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Retro Homes and the Value of 'Authentic' Iconicity

The acquisition of original artefacts has been theorised as important to consumers of retro style and as integral to the production of cultural capital (e.g. Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Jenß, 2005). In this paper I consider these arguments using ethnographic research conducted with retro enthusiasts in the UK.

I begin by exploring the ways in which distinction is made through narratives of originality, quality and individuality used to describe pieces of furniture and interiors. I observe that it is often the most culturally undesirable items that have the highest symbolic exchange value when put in the 'right' context and attached to the 'appropriate' identity. Thus, rather than contingent on the exclusivity, rarity or origin of artefacts themselves, it is the appropriation and demonstration of 'authentic' iconicity that reflects and produces high levels of cultural capital. I argue that this is part of the discourse of self-expressive individuality that is central to middle-class distinction making and to consumer culture. The value of 'authentic' iconicity is also evidence of everyday life as commodity to be exchanged and as an investment from which certain groups are excluded. At the same time, however, the practices of retro enthusiasts go beyond the accumulation of capital. Thus I conclude by reflecting on the problems with theories that conceptualise everyday life in terms of exchange.