

## [Parade Material Culture: You caught what at a parade](#)

Blog Post published by [Tiff Graham](#) on Tuesday, August 8, 2017



**What sails through the air? What makes people shout and pounce to the ground or reach to the skies? What is free for those who wake up early and wait patiently?** It's parade trinkets/throws/swag/loot/handouts/kamelle, of course. Things we don't know we want, till that moment when a parade goes by. Maybe it ends up in your mouth, in a bag, a drawer, or eventually the trash, it doesn't matter, these random parade gifts are eagerly received by both children and adults.

### **I have so many questions about these objects thrown and handed out during a parade:**

1. Is it a DIY or a commercially manufactured thing? edible, collectable, educational, throw-away-able...
2. What are catching techniques/strategies for bystanders? (hand, umbrella, hat, bag...)
3. Are there no-no rules about how and what parade participants can give out to bystanders? (e.g., no throwing, no old candy, no pointy things, no glass, no marshmallows, no environmentally unfriendly, etc.)
4. Is there a particular name for these parade things thrown/given in different places? (Some web sites lists Pride Parades - swag; Mardi Gras New Orleans parades - throws; German Karneval/Carnival Parades - kamelle (sweets/candies/things thrown); parade trinkets, parade loot, parade junk, parade tchotchkes, parade paraphernalia, etc.

## [doodahparade-tortillas.mov](#)

Loading Video...

[DooDahParade-Pasadena-California-tortilla-throw-dogs](#) / [Tiff Graham](#) / August 8, 2017

Video: Doo Dah Parade, Pasadena California, US, tortilla throws, 2011

**And because I'm academically inclined, I'm going deeper down the research hole with my whimsical parade thoughts of dancing candies, coconuts, and tortillas to yes.... MATERIAL CULTURE land.** Right into the swirl of academic research land, filling my eyes with online readings from ebrary/ebook central, jstor articles, internet blog sites, and my own panoply of real paper books. I have gone to the other side. Which is fine, I'm only saying that the academic mind likes to dig and dig and dig, down through the layers of words, and it takes time. These parade objects are now multifaceted, complex objects with some kind of embedded significance. Possibly reflecting local / global interests, particular aesthetics, group identity, a socio-economic situation, politics, nationality, religious beliefs, popular culture...

**Plus, knowing that material culture always was a little bugger to me is not helping.** Should I open the folklore door, or maybe the art history door? So many doors. Possibly the archeology, cultural studies, religious studies, material studies, museum studies, visual arts, performance studies doors. Should I should consider how national differences shape the doors in other ways? Oh so many academic areas studying material culture, which to choose?

### **More questions coming to mind...**

1. Do I want to examine the material culture as it relates to issues of tradition, artistry, marketing appeal, psychology, agency, history, gender representation, religiosity?
2. Am I simply fetishizing the object?
3. Or is this parade object/form/item something to study that reveals how a community gifts?
4. Could it reflect local values and special interests?
5. How could it demonstrate community affiliation/sense of belonging?
6. With each homemade item, does the maker feel pride or even regret because it will be given away.
7. What kind of compensation might be expected? Is the object even a commodity for exchange?
8. Is the DIY parade throw a reflection of a society responding to a growing technological and commercial world? Or is it a merging of tradition, popular culture, and technological interests all embedded in a tangible fan-based creation?

## BEGINNING STEPS -- RESEARCHING PARADE PARAPHERNALIA HANDOUTS

### A. what is material culture? a few texts discussing the term suggest,

**Folklore approach:** "Folklorists are primarily concerned with three crucial aspects of the realm of material culture: product, process, and people" and "material culture (is)—those tangible creations that are based upon and incorporate human needs, ideas, values, and beliefs"  
(Robert E. Wallis, "Ch 12, Folklife and Material Culture" in *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life: A Fieldguide and Sourcebook*, ed. George H. Schoemaker, 1990,107)

**History approach:** "Historians of material culture use artifacts, as well as written evidence, to reconstruct the patterns of meanings, values, and norms shared by members of society" and "Historians of material culture describe, categorize, and compare the characteristics of artificially constructed objects that have survived in physical or representational form—their size, shape, color, design, weight, and volume. With the help of literary and archival records they identify and measure the quantity, as well as the quality, of goods and determine how they were made, distributed, and related to each other, when and where they appeared; and who acquired them for what use"  
(Richard Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 4 (2005): 592)

**Religious approach:** "Religious material culture consists of the objects, spaces, practices, and ideas in which belief takes shape" and there was another passage that said "Material culture consists of the things, the practices of using things, and the forms directing their uses on which we build and maintain the worlds about us, and thereby encounter and value ourselves and others"  
(David Morgan, "Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions" in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan, 2010, 73)

\*Other references listed

### B. research

Academic and popular works have focused on these parade handouts. Some briefly mention the objects thrown or handed out, while others describe them in more detail and even explain intended significance of particular objects, especially the more controversial or homemade. Museum exhibits have displayed items from parades and processions too. There are also documentaries focused on parade throws. The documentary, "Mardi Gras: Made in China" focused specifically on the plastic bead life cycle as it related to economic globalization and cultures. I'm sure while you are reading this, you are thinking of examples familiar to you?

On the surface these commercial parade throws, such as beads, frisbees, toys, candies, flags, stickers, magnets, cups, hats, fans, pamphlets, etc., might not appear to reflect something particular about the culture, society, or individuals. Yet, they could easily reveal a parade's theme, group aesthetic, sponsorship, political/social/cultural interests, popular culture influences/trends, etc. If the object is a DIY/homemade version of throw, then it could reveal even more about a culture, sub-culture, and the individuals participating in the parade. In addition, how the objects are distributed by participants and how recipients receive them might reflect something about human psychology, strategies of persuasion, or attributed value given to the object within the parade context.

### C. fieldwork

[krishnachariots-handouts1.jpg](#)



Citation: Tiff Graham. *Parade Material Culture: You caught what at a parade* . H-Celebration. 09-07-2018. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/167585/blog/parade-talk/190189/parade-material-culture-you-caught-what-parade>  
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I attended a parade named the Festival of Chariots, similarly referred to as Ratha yatra in the Los Angeles, California area. It's sponsored by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), also known as the Hare Krishna. In previous years, I hadn't thought about what is handed out to bystanders at this event. I typically focused on the festival or other aspects of the parade, like the procession of colorfully decorated, wood chariots pulled through the streets of Santa Monica to the sand of Venice Beach by people pulling on thick ropes.

Only one thing is handed out to bystanders during this parade. A clear plastic, sealed packet of materials related to Hare Krishna teachings and beliefs. In the sealed parade packet were three Krishna Consciousness books (yoga guide/teachings, vegetarian cooking recipes, and Vedic teachings of 18 mantras); a candy sucker; a pamphlet about the history of the giant rolling carts/chariot parades in India and the United States with words for chanting; and a colorful sticker associated with the Jaggananth deity, depicted as wide eyed smiley face, and often affiliated with Krishna or Vishnu.

### [krishnachariots-handout-content.jpg](#)



Initially, I was hesitant about accepting it. I thought by taking the packet, I would open myself to proselytizing since this is a religious sponsored event. Then this woman said it's free. And it was a parade. Though, in my mind, I still remembered being drawn into the "it's free" line, only to learn it really meant, I would now have to listen to a pitch, sermon, or something else. However, on this day there were so many people passing them out that it seemed okay. Possibly, parade brain made me more susceptible. Maybe it was the chanting, drumming, dancing, festive spirit, smiles, or the openness to strangers that parades bring to the mind and body. I had used the Starbucks bathroom, had a hot coffee beverage in hand, and now was waiting with dog and dad for more parade chariots, so maybe I was just in a comfortable and receptive state. I like all festive occasions and normally I don't question whether I'll take what the parade participants give me. All of this had me ruminating. How does the parade context change an experience? What are parade participant-bystander communication processes and expectations? Is the parade

handout something significant and telling of the event and people? How can a parade object reflect religious beliefs and practices? What is the aesthetic of this parade object? Who funds, creates, and packages these parade handouts? How is it distributed? What's the meaning or purpose of handing these things out?

So I took pictures of not only the decorated chariots, the dancing people, the musicians, the bystanders watching the parade, but also the distribution of these parade packets to the individuals walking the route.

### [krishnachariots-handouts-van-cart.jpg](#)



#### **D. final thoughts**

Obviously these parade handouts had me asking a lot of questions. I was wondering about the presentation of religious symbols/teachings/beliefs, participant's religious motivations/intentions, the act of giving, and even how these parade objects and activities relate to other religious events or other types of parades. Moreover, since there are so many things handed out in parades around the world, I'll be revisiting this topic in future blog entries and welcome any comments/contributions you may have about the topic.

#### \* VARIOUS REFERENCES

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Citation: Tiff Graham. *Parade Material Culture: You caught what at a parade*. H-Celebration. 09-07-2018. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/167585/blog/parade-talk/190189/parade-material-culture-you-caught-what-parade>

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