

Article

The Ways of Things: Mobilizing Charismatic Objects in Oberammergau and Its Passion Play

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Abstract: The mobilization processes initiated by the medieval practice of Christian pilgrimage do not only concern the journeys of human travellers but also of things. The transport of objects to and from pilgrimage sites derives from a pre-modern concept of charisma as a specific kind of energy that can be transferred to things and substances. This mutual mobilization of humans and things can be described as the entangled processes of charismatic charging and re-charging; we argue that this pre-modern logic of contiguity and contagion has survived the multiple transformations of individual travel until today. Even travel dispositives of the 20th and 21st centuries presuppose kinds of situational and spatialized charisma involving human and non-human agents. We illustrate this by the example of the world-renowned Oberammergau Passion Play with its unique playing continuity from the early 17th century onwards. We argue that by taking objects home from elevated places, situational and site-specific charisma can be taken home. To describe the relationship between travel by pilgrims, the mobility of objects, and the mutual charismatic charging of elevated places and things, we propose three perspectives on the material remains of elevated situations. In addition to relics and souvenirs, we propose ‘spolia’ as a third category which allows for the description of discontinuity and transformation in practices of elevating things.



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1. Introduction

Confronted with pilgrimage as a mobility practice, one may first think of persons moving and being moved, be it physically in space or metaphorically in narratives and semantics. However, the dispositive of pilgrimage, which is a bundle of movements, actions, communications, topographical and topological ways and shifts, routes and transgressions, institutions, and infrastructures (Foucault 2000; cf. Bührmann and Schneider 2008), does not only engage persons. The dynamics of space and time corresponding to pilgrimage also involve things and objects, animals and architecture, narratives and imagery.

This article will discuss pilgrimage as a constellation entangling multiple kinds of mobilization, shifting, and change over time, beyond cultural-historical borders. The type of pilgrimage discussed here is not identical with the practices of religiously affected travel that co-evolved with European Christianity, although it refers to them. Encouraged by the early church fathers, pilgrimage has been a customary episode in a good Christian’s life, and it has always been a set of practices assembling more than human agents: God and Saints, relics and icons, things and symbols, holy places, and religious architecture (Kessler 2013). Places of pilgrimage are regularly identified as ‘elevated’ places, linked to miracles or martyrdom, now bearing the physical remains of saints or revered persons. While these relics are stationary, they trigger the dynamization of living human bodies when religious practitioners devote a part of their lifetime to get there. Thus, a history of Christian pilgrimage can hardly be written without mapping the topology of relics in

Europe and beyond (Dyas 2014; Wilken 1992). On the other hand, people are likely to take home mementoes from their journeys to elevated topoi; transportable objects have been part of the pilgrimage since early Christianity. Thus, there is a significant overlap in the histories and biographies of relics and pilgrimage.

The entangled histories of pilgrimage and elevated objects are the first historical point of departure of this article. The second lies in the modern transformation of pilgrimage: While some of the practices of pilgrimage survived reformation and the epistemological shifts of the 16th–18th centuries, the 19th century as a period of radical societal and media-historical transformations also led to the transformation of pilgrimage as an institution and the integration of agents constituting it to specifically modern ways of travelling. In the 19th century, a new bourgeois way of life emerged that made travel without religious or economic aims and background a common practice. Shifts in practices and a new conceptualization of travel contributed to the evolution of modern dispositives of tourism, taking part in the production of identities beyond religious metanarratives or economic necessities. Nevertheless, even late-modern travel dispositives continue to essentially involve objects of concern, such as postcards, photographs, and souvenirs of different kinds. Thus, traditional pilgrim destinations did not disappear from the maps of post-enlightenment travellers, nor did they lose their attraction. Instead, they remained spaces that were likely to make a difference; the journey to these places qualified them to be integrated into modern narratives of individuation.

Departing from these two historical observations, we aim at understanding how the pre-modern practice of taking home bits and pieces of the numinous experienced in sacred places, and integrating them into everyday life, is transformed in the context of fluidized and individualized religion (Lüddeckens and Walthert 2010). To explore this, we take a closer look at the interwoven histories of relics as charismatic objects, and pilgrimage as a practice based on the notion of charisma. Charisma has conventionally been described as a quality that can be transferred—from a numinous entity (God) to outstanding persons, non-human agents and even objects or substances (Vedeler 2018). In non-human agents, we argue, the spatial and situational charisma of the pilgrimage site can be taken home, where these significant objects can recall the charismatic situation and, again, generate charismatic effects: healing, making present, generating communion.

The elevated place and the situated practice we engage in in the following are Oberammergau and its world-famous Passion Play. Oberammergau is a small Upper-Bavarian centuries-old historical village. The village's identity has been closely linked to the legendary foundations of its Passion Play in 1634. According to the narrative, in 1633, the community of Oberammergau had pledged to produce and perform a decennial passion play if God would spare their village from the bubonic plague. The promise has always been fulfilled, with only two exceptions. In the 17th century, the play used to be an affair of the village. However, it soon attracted travellers from the whole region of Ammergau and, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, from all over the world. With about half a million visitors in the most recent playing seasons, the Passion Play is no doubt one of the decisive economic factors of the village. Paradoxically, the transformation of Oberammergau into a pilgrim destination co-evolves with the history of secularization that involved the implicitness of the pilgrimage. Thus, pilgrimage into Oberammergau and its Passion Play has always been a hybrid practice, integrating moments of individual spirituality and conversion in parallel with narratives of retreat, reversion, and return to Christian faith and belief (Waddy Lepovitz 1992).

We will observe the specificity of Oberammergau as a pilgrim destination bearing the index of late-modern multiple secularities. The village is institutionalized as a pilgrimage site not only by the villagers' fulfilment of their legendary vow but also by travellers witnessing and testifying the decennially renewed staging of the Passion Play, integrating it into diverse biographies and environments. This institutionalization also affects how things were used in evidencing and evoking the Passion Play as a singular event and Oberammergau as an elevated site. The infrastructures, objects, and practices the dispositive of

pilgrimage allow for the production of elevated objects that can be transported elsewhere to spread the charisma of the place and the play and manifest its relevance.

Our main systematic interest is in material matters of concern in travel, their agency, and their discursive negotiation: How can human spatial practice participate in producing and transforming objects conceived as ‘elevated’ and charged with charismatic energy? We approach this aim from three overlapping perspectives:

1. In pre-modern dispositives of pilgrimage, stationary and place-bound objects (relics, holy substances) trigger and coordinate the travel of bodies in space. They produce specific topologies manifested in travel infrastructures (hostels, chapels, travel guides, maps, communities) centred around elevated situations (pilgrim church service, holy plays). These situations assemble human and non-human agents, notably triggering objects (often relics) we conceive as ‘charismatic’ in a post-Weberian sense: they are perceived and made use of as charged objects, bearing a certain energy transferred to them in specific, often ritualized, practices involving metaphors of contiguity such as ‘contagion’ and ‘infection’ (Frazer 1900; Flügel 2010; Vedeler 2018).
2. The notion of taking home a specific energy ascribed to an elevated situation (e.g., of community, wholeness, salvation, cure) is closely linked to the notion of charisma as a substance or a quality that can be rubbed off from the bodies of saints or relics onto other material things (such as pieces of cloth or paper). This idea of transferring charisma by touch or spatial contiguity is deeply rooted in the Catholic typology of relics (Vedeler 2018, p. 18). Thus, elevated situations typically experienced at pilgrim destinations often involve practices of producing relics of touch (Vedeler 2018) that can be taken home as both physical evidence and a spiritual means of recalling the charisma of the original object.
3. Although differing from their pre-modern reference, late modern derivations of medieval pilgrimage involve objects brought home as souvenirs (e.g., shells, stones, dried plants; mugs, carved or sculpted objects; postcards, posters, phonograms). Conventionally, these objects are seen as falling into two or more categories, depending on how they involve specific indigenous handicrafts, facilities, or techniques of medicalization (Hume 2014). As it has been widely shown, souvenirs can be more than the mere remains of travel. Instead, they can be—and are—used to encapsulate the different time and space of the journey, integrating it into the traveller’s affective biography and serving as a spot of remembrance to an emotionally charged individual past. Especially journeys narrated in the logic of pilgrimage tend to elevate these objects and ascribe to them a certain charisma. Departing from notions of the affective power of souvenirs as charismatic objects of a specific kind (Hitchcock and Teague 2000; Hume 2014), we propose to introduce a third category, aware of the analogy between relics (of touch) and souvenirs as ‘elevated objects’, transporting the charisma of ‘elevated places’. It cuts across the concepts of relics and souvenirs, focusing on the function they gain as the means and media of singularization. We identify it as a category of objects that can be a means of ‘vitam instituere’ (Legendre) without including individual biographies in a universal metanarrative. We call objects of this type spolium in a sense to be elaborated on below. While a relic of touch serves to transport (and transfer) charisma, a spolium serves to transport (and transform) singularity (Stenzel 2022a).

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we briefly sketch out the history of pilgrimage and its modern (touristic) transformations (1). Then, against the backdrop of the traditional Catholic typology of relics, we outline a typology of elevated objects correlated to practices of pilgrimage and its modern derivations: the elevated objects we are dealing with can be described as remains of an elevated situation, recalling it in different ways, in the form of relics, souvenirs, and spolia (2). This typology is concretized in the analyses of exemplary matters and objects of concern: The negotiation of the performers’ hair in the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries’ Oberammergau Passion Play allows for an elaboration of the concept of spolium. A closer look at the refashioning and

explicit recontextualization of promotional articles produced for the 2020 season after its postponement due to COVID-19 sheds light on how elevated objects can contribute to the collective coping of latency and unforeseeable shifts in the traditional chrono-logics of the Passion Play (3).

2. 'Tourimage'—'Pilgrimage': Travelling to Elevated Places

The following section will elaborate on the evolution and diversification of pilgrimage both as a concept and a practice, entangling narratives, imaginaries, (situated) knowledge, and materialities. This involves two highly intertwined histories: One is the history of the diversification of travel as a social practice from the Middle Ages to early modern times. The second is the history of the narratives that can initiate great voyages: since early modern times, it is no longer only the epistemic objectivity of (religious) truth that can persuade humans to leave home but also, and even to a greater extent, the subjective craving for an individual, singular experience.

2.1. *The History of the Diversification of Travel*

There are many types of what we conceive as 'elevated' things, depending not least on which places they are correlated with. Nevertheless, the spatial metaphor of elevation implies a relation to a baseline that requires historicization and precise contextualization, especially in the context of pilgrimage: Christian life has been described as the daily pilgrimage of the people of God towards Heaven by the church fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine). Thus, pilgrimage is a 'way up', and strategies of giving persistence to the experience of being lifted beyond the earthly world at the holy place the peregrine directed his physical effort to are of considerable concern.

Where travel movements in the Middle Ages did not obey economic or pragmatic imperatives such as seeking work or trading, they were overwhelmingly religiously motivated. Few other reasons in the Middle Ages could cause a person to travel far and spend a long time away from his or her environment. Most pilgrims will have had a religiously based desire to travel to holy places. In addition, however, and perhaps even easier to grasp in the written and pictorial record, the motivation for pilgrimages lies in a measurable purpose: the journey to an elevated place obtains indulgence. Those who complete a pilgrimage may hope to be pardoned in the afterlife for part of the time they must spend in purgatory. In addition to this main reason for pilgrimages, there are more individual reasons which are still typical: supplication, fulfilment of a vow, enhancement of one's reputation, and no doubt also economic interests (Wolf 1989, p. 83).

Curiosity will also have played a secondary role, but it could hardly manifest discursively as a reason for the journey. Since Augustine, 'curiositas' has been subject to a theological ban; anyone who curiously tries to search out the hidden powers of nature questions its beautiful and good arrangement by God and makes himself suspect of 'superbia'. Accordingly, for a long time, pilgrimage reports hardly bore individual traits; these could have provoked and undermined the reputation of the person reporting (Wolf 1989, pp. 83, 88). On closer examination, the sources reveal that in the range of pragmatic text types, only the pilgrim subject was available to narrativize journeys. In individual cases, types of adventurous journeys also offered narrative patterns that could shape pilgrimage accounts, but they remain secondary to the pilgrim subject. Novel and unfamiliar things can be included in pilgrimage reports more effortlessly, making it easier to classify them in familiar reference patterns and evaluate them from a theological perspective. This holds especially true for pilgrimages to the Holy Land. On his way to the stations of Christian salvation history, the pilgrim conspicuously confirms the New Testament events and inscribes his own life story in them.

By the Middle Ages, pilgrimages, especially to the Holy Land, were strongly regulated, and it would not be wrong to speak of veritable pilgrimage tourism. Routes were largely standardized (from Central Europe, pilgrims headed for Venice and travelled by ship with stops in Crete, Rhodes, and Jaffa), and at the destination, competent guides awaited the

pilgrim. Since the second half of the 14th century, a detailed description of particular places of salvation was no longer necessary, for every pilgrim was in the care and under the guidance of the Franciscans. They had obtained a kind of license from the Sultan in Cairo to take care of pilgrims, setting them up in a monopoly position. Once pilgrims obtained a permit in Cairo and entered the Holy Land, they were largely incorporated into the Franciscans' sightseeing program (Wolf 1989, pp. 91–92). Given this dense supervision, pilgrims had little opportunity for individual experiences; the individuality in their accounts lies more in the way topic motifs are invoked and varied.

By the Middle Ages, religious and economic interests were interwoven. For instance, the Church promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Land less vigorously than those to Rome to support the economy there and prevent freed-up capital from falling into the hands of the heathens (Wolf 1989, pp. 83–84). In the early modern period, a diversification of travel practices occurred (Margry 2008a, pp. 28–29). In pilgrimage reports by aristocrats, the prospect of increased reputation already played a critical role. The reports stylize the pilgrimage as an adventurous journey and emphasize proving oneself in the face of perilous situations. In the 15th century, the focus shifted to accents of representation. In this period, the unique, unrepeatable nature of the journey is emphasized, which lies in the enormous financial and logistical effort and the exclusivity of the encounters with other top nobles and rulers (Wolf 1989, pp. 97–100). In the early modern period, alongside the pilgrimage which maintained its high status into the 18th century, and sporadically in offshoots into the 19th century, the grand tour of nobles and the 'peregrinatio academica' of students, who were attracted by the call of individual scholars and took on long journeys to study with them, arose (de Ridder-Symoens 1989; Meier 1989; Sweet et al. 2017). In these types of journeys, curiosity gains a new legitimacy (Blumenberg 1996). While pilgrimage accounts are not necessarily capable of absorbing and processing experiences of novelty, erudite Latin travel descriptions ('hodoeporica'; cf. Wiegand 1989), and the descriptions of voyages of discovery for which there were no patterns to live up to, absorbed the novel empirical data and fed them into contemporary knowledge systems.

2.2. *The Singularization of Travel Narratives*

The types of travelling so far discussed have two things in common: the main and interim destinations of the journeys and the things and circumstances to be observed on the way are prior to the individual experience. This holds for the sites of salvation history in the Holy Land and the cities, courts and residences on the cavalier's tour or the universities with an international appeal (Paris, Bologna, Padua, Louvain) attracting students from all over Europe. The destinations of pre-modern travel are mostly fixed, as are the routes and their stages. To put it bluntly, the traveller knows in advance what she or he may encounter. For a long time, their own experience is secondary to erudite book knowledge; it has to confirm the latter and, at most, add new details.

While within pre-modern logic, the destinations have a categorical validity, modern, post- or late-modern journeys have to legitimate their respective destinations. If the promise of salvation and places of grace is already given to pre-modern pilgrimage accounts, so is the discursive site where such validity is enforced. In times of multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2017), one encoding can be joined by another precisely because the discursive location of elevated places is not clarified in advance. Persons who conceive of themselves as pilgrims will mix with those they estimate as 'mere' tourists (for interrelations between religion and tourism see Bar and Cohen-Hattab 2003; Badone and Roseman 2004; Gebhardt et al. 2005; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Swatos 2006; Raj and Morpeth 2007; Grimshaw 2008; Margry 2008b; Stausberg 2009; Norman 2011). Spiritual contact zones of this kind make two moments expectable: first, the meaning of the destination and the journey itself is likely to be grounded in an inner experience. Second, one will eagerly assure oneself of the experiences through souvenirs if the significance of the journey cannot be readily communicated. Thus, the relationship of justification between journey

and biography is reversed; the journey through space is increasingly discursivized as an encounter with one's self.

While the topologies of medieval and early modern pilgrimage are based on physically overcoming the spiritual distance between the individual Christian and God, thus mirroring human life as a pilgrimage towards Heaven, late modern concepts and practices negotiate the task of overcoming the psychological distance between a subject and the inner self. They no longer necessarily rely on the history of salvation and the belief in a beyond but involve multiple spiritualities and multiple secularities. Thus, while the former includes the pilgrim and his physical journey into universal salvation history, the latter includes the journey and destination into an individual biography. Instead of confirming a person's belonging to a collective like 'Christendom' and re-enacting inclusion into the Christian community, modern peregrinations can be described as strategies of singling out, and as practices of stepping apart from societal life, at least for the duration of the journey (Turner and Turner 1978).

Travel guides and reports of travel to Oberammergau since the 1850s reflect these developments. From 1850 on, the Passion Play village attracted an increasingly international (though predominantly British and American) audience (Waddy Lepovitz 1992). Visitors seek not only religious edification but also recreation, the exoticism of simple country life (almost) untouched by modernity, or an alternative to bourgeois art theatre (Mohr 2018, 2022). The municipality tried to address these heterogeneous expectations; travel guides and other publications such as the trilingual 'Oberammergauer Blätter' (1890) were intended to channel the diverse expectations and attune the out-of-town audience to the special conditions of the Passion Play and the location. The travelogues of visitors who see themselves as pilgrims clearly show efforts to distinguish themselves from the mass of other travellers. However, since people widely follow the same routes (even the routes to Oberammergau are largely standardized), this can only happen by asserting an inner attitude. The way to the Alpine village separates the traveller from everyday life. Not only does it lead to a spiritually charged sphere but it also constitutes a way to an inner experience (Mohr 2018).

3. On the Orders of Remains: Relics, Souvenirs, and Spolia

When talking about the devotional practice of pilgrimage in the context of the medieval and pre-reformation Catholic religion, the link to wandering things is at hand. As shown before, pilgrimage can be described as a complex topological constellation of places, proximities, distances, and corporeal experiences such as walking, watching, touching. How and why a place qualifies for inclusion in this constellation significantly depends on material factors. Therefore, attitudes to the material remains of holy lives are central in the organization of "'primary' holy places and the secondary network of sites which developed through belief in 'transferable holiness'" (Dyas 2014, p. 1). Consequently, bodily practices connected to relics and the spiritual realities that they are involved in are triggered by the basic assumption that the charisma of religious figures can be rubbed off onto things and thus mobilized, transported through space and time in those 'charged' objects.¹ Thus, the logics of relics, as the logics and topologies of pilgrimage, are the logics of the transfer of certain qualities by contiguity, contact, and contagion (Dyas 2014; for an intercultural approach Flügel 2010).

Marianne Vedeler describes relics as objects possessing charismatic power. Challenging the sociologically elaborated concept of charisma, she opts for exploring 'charisma' as an attribution not restricted to human agents and superempirical beings (Vedeler 2018). The neo-materialistic notion of a non-asymmetrical structure of the social in the background (Latour 2007), charismatic objects come into view as being part of, made by, and generating a hybrid, more-than-human actor-network, involving physical and non-physical entities. As we approach pilgrimage as a practice of assembling heterogeneous agents and triggering the production of things qualified to inherit and transfer more-than-human features, Vedeler's proposal seems helpful. Departing from her notion, we aim at charisma as a

dynamic, ephemeral quality generated by the agents involved in specific settings. It can be associated with humans as well as non-humans, it can be charged and discharged, and it can, under certain circumstances, be transported through space and time. Of course, we do not understand charisma as a matter of fact, but as a “matter of concern” (Latour) that gains its reality and efficacy by the use communities make of it and its power to act and trigger action. We can observe the practices connected to this concern and the materialities they involve and bring about.

The transferability and dynamics of the charismatic power of relics manifest in the conventions of their categorization. Roman Catholic dogma subsumes relics into three classes derived from the order of the biblical model of martyrdom: the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Relics of the first order are the Arma Christi, the instruments of torture bringing Jesus to death, e.g., splints of the holy cross, thorns of the crown, but also Veronica’s Veil, the shroud of Christ, and even the dices of the Roman soldiers. Deriving from the foundational situation of the crucifixion, the category of first-order relics includes every surviving part of the bodies of Jesus or the saints, such as bones or hair. Relics that are neither body parts nor parts of Arma Christi but inherit their quality otherwise are classified as ‘contact relics’: This “rather vague term”

“can be used to describe two entirely different classes of relic [. . .]. Secondary relics are items that came into contact with a saint during his or her lifetime, such as the tunic of Francis of Assisi. Tertiary relics are items that have come into contact with relics and thereby absorbed some of their power, becoming another form of contact relic, such as the strips of cloth (brandea) that were touched to the tombs of saints. These tertiary contact relics allow for the power of the holy to spread [. . .]” (Montgomery 2012).

It is mainly the contact relics of the third order that can be connected to the practices and processes of transferring and transforming charisma. While the stationary relics of the first and second order that are not allowed to be bought, or to be randomly brought somewhere else, are triggering journeys, third-order relics are mobile and dynamic. They can be generated by contact or contiguity, taken home, used in individual devotional practices away from the official church service’s architectural and ritual framework.

As wandering objects, they can accompany travellers on their way to holy places and back home; their quality as a relic can be charged, discharged and recharged. A broad spectrum of objects served to transport the qualities of the relic somewhere else, and the difference between relics of touch and mere media of transfer is often difficult to draw (Simonsen 2018). As Sarah Blick has shown for relics deposited in the Aachen Cathedral, mirrors have been used as objects to inherit the charismatic qualities of relics they are pointed on:

“A widespread belief held that mirrors reflecting a sacred image could assimilate and fix some of the sanctity expressed and could later be dispensed by pointing the mirror towards a loaf of bread to be eaten or towards one’s own eyes”. (Blick 2014, p. 114).

These mirrors can be seen as ephemeral relics: they are charged easily, discharged quickly, rechargeable every time they inflect and reflect a relic that possesses a continuous charismatic power. Thus, the logic of relics comes into sight as a specific logic of mediation and transcription.

The notion of charismatic objects is not limited to the field of Catholic Christianity. Moreover, the material history of ex-voto offers of pre-Christian European contexts shows that concepts and practices of transferring, transporting, and transforming ‘good’ or ‘bad’ energies often survive shifts and disruptions in religious histories, and are deliberately taken up, re-enacted, and recycled—sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently (cf. Glørstad 2018).

In ancient and medieval Europe, the reuse, recycling, and re-enactment of “matters of concern” was mainly a process accompanying major historical and cultural shifts or wide-ranging migration movements. However, since the beginning of the 19th century, the affective or semantic reformulation of objects by someone considering themselves not involved in the practices these objects stand for becomes increasingly common. Furthermore, modern

practices of travel and objectifying significant moments to take them home are often connected to the transformation of charismatic objects and the production of new ones. This holds even true for mass products of a globalized tourism industry that are both evidencing and recalling the individual journey to the place they represent (Hume 2014). They are used in manifesting charismatic situations and chargeable with charismatic power, singularizing their proud owner and materializing their memories and imagination when back home. Although deliberately given away and sold for individual use, they also recall the often violent decontextualization and appropriation of charismatic objects characterizing European religious histories. Their materiality impersonates the histories of these objects that have been discharged by decontextualization and forgetting and recharged by integration into a new context. To further understand their relation to relics on the one hand and souvenirs on the other, we introduce the concept of spolia.

Early modern writers first used the metaphor of ‘spolium’ to describe how architectural remains and fragments from the Greek and Roman cultures were used to build early medieval Churches (see, e.g., Meier 2007, p. 2). Deriving from Latin, spolium means spoils or loot, but also the flayed skin of an animal. The latter semantics shows a significant overlap between spolium and relic that we will further elaborate on. Namely, relic theft—*furta sacra*—was a common issue in the Middle Ages. Relics of the first and second orders can be decontextualized and included in different devotional contexts without being transformed into spolia in the sense we propose here (cf. Geary 1990). When applying this term, we refer to practices that cut off the unconditionality of mythological and pragmatic contexts, deliberately establishing new ones involving objects that seem to inherit a particular relevance.

Thus, relic and spolium form an asymmetrical pair of concepts; spolium is the old, stolen, reactivated, and resocialized thing insofar as it asserts itself in its erratic evidentiality: ‘I have been important elsewhere. The sheer fact that I am stolen and reused testifies to this importance.’ The logic of the spolium corresponds to a predatory actualization of tradition, which is transformed like the alien skin of the animal when it becomes human clothing. Spolia, as proposed above, can incorporate features of relics of touch as well as of first-order relics: they gain their charismatic power by their previous relevance, but also by testifying an experience estimated as significant for an individual or collective biography. In addition, this makes the concept valuable for practices involving souvenirs.

4. Souvenirs and Relics, on and off the Passion Stage: Hair, Keyrings, Crucifixes

Instead of applying the older contested notion of secularization as the replacement and emancipation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, the production and recycling of elevated things in Oberammergau makes it necessary to describe the relation of religion and other societal fields more specifically. The practices of transforming and reformulating “matters of concern” in Oberammergau can both illuminate and be illuminated by the concept of multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2017). Departing from the more established model of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000), the concept has been primarily used to detangle the relation between secularity and modernity. Wohlrab-Sahr and her coworkers distinguish between secularism as an ideologically loaded concept connected to Westernization and occidental hegemony and secularity. Secularism stands for the ideology of separation (of religion and state, the privacy of faith, and the secular public sphere). In contrast, secularity as a concept allows description of the diverse and multiple modes of differentiation between religion and other societal fields of practice. The concept of multiple secularities does not imply a unilateral or teleological process of modernization that makes religious practice disappear from the public sphere. Instead, it aims at establishing a typology open for historical and cultural comparatistics and not restricted to Western modernity (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2011, p. 71). Thus, the use and reuse of elevated objects, their charging and discharging, their agency and erraticity, can be described as multilateral and multilayered through space and time, through material and discursive histories.

For the case of relics, this means that they do not have to turn into mere remains. Instead, as spolia, they can be built into a completely different, individual or societal, transcendental system, adapted to a different body, without getting lost and becoming invisible. Thus, spolia become negotiable on secular bodies that can be sacralised in these processes—however temporarily and idiosyncratically.

To evaluate the plausibility of these hypotheses, the Oberammergau Passion Play offers remarkable examples. For a century and a half, the Passion Play site has only attracted a local audience from Oberammergau itself or the surrounding villages. However, since the second half of the 19th century, the Passion Play has increasingly mobilized an international audience. As the catchment area of visitors grows, the interest in the Passion Play has also become more diverse.

Given this heterogeneous bundle of interests, expectations, and religious backgrounds, it is anything but surprising that the physical encounter with the Passion Play village and the actors affects different perceptions. That performing the Passion Play was merely a more or less exclusive theatre event under conditions of modern fictionality and theatricality is one point of view among others that can be traced in the Oberammergau discourse of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instead, numerous travelogues and guides claim (or presuppose) that a visit to Oberammergau is, even in modern times, a pilgrimage. According to them, witnessing the events of the salvation history renewed (rather than just watching the Passion Play) provides an inner experience unrivalled in times of rational sobriety. Furthermore, to be sure, there are many layerings, entanglements, and amalgamations of travel practices marked as ‘touristic’ and others described as ‘religious’. Thus, Oberammergau is a perfect example illustrating the different types of remains and relics and, more specifically, the different orders of relics and processes of mutual charging, discharging and recharging.

One of the most prominent objects involved in the co-evolution of elevated things and practices of production is the actors’ hair. Hair is a specific kind of material, combining traits of a body part with those of a substance that can be used in multiple human practices, such as weaving, wig-making, and even puppetry. Moreover, hair has been classified as a first order-relic in Catholic dogmatics. On the other hand, the connection between a strand of hair and the body to which it belonged is uncertain as soon as it is cut, which has been a literary motif since the times of Attic theatre. In the times of European romanticism, a curl of hair from the beloved is ascribed the power to make their absence physically perceptible, transforming it into an imaginary presence. In the Passion Play, hair is involved in the performative production of authenticity and credibility, allegedly increasing the intensity of the religious experience of the play (cf. [Stenzel 2022a, 2022b](#)). Probably in the first half of the 19th century, a rule was established for the Passion Play, according to which wigs were forbidden to be worn by the performers. Moreover, with the so-called hair and beard decree (‘Haar- und Barterlass’), which is renewed on Ash Wednesday of every year before the playing season, all performers are obliged to let their hair and beard grow until the end of the season ([Mohr and Stenzel 2020](#)). Since then, flowing hair, especially of male inhabitants, has been part of Oberammergau’s iconographic tradition, invoked in travelogues and fictional texts as well as in pictorial representations. Significantly, the production and trading of secondary relics made with hair are mainly graspable as a discursive reality, in travelogues and magazines.

Depending on whether the Passion Play is conceived as a repetition of salvation history and blends the actors in Oberammergau with the biblical characters, the status of this conspicuous splendour of hair also changes between a merely picturesque peculiarity, a theatrical costume with particular authenticity, or otherwise the charismatic quality charged by and charging the wearer reciprocally. This ambivalence has caused, among others, several caricatural responses we will briefly discuss. It is far from surprising that, on the occasion of the 1922 Passion season, the Munich satirical magazine ‘Simplicissimus’ dedicated a special issue to Oberammergau and the Passion. Since ‘Simplicissimus’ was well known for its anti-clerical stance, the issue was packed with satire, caricatures, and somewhat informative contributions on the performance history of Oberammergau. The

strikingly long hair and beards of those who impersonated the holy figures on stage were the main target of satire, especially when it comes to the affective and (semi-)religious charging. An illustration shows two elderly ladies attacking a helpless, long-haired Jesus (obviously the Christ-actor of Oberammergau) with scissors (Figure 1).



„Locken werden nicht mehr freihändig abgegeben. Im Herbst kommen sie zur Versteigerung.“

Figure 1. *Simplicissimus* 26, 53: 2.

One could take this for the enthusiastic followers' hunt for souvenirs, for a fetish, but the context of the caricature points in another direction. In the 'Simplicissimus', as in other popular journals and magazines of that time, caricatures are shown repeatedly in which British visitors to the Passion Play (recognizable by their clothing) do not distinguish between the characters presented on stage and the performers themselves. That is, they consider the stage action to be reality. They beat up the Judas actor, wish for a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, or are surprised that Jesus apparently has a wife and kids and lives a sedentary life in the village together with his family, though never mentioned in the Bible. As for the hair of the famous Christ actor Joseph Mair, the British orientalist Richard Burton mentions the "legend that an Englander [. . .], who had vainly offered £1000 for a crop [haircut], dogged him for months with furtive scissors" (Burton 1881, p. 97).

Against this background, it is likely that the two women with scissors do not take their victim to be the 1922 Christ-actor, Anton Lang, but Christ himself. The picture suggests that his naturally grown curls are first-order relics to them. However, this is not just the twisted perception of two British ladies: pleadingly, Christ points out that the hair would be auctioned off at the end of the season. This equally assumes that much money can be made from the natural hair of a tangible Christ actor (or, in the eyes of the pious Englishwomen, not a mere embodiment but a revival Jesus). The imminent theft of the sanctified curls anticipates what is planned: the mobilization of a remnant, a remain, which is stylized into a relic.

The illegitimate haircut evoked by the drawing can be described as a strategy of mobilizing charisma by relic theft, as 'furtum sacrum' (cf. Geary 1990). However, other than the medieval strategy of bringing commonly approved relics under one's control, the theft depicted here produces a relic from a spoliium—a stolen body part, removing not skin but hair, thus leaving the source body alive. The hair is charged in at least two interwoven aspects. Firstly, it has been grown according to institutionalized rules on the heads and faces of those supposed to perform the biblical narrative on stage. Secondly, it is part of a human body that underwent the Passion of the Christ, albeit on stage. Thus, the hair can be seen as testifying to both the year of rehearsal and spiritual preparation its wearer subjected himself to, and the lived experience of the Passion play that the auditory has shared with the performers on stage. As the hair is traditionally cut after the dernière, it is the only remain of the body of Jesus on stage, for his impersonators regularly return to their roles in families and society. The status of the performers' hair at the end of the

season is a reminder of a practice involving the merchants' jugs that Jesus destroys on stage in the temple scene: those are still crafted in local workshops and restituted after the season, showing the cracks and lesions of their destruction, and bearing the signatures of the performers. Until today, the visibly mended vessels are auctioned at the end of the season, and the proceeds are donated to charity. Thus, in purchasing a jug, the buyer accepts it as an object that is elevated by its material connection to the performance of the Passion.

The ambivalence of hair between remain, memento, relic, and nauseating remnant is a recurring motif in the satirical Oberammergau discourse of the early 20th century. For example, an illustration in the Munich magazine 'Jugend' shows the waitress of an inn in dispute with a guest who complains about the extortionate price of the soup (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Jugend* 26 (1910), p. 606.

In a broad dialect, she rebukes the guest: Some female American would pay a dollar, for there's a hair of the Christ inside! ("A Amerikanerin zahlat an Taler! Weil a Haar vom Christus drin is!"). Quick-witted, she responds to the dissatisfied guest who had found the

proverbial fly in the ointment (the German equivalent: ‘hair in the soup’), not in the soup itself, but its price (“Zurechtweisung”, (Hirth 1910), p. 606).

Responding, she reinterprets the unappealing leftover (if there is anyone at all) into a relic deprived of its context. At the same time, she claims that the alleged hair is charismatically charged by the body it stems from—at least from the fictive American woman’s point of view. Far from being in the same spiritual mood, the waitress knows precisely to what extent some visitors are enthusiastic about the Passion Play actors whose behaviour they observe as reflecting their stage roles. The serving of the soup is ironically transformed into relic trade. We do not know if the fictive American woman would have saved the holy remain in her handkerchief and how a later monstrosity of that relic might have been designed. Perhaps she would have simply enjoyed the soup in which she had found the object of concern.

The assumption that divine charisma is generated in the performance of the Passion and that this charisma remains in matters and substances that have participated in the performance is notorious in the discourse on the Oberammergau Passion play, and the notion of charismatic charging can be taken much further. Another sketch in the special issue of the 1922 ‘Simplicissimus’ shows the impersonator of Christ fleeing from a gaunt lady with a handbag (Figure 3).



„Isch hab komm über from America for zu heirat Sie. De Dollar steht 306.“

Figure 3. *Simplicissimus* 26, 53: 2.

In an awkward combination of German words and English grammar, the lady addresses the theatrical Jesus: ‘I have come over from America for to marry you. The dollar stands at 306’ (*Simplicissimus* 26 [Langen 1922], p. 2). The enormous purchasing power of the U.S. dollar was conditioned by the economic crisis and the reparation payments that the Weimar Republic had to make after the World War. Many cartoons from the 1922 season ironically refer to the currency disparity that made the trip to Oberammergau possible for pocket money from the perspective of U.S. tourists.

The lady offers a barter deal in which economic and religious logic intersect. After all, she aims to steal the man who is considered to perform as Jesus on stage and, by this, be charged with divine charisma. In this gesture of appropriation, the theatrical body of Christ is degraded to an object, albeit a sacred one.

The caricatures exaggerate, but they reflect historical options of thinking, at least the (discursive) presence of relics, their production, transformation, and trade. In this respect, they are just as relevant for a reconstruction of the Oberammergau discourse as they are for the question of the various forms of transition between souvenirs as semantically and emotionally charged things, and relics in social fields of entangled religions and multiple secularities. Oberammergau can be seen as a contact zone and a place where religious and secular claims of validity and legitimacy are negotiated. The Passion play seasons fuel not only Catholic Christian views and ways of life. They also fuel their challenges by multiple secularities, that is, multiple distinctions and correlations between ‘elevated’ and ‘ordinary’ situations, private and public matters of concern, religion, and other societal fields.

In a far more trivial form, types of contextual charges can also be observed in the windows of Oberammergau’s carving stores today. For centuries, the inhabitants of Oberammergau have established a tradition of woodcarving since the soil in their valley was not fertile and allowed neither for agriculture nor for breeding cattle. Not surprisingly,

what prevails in today's carving stores are the iconographically familiar pictorial formulas of the Christian history of salvation: the Crucifixus, the Holy Family, the Pieta. However, mundane objects, figures and arrangements are also exhibited. This leads to constellations which pious observers might find offensive, e.g., when a statue of Mary is placed next to a clown with dice, a toy castle, and wooden animals (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Window of a carver's shop in Oberammergau. Photograph by the authors.

Settings like this can not only initiate the transfer of charisma by contiguity and thus the transformation of souvenirs to relics, referring to Oberammergau as a place where a specific religious or at least spiritual experience has occurred. However, it can also lead to the profanation of devotional objects as a carved Crucifixus or a Madonna which come to stand in-line and function as arbitrary remains of a tourist trip: they do not necessarily await any recharging or religious appropriation but remain spolia, decontextualized and exhibited as arbitrary remains of a journey that lack any integration to a unifying narrative.

The Passion play season of 2020, which, due to the pandemic of COVID 19, had to be postponed for two years, highlighted another mode of charismatic objects. Shortly after the postponement, the local tourist industry responded by producing souvenirs from the remains of a performance that never occurred: keyring pendants were made out of original costume fabrics, bags, shirts, backpacks, and other promotional articles continue to be sold online, partially reprinted and modified to advertise a period of latency between the moment of the play's postponement and its actual production on stage. This recycling of material remains can further illuminate the concept of charging and discharging.

At first glance, the souvenirs of a production that has not yet occurred may appear irritating, even pointless. The cessation of the elevated situation the objects refer to should instantaneously deprive them of their charisma. However, this is only one side of the coin.

On the other hand, at the same instance, a process of recharging is initiated. On some of the promotional objects, the scheduled playing season 2020 was conspicuously deleted and overwritten with 2022, complemented by the single word ‘anticipation’ (Figure 5).



Figure 5. ‘Anticipation’: reprint of an Oberammergau merchandise bag (<https://www.passionsspiele-oberammergau.de/de/blog/detail/was-die-passionsspiele-mit-snowboarden-zu-tun-haben-2020-0614>, accessed on 8 January 2022).

Here, the holy covenant with God, which initiated the playing tradition in 1634, is replaced by a pact with the potential customers, the characteristic verticality of Abrahamitic religion by the horizontal logics of a bourgeois society. Keep the faith, the promotional articles shout out, keep the anticipation, and ‘we’ (the village community) will perform the Passion for you. The chrono-logics contributing to the persistence of Oberammergau as the site of the Passion Play are recycled like the material remains of costume production. These logics are mainly founded on the mutual generation of latency and resuscitation, of the performance on stage and the performance of waiting and preparation, rehearsal, and bodily subordination to the rules of the Passion. Though referring to an event that has never occurred, the articles still play a role in transforming the phase of latency into a directed and fulfilled time, as does the growing of hair and the enrolment in an extensive casting and rehearsal process. Beyond, the ‘anticipation’ overprint connotes the mutual mobilization of objects and visitors: the one who takes the ‘anticipation’ home as a material testimony of the postponement is likely to set out for the Alpine village in 2022.

5. Conclusions: Site-Specific Charisma and the Ambivalent Status of Objects

Oberammergau draws a substantial part of its fascination from the site-specificity of the Passion Play, which is just as dependent on its topographical surroundings. It works, conversely, as a condensation that semantically and charismatically charges the village and its environment. According to a well-known anecdote, a U.S. film studio offered the village one million dollars for the right to film a Passion Play production. The community decisively refused, just as they had previously refused the proposal to go on tour with their production in America. The anecdotal response (‘We would have to take

the Kofel [a prominent mountain peak that characterizes Oberammergau townscape] with us'), internationally spread as early as 1881 (Burton 1881, p. 43), condenses the notion of a strictly local play practice that combines with a situated body of knowledge and logic of things and performers tied to a place.

Studio photographs of the performers have been offered for sale since the late 19th century, and authorized trailers and scene recordings have been produced for the last season in 2010. However, film recordings during performances are still prohibited (and the next season will show how far this prohibition can still be enforced in times of smartwatches). While individual images of the Passion Play are reproduced, the play itself remains beyond reproduction. There is much to suggest that the unconscious logic behind this is that the charisma of the elevated place should remain tied to it. The Passion Play mobilizes the masses precisely because it is tied to a specific location.

However, this is only one side of the coin, as we have shown. The ambivalent status of the play in times of multiple secularities and multiple religiosities allows things to leave the village because there is no dominant semantics according to which they can be classified as relics. It is precisely on this lack of common ground that the jokes of the early 20th century caricatures are based. Where one finds a fly in the ointment, his counterpart can declare it a potential relic—for certain groups, under certain circumstances. By the same logic, souvenirs can mark an elevated situation for the visitor (such as the experience of the Passion Play). Thus, as individual matters of concern, the objects can enter into a global network of places and represent the village and its Passion Play in multiple ways. However, the things of Oberammergau always only mark the absence of the elevated place and the elevated situation to which they refer, as did the lover's hair in romantic literature. This holds especially for the promotional articles offered after the postponement of the playing season in 2020. They both evoke and document individual histories of experience and singular patterns of doing and making sense (Hume 2014).

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Note

- ¹ The practice of putting one's illness or wish onto votives that stay at the holy place is the other side of this coin: as charisma or a healing energy can be transferred to any arbitrary object, ex voto offerings can carry harm and sorrows to be cured and solved (for a concise investigation into the interconnection of Christian and other practices and beliefs, see (Dyas 2014)).

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