

# The seduction of craft: Making and value in artisanal labour

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## Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork amongst lacemakers in Slovakia, this article examines the relationship between practices of making and the production of value in artisanal labour. The author shows that the processes of making challenged artisans' perceptions of the natural distribution of agency between humans and objects, resulting in feelings of ontological insecurity. Arguing that they perceived this insecurity as a problem of ethics, as well as a problem of agency, she demonstrates how the intellectual and sensual experience of manufacture was constitutive of the ways in which artisans perceived the value of their craftwork. Taking this approach, the article seeks to disrupt the anthropological habit of framing questions about value in terms of domestic economies, global markets and aesthetic regimes, and making in terms of skilled practice, embodied knowledge and knowledge transmission. The author also suggests that scholars ought to pay more attention to the ways in which ethical considerations are grounded in our ontological disposition towards the material world.

## Keywords

agency, craft, ethics, labour, value

## Introduction

Doing fieldwork amongst bobbin lacemakers in central Slovakia, I was faced with an unexpected paradox: when speaking to me, artisans would present their craft work as a hobby, then as menial labour and later as a dangerously addictive obsession. In the very same conversation, I was told that making lace was a way of 'making do' in times of economic hardship and, barely a breath later, artisans would claim that craft practice was nothing more than a personal indulgence. Lacemakers seemed equally ambivalent in their descriptions of the experience of making lace itself. They would emphasize the

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emotional and therapeutic aspects of craft practice, and then warn me that it could develop into an obsessive 'sickness'. The process of making was described in terms of mastery and control, but also in terms of submission brought on by a seduction of the craftswoman by her own tools. Indeed, they felt that these tools exercised a kind of sensuous constraint on their minds and bodies. And, finally, in our conversations about lace and lace making, artisans would often refer to the aesthetic qualities of a given piece of lace when making a statement about the diligence, skill and good will of its maker (or lack thereof). Lacemakers thus operated with a particular descriptive language that posited the social and economic value of an artisan's labour as visible in the very materiality of the lace itself.

Craft and craftsmanship have recently emerged as a key area for anthropological enquiry into the nature of skilled knowledge and embodied practice, as well as theories about the construction of value. Focusing on practitioners' engagement with the tools and materials of their trade, a number of ethnographers have probed the relationship between creativity, cognition and the transmission of knowledge (Gowlland, 2019; Ingold, 2013, Marchand, 2016). Approaching artisanal production as a type of unalienated labour, they have posited craft as 'an ontologically engaged orientation to the world' which overturns 'modernist Cartesian separations of head and hand, mind and world' (Yarrow and Jones, 2014: 258–259). Others have been more concerned with understanding contemporary political economies of craft, examining how shifting aesthetic regimes, knowledge economies and commercial models have influenced the status of artisanal products and labour in the global market (Cant, 2019; Luckman, 2015; Wilkinson-Weber and Ory, 2016) and reconfigured relations of class, gender and ethnicity in craft communities (Bose, 2019; Schlossberg, 2015). Focusing either on practices of making or the production of value, however, this scholarship has given less consideration to how practices of material transformation themselves may be implicated in the creation of value. If craft is indeed characterized by 'dialectic, mutually transformative, engagements between head, hand, and material' (Yarrow and Jones, 2014: 258), what dispositions towards labour does it entail on the part of artisans? How does it influence the way in which they experience and articulate the value of their craftwork? And how does it influence the way they reconcile the internal goods this work produces with the value(s) placed on it by the market?

In this article, I unpick the disparate and contradictory statements lacemakers made about their work, examining them for what they can tell us about the relationship between practices of making and the production of value. Focusing on the affective and experiential aspects of craftwork, I start by showing how the process of making lace challenged craftswomen's perceptions of the natural distribution of agency between themselves and the material world. Craftwork, I argue, created feelings of ontological insecurity: the act of making not only gave artisans sense of mastery over the self and the material, but was also experienced as a pleasurable but disturbing feeling of addiction and submission to the tools of the trade. Lacemakers associated this seductive aspect of craftwork with creativity, skill and the desire to undertake good craftsmanship for its own sake. However, they also regarded it as a threat to their bodily autonomy and – by extension – their capacity to produce for the market. Indeed, while artisans saw craftwork as a commendable demonstration of purposeful activity, they did not regard

all production of lace as equally socially and materially valuable. Believing that the impulse to create sometimes led a lacemaker to privilege creative and technical virtuosity over taste and profitability, they were anxious to demonstrate that their practice was more than mere 'needlework'. For artisans, in short, making raised questions not only about the nature of human agency, but also about the production of value and values, of meanings and norms.

Focusing on the way lacemakers' ontological assumptions about the material world shaped the manner in which they valued craftwork, leads me to probe contemporary approaches to craft as a privileged site of material and mental engagement. As Thomas Yarrow and Siân Jones (2014: 258) have shown, artisanal labour has long been constructed in opposition to 'modes of production that separate and socially institutionalize . . . distinction between thought and practice, head and hand, mind and world'. Since the mid-19th century, social and educational reformers have celebrated craft as an ethically superior form of labour and an ideal model for the transmission of knowledge (Adamson, 2007, 2010). While rejecting romantic notions of craft as an antidote to capitalist alienation, anthropologists have also embraced the notion of artisanal labour as ontologically distinct, using craft to deliver a rebuttal of the Cartesian dualism between mind and body (Ingold, 2000, 2013). Highlighting the inseparability of thinking and doing, design and making, anthropologists have shone light on the mutual interdependence of human and non-human agencies in artisanal production (Marchand, 2010). However, as Yarrow and Jones (2014) argue, this conceptual privileging of engagement has led ethnographers to overlook the various forms of intellectual and emotional detachment which also characterize craft practice. Indeed, the tendency of scholars to approach craft as a special case against which dominant modes of production and their ontologies can be critiqued and challenged, means that conceptual insight has often come at the price of further ethnographic insight. Eager to dispel the philosophical orthodoxies of Western modernity, they have often failed to consider in what way these are part of the lived reality inhabited by craftspeople themselves.

In the case of Slovak lacemakers, craftwork did not provide an oasis from modernist ontologies. Instead, it was profoundly shaped by them. Disturbed by the interplay of human and non-human agency involved in the process of making, artisans appeared to share what Bruno Latour (1993) has called a 'modern' mindset, believing in the ontological separation between material causality and human interest. More importantly, they operated within a wider socio-cultural tradition in which the maintenance of this separation was implicated in the production of the social value of objects, people and practices. As William Pietz (1987) has argued, European thought makes a reoccurring connection between causality and value; the 'true' value of objects (use-value or exchange value) depending on the continuing status of matter itself as entirely inanimate. Similarly, Webb Keane (2005: 192) has shown how the work of separation constitutes materiality as moral project: 'Morality . . . depends on the correct understanding of the materiality of things and the immateriality of persons, a balancing act which invites perpetual anxiety.' As a moment when the inanimate nature of the materials and tools of the trade were no longer self-evident, the process of making inspired precisely such feelings of 'perpetual anxiety' in lacemakers, engendering discussions about the nature of craftwork as simultaneously affirmative and addictive, frivolous and productive.

Ultimately, then, I argue that artisans experienced making lace not simply as a form of physical and intellectual labour, but as an *ethical* project – that is, a project of patrolling the ‘boundaries that distinguish persons from things, ends from means’ (Keane, 2010: 71).

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I provide a brief outline of the socio-economic context of lacemaking in central Slovakia, as well as my fieldwork and methodological approach. I note that, contrary to what might be expected, the differing histories of the craft in the villages of Špania Dolina and Staré Hory, and in Banská Bystrica town, had relatively little impact on artisans’ experience of craftwork or its status as waged work or a hobby. Over the subsequent three sections, I then present and analyse my ethnographic material, exploring lacemakers’ descriptions of the dangers and rewards, pleasures and pains of craftwork. Focusing on the ontological insecurities that arise during the production process, I start by examining how the tensions between the agency of the artisans and their tools of the trade bred two opposing but complementary ways of thinking and speaking about craftwork as work and as a hobby. Moving on to consider lacemakers’ reflections on the meaning and purpose of skilled practice, I show how these conversations coalesced into shared discourse on productivity and the value of artisanal labour which was expressed through artisans’ propensity to label lacemaking both as work and a hobby, as well as the belief that the value of craft activity was visible and materially evident in the finished product. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the conceptual implications of my findings for the anthropological study of craft, arguing for greater attention to be paid to the way concerns about the purpose, meaning and value of their labour emerge from artisans’ engagement with the material world as they work.

## **Making lace in (post-Communist) central Slovakia**

This article is based on long-term fieldwork undertaken in several episodes between 2003–2013. The majority of the material was collected through interviews and informal conversations during repeated visits to the homes of 40 lacemakers in the villages of Špania Dolina, Staré Hory and the provincial capital Banská Bystrica. Bobbin lace making has been a cottage industry in these villages since the 16th century when immigrant Germans settled in the communities, attracted by work in the local copper mines (Marková, 1962). The production of lace for commercial sale, undertaken by the wives and children of the miners, provided families with a supplementary income which became increasingly important with the decline of the local mining industry in the 19th century. In the early 1950s, the post-war Communist regime incorporated this cottage industry into a national network of state-sponsored craft cooperatives, securing long-term employment for local lacemakers. By the 1970s, urbanites in nearby Banská Bystrica began to take up lace making as a form of needlecraft alongside knitting, crocheting and embroidery. Women who had no family ties to Špania Dolina and Staré Hory taught themselves to make lace using textbooks or learned the craft through courses arranged by the Slovenský Zväz Žien (the Slovak Union of Women) and ROH (the state Workers’ Union). Today, a number of lace-making clubs exist in Banská Bystrica where craftswomen swap tips, techniques and designs.

The history of lace making as cottage industry in the villages of Špania Dolina and Staré Hory means that the craft has always been associated with poverty and the need to ‘make do’ in these communities. When I started my fieldwork in the mid-2000s, however, lacemakers in both the villages and in Banská Bystrica town were actively looking to sell their products. Post-communist economic reforms – including the privatization of public infrastructure and services, and the liberalization of prices for many goods – had led to a sharp rise in the cost of living. The majority of my respondents were females between the ages of 45 and 70 who belonged to the most financially vulnerable groups: the retired, and those with little or no secondary or vocational training. Facing economic insecurity, lacemakers in all three locations sold their lace in order to supplement their income from employment, old age pensions and social benefits. They marketed their wares to visitors at fairs and festivals, supplied local shops selling souvenirs and ‘folk art’, and used personal connections to find buyers (Makovicky, 2009). Acknowledging that their clients often suffered the same economic constraints, lacemakers perceived any sale to be a matter of good fortune, rather than a matter of course. Profit, in other words, was considered a by-product of manufacture, rather than the other way around.

Indeed, making lace was not only about gaining an income. As an integral part of ethnographic fieldwork, I was apprenticed with respected local craftswomen in Špania Dolina and Staré Hory, learning to make the style of lace local to each village. My contacts with lacemakers in Banská Bystrica were established through membership of two lace-making clubs. As such, I had ample opportunity to witness how notions of knowledge, skill, tradition and authenticity differed between practitioners (Makovicky, 2010). Urban club members spoke with urgency about the dangers of the craft ‘dying out’ together with the elderly craftswomen of Špania Dolina and Staré Hory and implemented a programme of conservation in order to salvage craft knowledge and what they deemed to be ‘old designs’. Craftswomen in the villages perceived these efforts negatively, worrying that a diffusion of local styles and motifs would undermine the uniqueness of their native traditions. Yet, whatever differences of perspective and opinion existed between these communities of practitioners, all lacemakers shared an element of personal pride in their work, as well as a genuine passion for the craft. Club members and village craftswomen alike enjoyed the challenge of making and designing new motifs and produced intricate statement pieces which served only to show off their skill. Indeed, with income from craftwork low and intermittent, making lace was never wholly work nor merely a hobby for either group of artisans.

## **Mastery and seduction**

Weaving lace, I was often told by lacemakers, is an emotional experience. This was reflected in a wider acknowledgement that craftwork could be used as a therapeutic device. I found that many of my informants fell into lace making a time of change or crises in their lives. Women continually pointed out that it ‘took the mind off’ marital problems or the grief at the loss of a relative:

(And when you started, what interested you in it?) I’ll tell you, when you want to make lace, you have to concentrate on it, especially when you are a beginner as I was. And all your worries

are set aside. When my husband was very ill, I cried all day, but when you make lace, you have to concentrate on that work . . . concentration on something else. (Viktória Urbanová, Banská Bystrica)

A characteristic description of the effect of intense sessions of lace making was the loss of the sense of time passing. Apart from making them 'forget the time', lacemakers also told me that while making lace, there were periods when they lost awareness of what was going on around them. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has described this experience as a state of *flow*. Characteristic of this *flow* sensation is that actors – completely engrossed in their activity – concentrate on the skills needed to perform the task and the limitations and possibilities presented within, reflecting little on what may happen around them. This leads to a 'merging of action and awareness' and 'self-forgetfulness'; in *flow* state, 'action falls upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor' (p. 36). Consequently, not only does the person in question become less aware of the passing of time but, Csikszentmihalyi claims, they derive a certain feeling of control over their environment.

Franz Boas (1955) describes the pleasure of craft work in terms of learning ever more complex actions in order to overcome increasing technical difficulties, a feeling called the 'instinct of mastery' by Serge Tisseron (1999: 135). Learning a new stitch or a new pattern, that is, repeating it until it had become an embodied motion which no longer required conscious reflection, was indeed a source of *flow* experience. As my informant Jana Horváthová happily recounted:

And this, when I was learning . . . I couldn't learn the half-stitch. The lady who taught me would ask 'What are you doing?' And I (would say) 'I'm undoing again'. And now look how nice it is! I like doing it now. And I was giving up, 'I won't do it', I said. (Jana Horváthová, Banská Bystrica)

The pleasure with which Jana described how she finally learned the half-stitch illustrates how the acquisition of skill was experienced emotionally. Jana had quite literally mastered the half-stitch because it was only when she was no longer engaged in a frustrating battle with bobbins and thread that did not respond to her efforts that she experienced the *flow* sensation that followed confidence in craft activity.

Mastery, therapy and control, however, were only some of the terms that lacemakers used to articulate the emotional outcome of their tactile involvement with their pillow. Peter Dormer (1997: 152) describes the pleasure of craft work as 'a form of intellectual and imaginative possession' which originates in the love of objects. Indeed, compulsion and obsession emerged as the 'darker side' of craft work in my conversations with lacemakers: there was apparently a constant danger that the therapeutic value of lace making could be subverted and, rather than the lacemaker gaining control over the process, it would force her into submission. All my informants described lace making as their love, but also as a curse. Craftswomen warned beginners – half mockingly, half seriously – that lace making is a 'sickness' which will never release them once they have come under its spell. Several lacemakers told me that they became 'unwell' ('*chora*') if they did not have an ongoing project pinned on their pillows at all times. This meant that



they suffered from a sort of nervous frustration which could only be mitigated by vigorous activity:

I feel totally sick if I can't work [make lace]. Sick. I cook, I clean and clean. (Jozefína Mišíková, Banská Bystrica)

Receiving new designs, lacemakers described themselves as grabbed by an irresistible urge to execute it and stubbornly refused to complete other tasks before they had mastered it. Upon encountering a problem, they stayed up long after the rest of the family had retired to bed to battle it out with the pillow, or found they could not rest:

Well, when I have a new pattern, I get up at five in the morning. It won't (leave me alone), I have to get up. To see whether I can master it or I can't master it. (Dagmar Babjaková, Špania Dolina)

This submission seemed not only to have a pleasurable aspect, but also an addictive power. The unworked pillow often came up in conversation as a picture of seduction, the pillow itself often being treated as the lacemaker's partner (or adversary) in the process of production. It was not unusual for artisans to stroke (or hit) and speak to their pillows ('Sit still'! or 'Now, look what you have done'!).

Listening to lacemakers speak about the sensual and emotional experience of craft work revealed the parameters of their ontology: describing lace making in terms of mastery and seduction, they associated agency with the ability to command the material world and control human action. Yet, while craftwork allowed them to exercise such agency, it also presented a constant danger by threatening to corrupt practice through sensual materiality and a pleasurable loss of control. Artisans, in other words, experienced craft work as both submission and mastery, approaching the material world alternately as inanimate, subject to the will of human agents and reflecting their labour, but also as animate and dangerously seductive. Feeling themselves alternately in control of and controlled by craft practice, artisans saw agency as a 'zero-sum game' played between (human) subjects and (non-human) objects. Indeed, what united their various experiences of making lace was a profoundly asymmetric understanding of the subject-object relation: either the lacemaker or the pillow had the upper hand.

The question of interest thus becomes how this experience of asymmetry as compulsive behaviour was reflected in the way lacemakers presented their craft activity and, by extension, what role it played in the creation of value in people and things. In the next section, I return to the experience of mastery and pleasure associated with craft work to explore the relation between the materiality and morality. I show how the seductive pleasures of lace making contributed to a meaningful discourse on the value of labour, lacemakers conceptualizing productivity as a form of energy released by and invested in craft activity. In so doing, I begin to sketch out their particular 'ethics of production', showing how they operated with both a simplified labour theory of value associated with domestic production and the understanding that value was created through exchange, productivity becoming visible through the transformation of lace into consumer goods.

## Work and play

As seen above, lacemakers are keen to emphasize the pleasurable aspects of lace making (the paired aspects of therapy and submission). However, as I befriended artisans, I began to hear them speak of craft activity in much more instrumental terms:

Well, in the summer I don't make much anyway, when it is so hot, your hands sweat. (So one can work better in the winter?) Yes! (But there isn't any light?) During the day I work 2–3 hours, and then again in the evening . . . Everywhere the light has to be turned on at 4–5 o'clock, so I work until 9–9:30, but only with the white thread. I can't work with the dark ones, because that is [too much] on the eyes. (Jozefina Mišíková, Banská Bystrica)

Jozefina Mišíková was a lively elderly lady, who at the age of 70 began selling her lace by renting stands at folk festivals and seasonal markets across the country. Mišíková reasoned that she was lonely after her husband's death, but also that she needed an extra income to supplement her meagre old age pension. Despite her advanced age, she was not only willing to travel several hundreds of kilometres to attend festivals, but she was also a very astute saleswoman, quickly mapping which festivals were worth attending, as well as the tastes of various groups of clients. While their earnings were very modest – amounting to less than minimum wage when the materials and production time were taken into account – Mišíková's efforts to gain a small income from her craft work were not unique: whether in Banská Bystrica town, or in the villages of Špania Dolina and Staré Hory, lace making emerged as a way of 'making do', that is, of supplementing the income from employment, old age pensions and social benefits. For some informants, like the 26-year-old designer Jaroslava Genderová, who worked for a local clothing manufacturer in Banská Bystrica that paid her only intermittently, 'making do' through lace making was a vital part of the family's domestic economy. As Dagmar Babjaková of Špania Dolina told me: 'Well in this day and age every crown is precious. I don't mean just for me, but for the other ladies too, for everyone.'

This pragmatic attitude contrasted with women's propensity to call their lace making a 'hobby' at face value. Moreover, such comments shed interesting light on the apparently addictive nature of lace-making practice: it not only suggests that craftswomen are able to resist its seductive aspects, but that women highlight various aspects of their craft practice according to the context in which they were speaking. As we have seen above, for example, the lacemaker Dagmar Babjaková described lace making *both* as an obsessive hobby ('Well, when I have a new pattern, I get up at five in the morning. It won't (leave me alone), I have to get up') and a source of income ('Well, in this day and age every crown is precious'). Pleasure and pragmatism, just like submission and mastery, were not incompatible, but appeared to be used instrumentally by craftswomen in conversation.

Regardless of whether lace making was spoken of as hobby or commodity production, however, women often referred to craft work as a release and expenditure of energy. As detailed above, lacemakers spoke of being driven to make lace by a peculiar sort of nervous energy that would not let them rest ('I feel totally sick if I can't work'). One craftswoman described her passion for lace making as an explosion of previously unknown and untapped desire: 'Well, it really burst forth ('prepuklo') when I went on old



age pension eight years ago'. Others talked of how much energy craft work consumed: they complained of fatigue and frequently talked of aching backs, painfully sore eyes and stiff shoulders as the price of indulging in craft activity. Quite a few were worried that the fruits of their labour would never see the light of day:

There isn't very much demand. Such a demand that it could be . . . but it really is a pity. Because in my drawers I have . . . I always show them, look, I have so much in my drawers. (Dagmar Babjaková, Špania Dolina)

Throughout my time in central Slovakia, I frequently heard craftswomen referring to such drawers full of lace. Tereza Čierná, who led the *Vtačík* [Bird] lace-making club in Banská Bystrica, explained to me that exhibiting the lace made by the members was vital, because 'making lace for the drawer' was not going to spread awareness of lace making as Slovak heritage amongst the public and officials. Most commonly, however, when women said they 'made lace for the drawer' they meant that they regarded lace making as primarily a personal indulgence, rather than as the creation of a commercial product:

(And do you still give it to her to sell in the shop?) No, she put a 40–50 percent commission on them and because of that, it wasn't sold much there. So now I work at home for the drawer. (Viktória Urbanová, Banská Bystrica).

This image of a drawer full of lace revealed much about how lacemakers understood and found merit in their craft practice. Firstly, suggesting that it was over and above a way of 'making do', lacemakers valued craft work as a material demonstration of constant, productive activity. Writing about popular concepts of labour in 20th-century rural central Slovakia, Josef Kandert (2004) notes that a high value was traditionally put on physical labour, activities such as growing their own produce, building and repairing their homes, and artisanal production being the measure of a person's social worth in the eyes of their peers. Similarly, Martha Lampland (1995: 318) describes how the work ethic of Hungarian villagers was built on a need to demonstrate and materialize action: 'To possess action was the goal of action; the value of activity derived from its constant realization by acting, working incessantly to substantiate, materially and socially, these very principles. Lacemakers' frequent references to their impulse to create as a kind of obsession, 'sickness', or nervous energy, reflected much the same perception of constant activity as a virtue (even when it appeared to be without direction or goal). Indeed, when she spoke of her drawer full of lace, unsold and unused, Babjaková underlined that the lack of sales did not hurt her productivity: she continued to produce regardless.

However, as a metaphor for accumulation and stasis, the drawer full of lace was also a negative image. As indicated by the comments of Dagmar and Tereza above, it described a situation in which a lack of commercial demand or public awareness prevented lacemakers from displaying and selling their products. As such, it hinted at the existence of an unspoken ideal which held that craft activity had greatest merit not simply when it was undertaken for its own sake, but when it took the form of value transformation – that is, when productive activity not only turned material into lace artefacts, but allowed for

the further conversion of these products into other material goods (through sale) or into immaterial social values (such as 'social awareness' or social recognition).

Listening to lacemakers reflect upon their practice, in short, it became clear that they operated with a particular 'ethics of production': a discourse of production which linked local conceptions of materiality with normative values regulating labour. They imagined and spoke about their craftwork in terms of the expenditure and re-investment of productive energy. Indeed, there was a reoccurring idea that such productive energy was in danger of being misappropriated by seductive materiality, binding the lacemaker to her pillow in submission. Furthermore, they expressed the idea that the energy unleashed – '*bursting forth*', as one lacemaker put it – needed to be controlled, reined in and reinvested in order to work for it to produce social and material values. Such values could be produced either through the performance of craftsmanship for its own sake, or the production of sale for sale and/or public exhibition. However, lace making as 'work' did not necessarily carry more merit than that done purely for pleasure. In both cases, the demonstration of constant activity lent craftwork an air of virtuous productivity, regardless of whether the lace made ended up 'in the drawer'. Indeed, as I show in my final section below, the relative social value bestowed to different modes of craftwork and the material qualities of the lace it produced was always determined comparatively and contextually.

## The ethics of pleasure and production

Roy Dilley (2004) points out that craft work often operates within regimes of value which is 'predicated on the visibility of production, that is, on the simultaneous presence of the processes and means of production as well as of the material products that result from those processes' (Dilley, 2004: 805). In central Slovakia, the lace produced through 'work', and that of lace making as 'play', were presented to me as visibly and materially different. A booklet of Spanish lace designs I had brought to a lace-making lesson in Špania Dolina elicited the following comment from Ana Paličková:

We didn't make these kinds of lace, because women would not make any money on them. Ours were sparser ('rečie')<sup>1</sup> . . . so that we would earn something; it was a terribly poor area. No agriculture, nothing. Here, lace was made for sale. It wasn't made like . . . 'I'd like to do some needle work, so I'll do it [for myself]'. (Ana Paličková, Špania Dolina)

Nancy Munn (1986: 17) has argued that 'certain [material] outcomes can . . . be considered icons of the acts that produced them.' Following Charles Sanders Peirce (1955), she calls these material outcomes *qualisigns*. In Gawan society, Munn (1986) writes, *qualisigns* are seen to signify the value of acts measured against their relative capacity to expand spatially and temporally the field of action of a given individual. As such, Gawan *qualisigns* embody notions of space and time, functioning as an opposition of kinaesthetic, bodily related qualities (for example, *heaviness, slowness, tightness* versus *lightness, slipperiness, speed*). This results in a 'symbolic nexus' (p. 80) according to which 'logico-causal' inferences are made about the relation between events and outcomes, as well as the intentions of the acting individual. The 'density' of the Spanish lace implied by Ana Paličková's comments can be understood as such a *qualisign* in the sense that it

was a material quality taken to be an icon of the maker's apparent abundance of leisure time; time which allowed her to expend the time and energy on producing elaborate (and therefore unprofitable) laces. The comparative 'flimsiness' of Špania Dolina lace, on the other hand, was a result of a careful weighing of the energy invested in production against the rewards expected from its sale. In short, qualities such as 'flimsiness' and 'density' were presented by Ana as the different material embodiments of the transformative value of the work of different lacemakers.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, what struck me as particularly interesting about Paličková's comment was the fact that the characterization of a piece of lace as *riedke* (wide-meshed or flimsy) was generally meant as a negative critique of the quality of the product: it indicated that the maker lacked skill, had worked the lace too fast, or was using inappropriate materials which resulted in a poor outcome. In Špania Dolina, such negative aesthetic judgements were usually levelled at lacemakers who were seen to have too avid an interest in commercial gains: their lace was described as 'too wide-meshed', 'repetitious' (meaning that the lacemaker made only very simple, quick patterns), or 'like a rag' (meaning the lace was loose and lacked the ideal stiffness) (see Makovicky, 2009). As such, the value attributed to lace artefacts and efforts of their makers did not simply rely on the visibility of the production process (as Dilley, 2004, posits). Rather, 'visibility' itself relied on a particular descriptive practice that made use of *qualisigns* to establish an analogy between abstract notions of productivity and the material qualities of lace. 'Flimsiness' and 'gauziness' were more than simply quantifiable physical attributes; they stood as the material 'proof' of productive or unproductive practice on the part of the maker. Furthermore, through description, these *qualisigns* were burdened with specific normative associations by being presented as icons of laziness and avarice, or of virtuous labour.

Statements like Ana Paličková's, then, were a form of moral commentary which posited the intentions and motivations of the producer as visible in the very materiality of the lace, tying together ideas about the value of certain acts with the (moral) value of the persons performing these actions. As is clear from Ana's tone, this included ideas about the merit of their own craft practice. Indeed, when speaking about their craftwork, artisans used statements about their productivity to construct a moral narrative about their persona. Such narratives often evoked the 'ethics of production' in a situational and comparative way. Telling me about her long career as an artisan, for example, Maria Jablková presented her lacemaking as both an avenue for earning an income, a hobby and a particular source of personal pride:

Ever since [Mrs] Grobová used to come, since then I have been making lace for the ÚEUV. But, besides this, I found a job too. So, I was employed too. I worked here in Staré Hory, in the grocery, selling vegetables. And this was my hobby. 18 years I worked there. But besides that, I didn't give this [lacemaking] up . . . I had an American [an emigré] who used to come. Every year for 20 years. She wrote to me, telling me what I should prepare for her and make. And when she came, she always came for something I had made for her. If I had all the lace I even made, I'd really be a millionaire! (Maria Jablková, Staré Hory)

There was a striking contrast between Ana Paličková's terse observation about the moral virtue of hard work (and the frivolousness of 'needlecrafts') and Maria Jablková's foregrounding of her lacemaking as a labour of love (albeit one that earned her an income). While both women presented themselves as extraordinarily hard-working, Maria

appeared to label her craftwork as a hobby precisely in order to positively distinguish it from mere wage labour. Lacemaking was something that she did for her own pleasure, as much as it was a profession.

Value is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves and to others (Graeber, 2001: 45). When lacemakers in central Slovakia spoke of their craft activity and that of others, they appeared to be commenting on their productive capacity and how they chose to expend it. As such, craft practice was seen as creating not only valued social and financial outcomes, but also as reflecting aspects of their personhood. Indeed, as we have seen in the contrasting characterizations of craftwork amongst two of my oldest and most experienced respondents, Ana and Maria, it was also a mode of reflecting one's relationship with oneself, and the relationship between the self and others.

## **Conclusions**

In his seminal ethnography of craftsmen and craftsmanship on the island of Crete, Michael Herzfeld (2004) notes that artisans' affective relationship with their work changed from resentment to love as they transitioned from the position of apprentice to that of a master of trades. Their declarations of affection for their craft, he writes, not only made a virtue of economic necessity, but were a claim to a certain 'freedom of action and affect' within the context of tradition (p. 78). Amongst lacemakers in central Slovakia, however, the labelling of craftwork as a 'labour of love' was not necessarily an expression of mastery or skill, nor was it an assertion of professional identity. Rather, lacemakers' declarations of love for their craft were associated with a certain loss of self-control; a pleasurable but disturbing feeling of addiction and submission to the lace pillow. Equally frequent descriptions of craft practice as 'work', in contrast, expressed the kind of pragmatic and detached attitude to craftwork as wage labour which signalled professionalism. Thus, when using labels such as 'work', 'hobby', or 'labour of love', artisans were not simply making a distinction between lacemaking as paid or unpaid labour, or their identities as craftswomen. Rather, they used them to describe two viscerally different experiences of the production process itself: a sense of mastery and autonomy over their bodies and the material world, and a feeling of submission and loss of self-control to the tools of their trade.

In this article, I have sought to address the relationship between practices of making and the production of value by exploring the way in which Slovak lacemakers struggled to articulate the purpose and meaning of their skilled practice. The meaning and purpose of craftwork, I argue, was determined not only by wider normative ideas and ideals of labour as a demonstration and materialization of constant activity, but equally by feelings of ontological insecurity which arose from the experience of making itself. Artisans valued craftwork for the sense of agency and bodily autonomy it gave them, but also experienced the process of production as a dangerous moment when this autonomy was in danger of being corrupted by sensual materiality. Manufacture was not an unproblematic avenue for personal expression and profitable production, but rather a point when labour – the paramount expression of individual agency – could be misdirected by the pleasures of craftwork. Ontological experience and normative expression thus accompanied one another: the experience of making challenged what lacemakers took to be the natural relationship between the (animate, agentic) subject and (inanimate, passive) object, diverting their efforts towards compulsive

overproduction and the privileging of aesthetics over marketability. Productive practice, in turn, relied on lacemakers maintaining 'asymmetric' relations of agency between humans and artefacts in their favour as they worked, remaining in control of the manufacturing process (and the emotions it generated).

By shedding light on the way Slovak lacemakers' ontological assumptions shaped the way they construed the value of their craftwork, I seek to disrupt the anthropological habit of framing questions of *value* in terms of domestic economies, global markets and aesthetic regimes, and *making* in terms of skilled practice, embodied knowledge and knowledge transmission. While theoretically expedient, this division in the scholarship has meant that less consideration has been given to how practices of material transformation themselves may be implicated in the creation of value. In the case of lacemaking, craftwork not only transformed spools of linen into lace fabric, but the material qualities of this fabric were the medium through which artisans expressed their opinions about their own work and that of their colleagues. Such judgements involved the evocation of a particular moral aesthetic: material qualities of lace artefacts – such as 'density' or 'flimsiness' – were presented as an indication of the nature of the practice which produced them as either 'work' or a 'labour of love'. Terms such as 'loose' and 'stiff' were derived from the visible and tactile transformation of linen threads into lace through the act of weaving (and, thus, from craft practice itself), yet the qualities they supposedly described referred not to the lace itself, but to the manner in which the producers had chosen to expend their productive capacity. As such, these comments carried with them normative ethical values and were used to deliver judgements of character.

Consequently, I want to suggest that anthropologists studying craft communities and practices – and indeed, any other aspect of productive life – ought to pay more attention to the ways in which ethical considerations are grounded in our ontological disposition towards the material world. Equating morality with socialization, scholars of craft have already demonstrated that processes of enskillment socialize apprentices into a moral community of makers, transmitting not only technical knowledge but also 'ideas about person, mind, implicit pedagogies, value judgements, and inter-generational relations' (Gowlland, 2017: 521; Marchand, 2008). Lacemakers' concerns about the purpose and value of their craftwork, however, appeared to be shaped as much by their perception of metaphysical order as they were by the normative parameters of the working community to which they belonged. Like the Scottish stonemasons studied by Yarrow and Jones (2014), they experienced the process of making in terms of both engagement with, and detachment from, the material world. Such experiences of engagement and detachment not only shaped the process of manufacture, but were associated with the social virtues of agency, autonomy and self-control and – conversely – with the vices of overindulgence and a lack of self-control. Craftwork – both in its broadest sense as self-realization and in its narrow sense as physical work – was thus seen as exposing the intentions, motivations and character of an individual, and making them tangible and visible to others.

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## Notes

1. The Slovak word *riedke* can be translated variously as sparse, tenuous, thin and gauzy. In this case, what is meant is that the weave of the lace is less dense (and thus less time consuming to make) than in the Spanish examples.
2. Munn's work has earlier been interpreted with a particular Marxist or Hegelian schema in mind (for example, Damon, 1980; Miller, 1987). However, in my own reading and application of her work I am wary of simply conflating the notion of *qualisigns* with the objectification of labour. Although lacemakers clearly operate with a labour theory of value, these *qualisigns* cannot be understood simply as the result of 'congealed labour' (Damon, 1980) because value is determined by the investment of labour in *relation* to its potential for later transformation, and not by its investment alone.

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