his study of the child's development. The transitional object – can be a doll, a blanket, a book, etc. - is a material thing to which the child is particularly attached – also in a physical sense – and upon which they project a strong affective value since it functions as a sort of cushion in the child's phase of detachment from the symbiotic relationship with the mother. The transitional object covers what Winnicott defines as the "third area," the intermediate space between a condition of total fusion with the object, as a fetish of the mother, and the subjective relation with the same object perceived as an "otherness." Later in this paper (§ 1.4) will be provided evidence of the analogy between children and collectors in their fetishist relationship with the objects.

[8] Benjamin (2006, 2006a) offers brilliant and suggestive images of the destructive power of children concerning material objects; for example, while playing hide-and-seek in the house, children first try to blend with the domestic furniture. Still, they usually do not wait to be found by their parents before reemerging with a scream of relief. Similarly, children are fascinated by the soap bubbles while eager to break their enchantment and make them explode.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

of the encounter between subject and object, often seen as a mere coincidence or the fulfillment of a subjective destiny, is defined by Breton (1976) as an "objective chance." In this scenario, some peculiar details of the object draw attention and capture the gaze of a subject capable of identifying minor differences or similarities with other elements of the collection, thereby sanctioning the object as a new collectible.[9]

In this regard, revisiting Bianchi's work (1997) proves especially useful. According to her, while the primary feature of the collection is seriality – what aligns the act of collecting objects with the consumption of commodities – what is less visible is that seriality implies an active and exploratory process. Indeed, identifying a set, imposing a pattern, and establishing recurrences and differences are not already given or immediately manifested but require constant research and discovery. As part of a collection, an object is loosened from its original relations and hierarchies and re-framed into new ones. So, the fascination with "completing" a set goes together with the necessity to modify it to give rise to new cycles of explorable links. This results in variety and novelty, serving as expressions of the infinite potentialities within the collection. This unrelenting aspect of collecting, wherein the set appears never to close, is often seen as a perverse attitude leading to the collector's alienation; at the same time, the openness of the collection provides the collector with spaces of agency and subjectivation - an invitation to illuminate and actualize the potential relational meanings of material objects. Bianchi argues that "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).

2. Stories of collections: subjecthood beyond the objects' enchantment

The last paragraph of the previous section opens with the hypothesis that to overcome the object's fetishism, subjects should avoid projecting themselves on the object(s) to reflect their image and find their identity. Instead, they must become a medium of expression for the object or, better, for the relations between the objects, that is, of the collection. In this way, material things emerge as protagonists in a narrative that diverges from official historical reconstruction. This is the thesis championed by Walter Benjamin, urging historians to collect residual materials from the ruins of History to

[9] According to Eco (1984) this ability is what defines the "critical spectator," who recognizes and enjoys in a (TV) series the strategy of its variations, that is how the same scheme is constantly declined to appear different. For these reasons, the figure of Don Giovanni could be defined as a "critical collector" since, in his serial conquests, he is guided by a hyper-sensitive gaze on a precise detail, a "marginal difference," or a *punctum* that emerges from the indistinct multitude by an objective chance (see Ginzburg 1986 and Diazzi 2013). The recognition of similarities in the differences, which appears to be crucial in collecting, has been investigated by Natalia Taccetta (2019) concerning Giorgio Agamben's notion of signature (2008) and Walter Benjamin's idea of *dialectical images*.

forge new connections, new stories from a past that is never crystallized in the objects but always potentially and alternatively present through them. For these reasons, the purpose of this study is not strictly historiographical but based on stories that place objects – especially collections of objects – as the driving force in the narrative program of a human co-protagonist. The choice of two films, The *Little Mermaid* (2.1) and *Wall-E* (2.2), is motivated by the intention to highlight, thanks to the possibilities offered by animation and *fiction*, the true fetishistic power of collected objects in the process of subjectification (and humanization) of the collector, as well as in the story of this same process. On the other hand, the film *Everything Is Illuminated* (2.3) enables us to discover the more proper historical value of objects, once again, not as passive witnesses of an objective past but as actual protagonists in many possible subjective stories.

2.1. *The Little Mermaid*: the destruction of a collection

The Little Mermaid is a Walt Disney animated classic directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, released in 1989. The movie is loosely based on the 1837 Danish fairy tale of the same name by Hans Christian Andersen. The story is set in the underwater kingdom of Atlantica; Ariel, a 16-year-old princess mermaid, is dissatisfied with her life under the sea and dreams of living in the human world. Ignoring the warnings of her father, King Triton, Ariel collects human artifacts, including a statue of her love, Prince Eric, found during her furtive explorations over the sea and ashore. She often visits her seagull friend Scuttle to learn about humans and their artifacts, whose use she misconceives in amusing ways. Oblivious of their original meaning and function, she places these objects in a secret grotto – a sort of *Wunderkammern* (Bianchi 1997) – where Ariel reconstructs a miniature version of the human world and its treasures (Fig. 1). The collection of material objects serves as medium, through which the young mermaid covertly lives as a human being, under the sea.

Figure 1. Ariel's secret grotto

Nevertheless, the collected objects do not completely respond to Ariel's dream of living as a human being, and the young mermaid is caught in an obsessive acquisition and accumulation of material artifacts (see Borland and Siddons 2013). As in the myth

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

of Narcissus (see McLuhan 1964), the mermaid can no longer find the reflection of her desired image in these artifacts, now constantly refracted along the infinite and sealed chain of collectibles (see Diazzi 2013; Eco 2009). These artifacts cease to constitute a psychological and physical *prosthesis* for Ariel's human transition and subjecthood, and she falls victim to her enchantment, becoming a beautiful object amongst the others, crowding the grotto. This space for human discovery and self-exploration suddenly becomes a sacred place for a fetishist cult (see Rizzi 2012) and, eventually, a sort of prison for Ariel (Fig. 2). The sequence is thematized and figurativized in a famous scene of the movie, in which the mermaid sings about her dream to escape the simulacrum of the mainland and be *part of that world*:

Figure 2. Ariel dreams to escape her grotto and be part of the human world

Look at this stuff
Isn't it neat?
Wouldn't you think my collection is complete?
[…]
Look at this trove
Treasures untold
How many wonders can one cavern hold?
Looking around here you'd think
Sure, she's got everything
I've got gadgets and gizmos and plenty
[…]
But who cares?
No big deal
I want more!
I wanna be where the people are
[…]
When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love
Love to explore the shore up above?
Out of the sea
Wish I could be
Part of that world

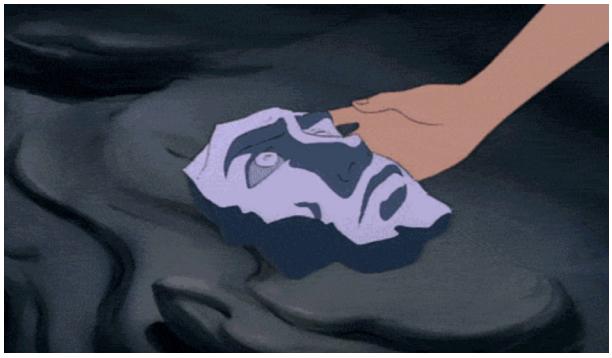

Figure 3. Fragment from Prince Eric's statue

Everything takes a dramatic turn as an outraged Triton discovers Ariel's secret grotto and her love for (human) Prince Eric, destroying her collection in a misguided effort to protect her. As in Benjamin's accounts of children's playful activity and modality of collecting (2006, 2006a), the collection's destruction represents a turning point in the little mermaid's tale as it triggers an escape from her confined sanctuary and a new possibility to realize her dream finally. The human artifacts collected by Ariel had suddenly turned into sharpened objects with a static and neat configuration, in which the mermaid's *utopian* desire for transformation had been crystallized. Only by preserving or restoring, through *ludic* or destructive activity (see Thompson 1979), the collectibles' *original* materiality will Ariel be able to achieve her goal of a new identity. It is not coincidental that just after the destruction of her collection, the mermaid collects a piece from the ruins of Prince Eric's statue: a meaningful fragment from which she can start rebuilding her story (Fig. 3).

2.2. *Wall-E*: from the ruins of our consumer culture

The 2008 Disney-Pixar movie *Wall-E* is one of the most brilliant examples of the myth of material and consumer culture. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic future and an uninhabited planet Earth due to the ecological disaster caused by extreme forms of consumerism and the wild accumulation of waste. For these reasons, *Wall-E* has been acclaimed by audiences and critics as an exemplary environmentalist manifesto capable of denouncing the risks of our harmful consumption patterns. Yet, a series of meaningful elements at narrative and discursive levels seem to invalidate its ecological message. Despite its apocalyptic impact, consumption remains the only means to stay (and become) humans and overcome a deeper cultural catastrophe.

This is the case of the protagonist of the movie, Wall-E, a unit of a larger group of robots designed to collect and dispose of the overwhelming mass of waste covering the entire surface of our planet. While its companions progressively are subjected to technical breakdown, becoming waste material indistinguishable from heaps of garbage, Wall-E overcomes its programmed obsolescence thanks to its peculiar relationship with the collected objects. What is enacted by the robot is not a presumed original and natural use-value of consumer goods, implying a mere physical consumption and leading to acritical accumulation; similarly to Ariel's case, Wall-E misinterprets or, better, reinterprets the function of the objects critically, pointing out their primary cultural

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

value and, at the same, their deep subjective meaning. In this interaction, Wall-E develops a sort of human sentience and intelligence transcending its mechanical nature and functionality. As if by magic, we assist in a miraculous transformation. Enchanted by the collected objects, Wall-E breaks its technical programming (and narrative program) to eventually become a human subject in what essentially constitutes a "paradoxical celebration of consumer goods within a narrative that ostensibly condemns consumerism" (Anderson 2012: 269).

This ambiguity reflects an ambivalence on the plane of the expression. The initial establishing shots, depicting gigantic skyscrapers of indistinct garbage surrounded by a toxic cloud of pollution, convey a spectacular image of the ecological disaster (Fig. 4); then, the camera offers the viewer a series of close-up views of singular objects of consumption, whose discrete borders are defined by a neater aura. Suddenly, the attention is diverted from the environmental catastrophe to a more intimate gaze toward the objects collected by Wall-E (Fig. 5). As highlighted by Anderson (2012: 270-71), "The foreboding towers of waste thus fade into the background when Wall-E's collection of familiar, cheery, nostalgia-infused objects takes center stage […] they would not have the same poignancy if the early portions of the film were set in a sleek utopian future."[10]

Figure 4. Trash skyscrapers

The syntagmatic succession from the large panorama to the smaller-scale images is emblematic of the passage from the disorderly accumulation of goods in the commodities' system to the ordered pattern of a personal collection. Here, the uniqueness of each object asserts itself, forming a personal connection with the collector. Also, in this case, the attempt is to restore a subjective control over a dystopic world through its reconfiguration in the smaller and human-oriented dimension of the collection (see Bianchi 1997) – particularly the museum space in which Wall-E places the objects he collects.

This museum space is the expression of an alternative story or, more precisely, two other stories about the consumer goods and their relationship with the human actor: (1) the story of the museal *énoncé*, narrated by the objects within the museum about

[10] This syntagmatic succession represents a typical figure in the construction of contemporary mythologies: what Roland Barthes defines as a sort of vaccine or inoculation, aimed "To instill into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks [...] take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes" (1991: 40). As a result, "One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil" (ibid. 151).

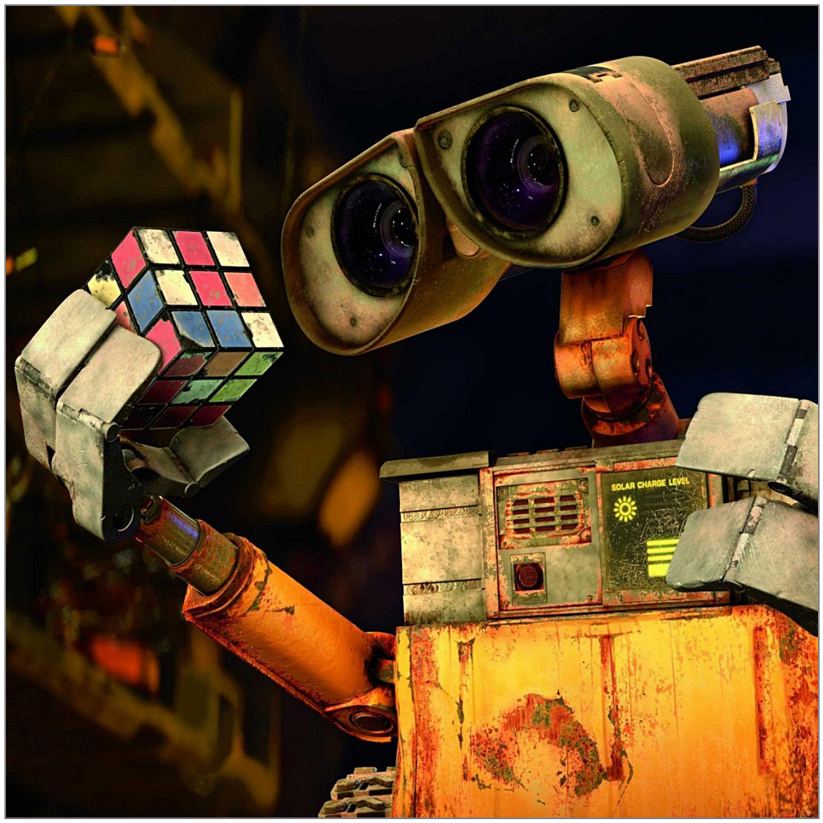

Figure 5. Close-up on Rubik's cube

themselves; (2) the story of the museal *enunciation*, narrating the modal transformations experienced by the robot, as a subject-visitor, in the fatal encounter with the exposed objects (see Violi 2014). This second story is the one that *gazes back* at the viewers through the eyes of Wall-E. In front of the future apocalypse, the viewer's nostalgic gaze does not turn to a primitive and past state of nature, purged from cultural and material contamination; quite the opposite, it fixates on our present culture of consumption, particularly our consumer goods imbued with nostalgic value. This valorization is nurtured by an extensive use of intertextuality, a hallmark of Pixar's productions. The movie constantly displays familiar consumer goods (including Pixar's products),[11] which the audience can relate to as anchors amid the apocalyptic devastation. The intertextual link can be understood as a collection form, bestowing a relational and fetishist value upon the cultural products shown onscreen. By acknowledging these material objects as elements related to a broader culture of consumption, viewers recognize themselves as part of that same culture and experience their social and personal identity as shaped by it.

[11] Likely missed by many spectators but spotted by sharp-eyed, critical or fanatic watchers, many merchandising products from previous Pixar's movies like *Cars*, *Toy Story*, *Up*, and even a lamp resembling *Luxo Junior* - the animated Pixar's logo - appears mixed in with the garbage and among the objects collected by Wall-E.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

In this sense, the collection serves as an extraordinary semiotic operator, a *dispositif* establishing spatial, temporal, and actorial connections across different dimensions. This gives rise a peculiar *chronotope*: conceived simultaneously as a narrative, a movie, a cultural product and a collection of cultural products in itself, *Wall-E* captivates our gaze of critical viewers (and consumers) by highlighting the wonders of consumer culture from the blinding background of mass consumerism:

> The Disney/Pixar animated feature film *Wall-E* (2008), one of the most celebrated recent examples of a popular anti-consumerism that now appears all but obligatory, is an instructive example of their ideological instrumentality. Implicitly endorsing the 'individualizing' practices of distinctive consumption, the film constructs a mass society critique that nonetheless validates the basic imperatives of consumer capitalism. (McNaughtan 2012: 753)

2.3. **Blinding lights in *Everything is Illuminated***

Everything is Illuminated is a 2005 film directed by Liev Schreiber, an adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's autobiographical novel. Jonathan, a young American Jew who collects objects associated with his relatives in small plastic bags to build and preserve a personal memory of his family (Fig. 6). The story unfolds when Jonathan's grandmother, just before her death, gives him another object for his collection: a picture of his young grandfather with an unknown woman named Augustine (as indicated on the back of the photograph), taken in Ukraine, where Jonathan's grandfather escaped before the Nazi invasion (Fig. 7). The image immediately appears to be illuminated by a special aura. By a sort of objective chance (Breton 1976), Jonathan notices that Augustine's pendant corresponds to the grasshopper preserved in amber that Jonatan himself, as a child, took from his grandfather's deathbed, marking the inception of his collection (Fig. 8). All the while this correspondence justifies the pertinence of the picture in the collection, it introduces an element of novelty and prompts a total reconfiguration of Jonathan's research strategy and conservation model (see Bianchi 1997).

Intrigued by the mysterious woman in the picture and driven to seek new answers to his quest for the past, Jonathan embarks on a trip to Ukraine. Accompanying him are a cranky, seemingly antisemitic older man and Alex, his enthusiastic grandson. Initially, all three travelers are affected by a kind of blindness. Jonathan's large glasses, the only element distinguishing him from his grandfather's specular figure in the picture, are like opaque screens that distance him from his past; Alex's peculiar and eccentric passion for American contemporary pop culture and music is an attempt to leave his Ukrainian roots behind, as he believes "the past is past, and like all that is not now it should remain buried along the side of our memories"; Alex's grandfather

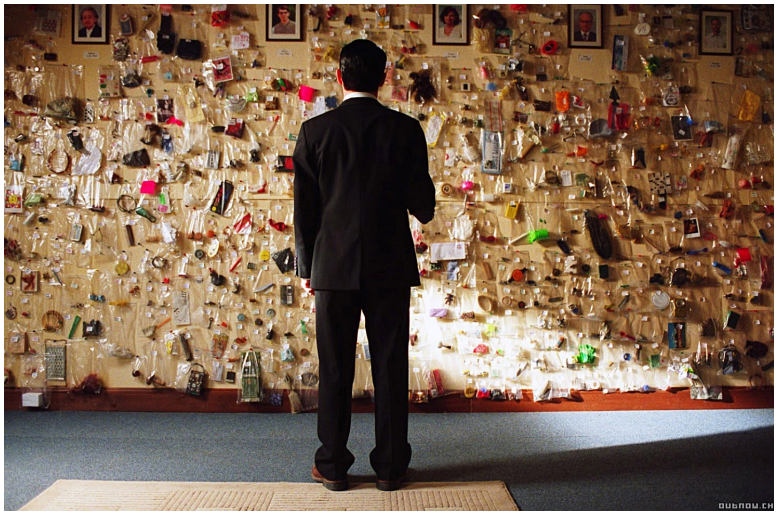

Figure 6. Jonathan's collection

Figure 7. Augustine's picture

Figure 8. Grasshopper in amber

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09:**01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

pretends to be blind, but, similarly to Jonathan's experience, the old man is profoundly moved by the picture, as its figures seem to evoke long-dismissed memories.

At the end of their journey, the three men arrive at an old house surrounded by a vast field of tall sunflowers and inhabited by an elderly lady. She exists in a realm of memories, crystallized in an infinite quantity of objects collected in boxes that cover every inch of the house. This collection, resembling a wild hoard (see Broland and Siddons 2006), is the sole remnant of the little town of Trachimbrod and its people, exterminated by the Nazis during the second world war. Jonathan's and Alex's grandfathers, along with the lady of the house, revealed to be Augustine's sister, were the only survivors of that massacre, now symbolically reunited in their motherland. The photograph brought by Jonathan represents a residual scrap from the ruins of History and the missing piece of a common story, liberated from the rigid framework of the collection and its fetishized objects. Drawing on Benjamin's insights (2006, 2006a), everything can forge new interconnections and be "illuminated by the light from the past" long confined within plastic bags and dusty boxes.

In a oneiric scene preceding the final epiphany, Jonathan envisions his young grandfather on the opposite side of a small river that crosses the old village of Trachimbrod. Subsequently, we witness the young man collecting a small clump of earth by the same river and placing it in another of his plastic bags. Upon returning to the States, he releases the collected earth onto his grandfather's grave: a symbolic act to close the circle of the past, from which Jonathan can undertake a new path and continue his story.

References

Anderson, Charles Todd 2012. Post-Apocalyptic Nostalgia: Wall-E, Garbage, and American Ambivalence toward Manufactured Goods. LIT: *Literature Interpretation Theory* 23: 267-282.

Agamben, Giorgio 2008. *Signatura rerum*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Barthes, Roland 1991[1957]. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Levers, New York: The Noonday Press.

Baudrillard, Jean 1981[1972]. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign. Trans. Charles Levin*, New York: Telos Press.

Baudrillard, Jean 1994[1968]. *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedict, London: Verso.

Benjamin, Walter 1969. Unpacking my Library. In: Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 59-68.

Benjamin, Walter 1969a. Theses on the Philosophy of History. In: Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 253–264.

Benjamin, Walter 1985. Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian. In: Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (eds.) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Continuum, 225-253.

Benjamin, Walter 1999. *Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter 2006. *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Trans. Howard Eiland, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter 2006a. *Strada a senso unico*. Scritti 1926-1927. Torino: Einaudi.

Bianchi, Marina 1997. Collecting as a Paradigm of Consumption. *Journal of Cultural Economics* 21: 275-289.

Borland, Jennifer and Louise Siddons 2016. From hoarders to the Hoard: giving disciplinary legitimacy to undisciplined collecting. *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 7: 407-420.

Breton, André 1937. *L'Amour fou*. Paris: Gallimard.

de Certeau, Michel 1984 [1980]. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Diazzi, Alessandra 2013. La lista impensabile. *Enthymema* 8: 354-366.

Dickens, Charles 1836. *Sketches by 'Boz.' Illustrative of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People*. London: John Macrone.

Eco, Umberto 1984. Tipologia della ripetizione. In: Francesco Casetti (ed.) *L'immagine al plurale. Serialità e ripetizione nel cinema e nella televisione*. Venezia: Marsilio, 19-36.

Eco, Umberto 2009. *La vertigine della lista*. Milano: Bompianio.

Ginzburg, Carlo 1986. Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario. In: *Miti emblemi spie. Morfologia e storia*. Torino: Einaudi, 158-209.

Grazioli, Elio 2013. La collezione come forma. *Nuova informazione bibliografica* 2: 282-310.

Latour, Bruno 1991. *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*. Paris: La Découverte.

Latour, Bruno 2005. *Reassembling the Social. An introduction to Action-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, Bruno 2010. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lefebvre, Henri 1987. The Everyday and Everydayness. *Yale French Studies* 73: 7-11.

Lefebvre, Henri 1991 [1947]. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Trans. John Moore, London: Verso.

McLuhan, Marshall 1964. *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McNaughtan, Hugh 2012. Distinctive consumption and popular anti-consumerism: The case of Wall-E. *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 26(5): 753-766.

Mullins, Paul R. 2014. The Banality of Everyday Consumption: Collecting Contemporary Urban Materiality. *Museum Anthropology* 37(1): 46-50.

Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics | **09**:01:2023
ISSN 2459-2943 | DOI: 10.18680/hss.2023.0009 | **punctum.gr**

Pfaller, Robert 2014. *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*. London: Verso.

Pfaller, Robert 2017. *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rizzi, Alessandra 2002. Mario Praz: Le ragioni di un collezionismo. *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte* 26: 517-557.

Taccetta, Natalia 2019. Dalla segnatura all'avanguardia. Agamben e Benjamin fra rovina e collezione. *Enthymema* 24: 156-170.

Thompson, Michael 1979. *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, Stacey 2020. On the interpassivity of collecting. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 25(4): 652–669.

Violi, Patrizia 2014. *Paesaggi della memoria*. Milano: Bompiani.

Winnicott, Donald 1971. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Routledge.

AUTHOR

Francesco Piluso Post-doc Researcher at the University of Turin (Italy) within the ERC Consolidator Project FACETS.