Exploring Folk Art

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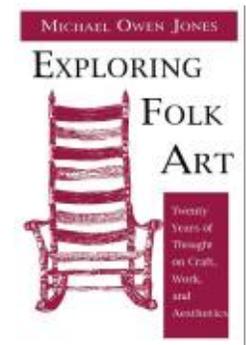
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The Material Culture of Corporate Life

In March of 1983, the Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology and the Behavioral and Organizational Science Group in the Graduate School of Management (GSM) at UCLA jointly sponsored an international conference on organizational folklore, which I directed with David M. Boje and Bruce S. Giuliano (the former a member of the faculty in GSM and the latter the president of Ponte Trading Company).

Called Symbols, Myths & Folklore: Expanding the Analysis of Organizations, the conference brought together 139 folklorists, organization theorists, and practitioners. Twenty-three presentations and six workshops filled the three-day event. Papers concerned ceremonials and rituals as well as aesthetic expression and play, the effects of folklore on organization and performance, leadership needs of the 1980s, and quality-of-work life issues approached through expressive behavior. Workshops focused on organization change, leadership, identity, ambience, formation, and continuity (always with particular attention to ritual, play, narrative, and aesthetic expression).

The conference was reviewed by Arthur Regan (1983) and by Marshall Ingwerson (1983). Charles Camp, who was then secretary-treasurer of the American Folklore Society, asked me to send him a description of the organizational folklore conference for publication in the American Folklore Society Newsletter, of which he was editor; it appeared in 1983.

Four other conferences were held in the United States, Canada, and Sweden during the following year and a half. I prepared a report of one, which was published under the title "Corporate Natives Confer on Culture" (1984a). The proceedings of another, Conference on Organizational Culture and Life in the Workplace (Vancouver 1984), were published as Organizational Culture, edited by Peter J. Frost et al. (1985). For the first conference, held in Oakland, California, I was invited to describe a course I was then giving on organizational folklore. For the second one, I was asked to speak on ethics, particularly some of the concerns about, and early objections to, applied folklore (voiced, for example, by Richard M. Dorson (1971).

I referred to the second conference, and particularly ideas voiced by Linda Smircich, in an introduction to a set of articles in a special section of *Western Folklore* (1984) called "Works of Art, Art as Work, and the Arts of Working—Implications for the Study of Organizational Life. Smircich had published "Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis" in a special issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* on organizational culture (1983). At the Vancouver conference on organizational culture and the workplace, she went beyond this article to challenge the notion that culture is or necessarily should be the metaphor for understanding organizations. She suggested that organization is the paradigm of culture, not the opposite. Insisting that we must "re-conceptualize culture, organization, and ourselves," she emphasized the need to shift research from a preoccupation with culture in organization to analysis of "organization making." Organizations are, she said, "representations of our humanity—symbolically constituted worlds, and symbolic forms"; they are "displays of the meaning of life." We should consider organizational life as a symbolic construction, she proposed, focusing on symbols rather than culture and paying attention to how we "make" organizations (as participants, and as researchers entering them for purposes of study).

Not long after this, when he was editor of *Material Culture* (the journal of the Pioneer America Society), Simon J. Bronner solicited statements from specialists on material culture to assemble as a symposium. The list included Jules David Prown, John Michael Vlach, Dell Upton, Warren E. Roberts, Allen G. Noble, Thomas J. Schlereth, and me. We were asked to respond to several questions, among which were whether or not there was or could be a discipline of material culture studies, what the methods of material culture research ought to be, and what concepts and assumptions should prevail in the study of objects. Authors' reflections appeared in a special double issue of the journal (1985c), called "Material Culture Studies: A Symposium."

Essays were published without titles. However, I had called my paper in manuscript form "The Material Culture of Corporate Life." I did this for two reasons. First, I think that the material culture of organizations (whether they be incorporated or not) is one of the most overlooked, yet one of the most pervasive and important aspects of our lives as a means by which we construct our social realities; therefore, it deserves greater attention in future, which is one of my points in the article. Second, it seemed to me that Bronner was calling for not only conceptual and methodological musings but also organizational considerations. Earlier, after conferring with members of the Pioneer America Society and with members of the editorial board of the organization's journal, he had initiated a change in the name of the journal from *Pioneer America* to *Material Culture*. Obviously there was a sense of organizational purpose and objectives. Also, his questions to seven specialists writing in the symposium on material culture studies seemed to address matters of mission, philosophy, and values. Why study material culture, and how to do so? Given the many disciplines represented by material culture specialists, is there really any sense of common goals or identity, methods and approaches?

"The Material Culture of Corporate Life" appears below. In it, I define such organizational concepts as *objectives, goals, values, philosophy, purpose,* and

mission. At the end of the essay I state what I think are some of the objectives, goals, and so on of the professional association of material culture studies. In doing so, I imply that the concept of organization is relevant not only to the study of much material culture but also to the field of material culture studies as a representation of ourselves.

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The setting is the offices of the Management Development Department of a major corporation in southern California. Located in a building in Marina Del Rey, this department is physically separated from corporate headquarters in Beverly Hills, where the group vice president is. A move to the corporate building is imminent, for the department (whose members now number more than two dozen) has rapidly outgrown the available space. Desks for several individuals have been squeezed into the reception area; staff must share offices even though they may be carrying out quite different functions; the noisy computing and photocopy rooms are uncomfortably close to where people are trying to concentrate on developing training programs; and a number of rooms have been given over to multiple uses, adding to the confusion and noise. The production room, for example, often serves as a hallway between the front and back offices. Recently a sign was posted on the production room door: DO NOT USE THIS ROOM AS A HALLWAY. Obvious- ly it was to no avail, for a second sign soon joined the first: THIS IS NOT A BARN. PLEASE CLOSE THE DOOR! Later someone crossed out the word "not."

The signs are expressive and symbolic. Explaining how and why can provide understanding of human behavior and organizational life generally as well as more specifically the relationships within these offices and between this department and corporate headquarters. Demanding that the production room not be used as a hallway flies in the face of the human propensity to economize motion. Because attempts to dictate behavior often fail, especially when edicts go against human nature or deprive individuals of their autonomy, other means of influencing behavior are required. The second sign recognizes that people will use the room as a passageway; it requests that in doing so an individual extend a common courtesy to others. Before stating the injunction PLEASE CLOSE THE DOOR! the sign reminds one of the situation using metaphor from a familiar expression. THIS IS NOT A BARN gives an explanation, therefore, of the reason for keeping the door closed; the incongruity of offices/barn provokes a ludicrous image likely to precipitate a knowing nod and perhaps the beginning of a smile. Crossing out the word "not" is a metastatement: the room (read departmental offices as a whole) is not a barn—but might as well be. The final act in the sequence of three creates a fundamental response in human beings, laughter, even if it is

"gallows humor." By thus "humanizing" the work place, the sign proves effective. When someone does not close the door, others joke and banter with the transgressor, which leads to appropriate action while also producing a degree of fellowship and community rather than conflict.

There is more. In spite of the crowded quarters (or perhaps in part because of them), relations in the department are generally cordial. The image of "family" prevails in speech and stories. Further testifying to the spirit of fellowship is the frequency with which department members have parties, especially birthday celebrations. Some tension exists, however, between the department and corporate headquarters. Upper management has not always been consistent in its treatment of employees, or fair; stories give details and express the effects on morale and therefore productivity and quality. Rumors have it that at corporate offices people are distant, cordiality is rare, and there are few parties—a certain indication, it is thought, of little fellowship and a lack of personal satisfaction.

To return to the signs on the production room door: The final act of crossing out "not," thus communicating in an amicable way the intended message about closing the door, seems to characterize the feelings, attitudes, and style of the Management Development Department as remarked upon by members themselves. Note, however, that the first sign was not removed, although the injunction DO NOT USE THIS ROOM AS A HALLWAY is irksome. Rather, the first sign remains juxtaposed to the (altered) second one. Why? Leaving the first sign up provides the history of the process by which the message evolved. The two signs and one alteration taken together poignantly remind that all people in an organization are in fact "organizational participants" and human beings engaged in a common enterprise, and they take the reader of the signs through the steps required to achieve this understanding and appreciation; in this regard, their influence far exceeds that of causing someone to close the door on noise. More speculatively, the juxtaposition of signs may also be read by some people on occasion as expressing the difference between corporate headquarters (upper management) and the department in their treatment of people; it might strengthen the resolve of department members to be humane rather than insensitive; or perhaps it expresses the anxiety felt about the imminent move to corporate headquarters.

Experiencing Organizations

Susan Montepio, a student in the Ph.D. program in folklore and mythology at UCLA, provided me with the information above concerning signs, space, stories, and celebrations. She took a graduate seminar from me recently called Organizational Symbolism and Corporate Culture. Whether history

and economics majors, folklore students, or individuals in the MBA program (with concentrations variously in marketing, planning and strategy, and human resources), all 15 who took the course were required to submit a paper describing and analyzing expressive behavior in an organization. Most focused on stories and speech forms, and some on rituals and cere-monials—in about the same proportion found in the growing body of litera-ture on organizational symbolism. Only Ms. Montepio included information about material culture, in part perhaps because the cramped space was an issue for department members. For all the attention being paid by researchers now to stories as an index of values and attitudes, however, it is the use and decoration of space, the physical facilities, and other objects that a visitor immediately perceives on entering an office and from which is gained an initial (and sometimes lasting) impression of the ambience, philosophy, and preoccupations of the organization. Material culture in the form of memos, missives, and documents; office or other technology; and work surroundings may express or be thought to indicate relations among organizational participants, "the way things are done around here, and why," and how various levels conceive of and treat others. The way in which we decorate our personal space at work can symbolize who we are or wish we were or would like others to think we are. The nature of the information we put into written form, and the manner, may suggest much about our values, concerns, and conceptions—or be taken by others as revelatory.

I hope my interpretation of the signs on the production room door in the Management Development Department is defensible. Whether correct or not, my inference helps me make a point in this essay. By their nature, members of the species called *homo sapiens* are expressive. We seek to communicate messages in multiple and varied ways. In addition, whether a particular statement was intended or not, we often infer meaning. Sometimes the most poignant messages are communicated, or momentous meanings are inferred, from the most prosaic actions and mundane objects.

Behavior or Outputs of Behavior?

More research needs to be done on material culture. For tools, technology, and the built environment literally surround us. Perhaps the most overlooked realm of life in which to study objects is that of the workplace. It is here that most of us on an almost daily basis spend at least half of our waking moments. Because material culture is subject matter rather than perspective or discipline, it can and indeed should be examined by individuals in various fields; art historians, management theorists, and folklorists, to name only a few, could develop a transdisciplinary approach to material culture study enhancing the understanding and appreciation of human behavior. Essential

to such an endeavor, however, is the realization that the field of inquiry which focuses on material culture should not be limited to things alone. In the example above, people *made* the signs and *responded* to them; analyzing the signs as outputs of behavior requires knowledge of the situation and benefits from having other data such as stories, speech, and celebration. In addition, material culture studies, so called, should not make "society" or "culture" the prevailing or exclusive concern of investigation but ought to promote research as well that considers individuals and particular interactional networks. Finally, the potential for application must be realized. In this instance, members of the Management Development Department asked Susan Montepio to give a presentation at one of their meetings. She quoted some of the comments she had overheard or elicited earlier about the role of birthday parties in helping achieve fellowship, contributing to departmental functioning, and enhancing communication. She cited some of the themes of narratives, noting especially differences in attitudes of department members toward the former and present leadership. She remarked on the anxiety felt by department members about the prospects of moving to headquarters. The group vice president from the corporate office attended this meeting. Informed and impressed by the presentation, she promised that when the department moves to corporate headquarters the members will be permitted to continue their parties—a statement that itself is expressive, symbolizing to many the changing policy of management toward a more humanistic approach. Studies of material culture, then, not only offer insights into the human condition but can also serve as a basis for altering the situation to provide pleasant social and sensory experiences, purvey good will, and promote a sense of well-being, thereby achieving what many of us hope to derive from organizational life but rarely do.

Material Culture Audit

Formal statements of philosophy, policy manuals or rule books, and materials used for recruitment or distributed to customers state or imply, whether intentionally or not, values, assumptions, preoccupations, and a tone or feeling about the organization. In many corporations now, for example, a professed value is that of human welfare. Yet the typical statement of objectives given to employees is badly written and filled with jargon; few would be tempted to read it, fewer still would understand it, and probably no one would feel inspired. Moreover, in many instances people are not mentioned until well into the document, and then they are referred to as "human resources" or "assets" (on a par, presumably, with financial resources and raw materials).

More positively, in regard to materials distributed to employees, TRW Electronics and Defense has prepared an attractive portfolio consisting of

several readable and profusely illustrated items including "A Guidebook to How We Work" (unposed photos of ordinary people of different ethnic backgrounds, simple prose, and appropriate quotations from Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Victor Hugo, John Ruskin, and others). Excellon Industries, producer of precision drilling machines for the printed circuit board industry, has a publication called "Hits & Chips," which details, through a homey personal narrative by its founder and chairman of the board, how "It All Started in the Garage..." "Inside Versatec," given to new employees, contains a section called "Our Traditions" describing festive and celebratory behavior as well as such material culture as the conference room table which several executives made by hand. The book notes, in obvious awareness of messages communicated by objects: "One thing everyone likes about Versatec is that management scorns the usual preferential reserved parking spaces and 'mahagony row' atmosphere. Instead, a comfortable friendliness prevails."

Not so many years ago, few companies considered what they were communicating in their annual reports to stockholders and the general public. Increasingly more, however, are trying for a highly individualistic, personalized style, one that purposely avoids banality and corporatese. Extremes in recent years (during the worst recession in decades) include Package Machinery's letter to shareholders that the preceding year was exciting, "if you like that hollow feeling of insecurity in the pit of your stomach." Tektronix used self-deprecating headlines including "A Swell Idea Backfires," and "Our Problems Mature."

When immersed in organizational life, we rarely note much of what we are conveying through our behavior and outputs. If one were to do a "material culture audit," however, it would have to include such matters as the amount of communication by memo (as opposed to firsthand interaction), and what this conveys or is inferred to mean; the length of some memos and the number of pages of reports and statements of company philosophy; and the kinds of information that are disseminated in written form, as well as the style. It would document the agenda of staff meetings and thus the priorities of some managers; the settings of activities; and the time devoted to various tasks or activities. Is there consistency between professed values and what is signaled? Is the organization alleged to be a "people company," for example, when in fact a material culture assessment reveals that communication is primarily through written rather than interpersonal form, that more time is spent behind closed doors than with people, and that interaction is impaired by the design of space? Material culture visibly supports, or detracts from, policy. It can be used as a tool by concerned and dedicated organizational participants wishing to create the kind of ambience that leads to fellowship and community. For example, the quality and quantity of tools, supplies, and raw materials often are symbolic of the importance

attributed to people, their skills and tasks; providing some individuals with the latest and best equipment may leave others disgruntled and disaffected. Speaking of "unskilled" or "semiskilled" tasks to someone about to engage in them, or referring to what someone does as "only," "merely," or "simply," rarely builds a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Pride in skills and identification with others sometimes results from training that emphasizes not just how to do the task but the history, rituals, stories—the human element—surrounding the activity. Seemingly costly in the short run, setting aside "sacred" time and space from the "profane" in which to interact, talk, and celebrate can be uplifting and pleasing, transcending work and transforming organizational life.

Organizational Concepts

The questions posed by Simon Bronner for this symposium are organizational questions, calling for a discussion of purpose, philosophy, and objectives. In my research on the material culture of corporate life, I find a great deal of uncertainty among organizational participants as to what characterizes and distinguishes several phenomena. In my view, *objective* is immediate, an end or aim of action soon realized, whether it be the sale of a product, the preservation of a particular building, or the publication of an essay. *Goal* is striving towards the achievement of something, an end to which a larger design tends; in religion it might be the winning of converts, and in a game one of the bounds or stations towards which players attempt to advance. *Values* are principles and precepts held in high esteem and considered by us as precious. *Philosophy* in an organization is that body of principles governing conduct in regard to all matters; it includes values, and it is based on assumptions about right behavior. *Purpose* is an aim that we propose for ourselves; it is our resolve. *Mission* is a sending forth to proselytize; it is that special errand or commission that in the extreme is thought of as calling or destiny, for it gives ultimate purpose to our lives and activities transcending the mundane world.

Of all the concepts, mission seems to be the most important. Whether articulated or not, it permeates the successful enterprise, infusing it with a sense of distinct character and uniqueness around which organizational participants can rally their efforts, draw upon inner strength, and undertake courageous acts when confronting the untried and uncertain. While objectives sometimes are upgraded to the status of goals or purpose, and values to the philosophy, mission rarely is defined or discussed by organizational participants; when it is expressed, usually it is downplayed by being called something else. An example of a statement of mission comes from a Japanese-owned electronics component maker in California. Called

"Management Philosophy," it reads: "Our goal is to strive toward both the material and spiritual fulfillment of all employees in the Company, and through this successful fulfillment, serve mankind in its progress and prosperity." In what is referred to as "Management Policy," an elaboration of this mission is given that implies organization as human enterprise, namely, that "Our purpose is to fully satisfy the needs of our customers and in return gain a just profit for ourselves. We are a family united in common bonds and singular goals. One of these bonds is the respect and support we feel for our fellow family coworkers."

Material Culture Studies

Below I state what I conceive to be some of the objectives, goals, and so on of the professional association of material culture studies.

objective   to study objects and their manufacture, functions, and use wherever we encounter them, including in the workplace and as a part of organizational life

goals   to develop the concepts and methods appropriate for a multi- or transdisciplinary perspective in the things that people make and what they do with objects

values   that the study of material culture benefits from the combination of research questions basic to many disciplines or fields of study and from the application of skills of such varied scholars as art historians, cultural geographers, folklorists, museologists, management theorists, and historians, among others

philosophy   that while the focus may be on objects (the "material") as outputs of patterned behavior and expressions of values (the "culture"), research should include attention to the act of making and doing, to the conceptualizing of and responding to form, and to other activities engaged in by specific individuals in interaction with others that will help us understand the nature and reason for the existence of the objects

mission   to understand human behavior, to enhance appreciation of what people make and are capable of accomplishing, and, when appropriate, to apply our insights to help improve the quality of life