



## The Bobby Pin Revealed

Just as some people do not rise from their beds without putting their eyeglasses on, Mother never left the house any day of her life that I remember without at least two bobby pins in her hair.

– Priscilla Marie Hubenak. “The Bobby Pin.”

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I am interested in the *vulgar* aspect of the object; this is the essence and starting point for this rumination on the strip of bent metal known as the bobby pin. *Vulgar* objects “are nothing more than their function” that is, there is no more to the object than meets the eye.<sup>1</sup> Like a thin sheaf of rolled latex, in the form of a condom, the object’s functioning can shift the user towards primordial pleasure – to a transformative state of *jouissance*,<sup>2</sup> that is lauded by artists, analysts and activists alike. Through the course of this action, this use, the condom becomes something more than its composition. It becomes a sign, a suggestion for the potential of pleasure – the object itself, sitting

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, 1996, 61.

<sup>2</sup> This French noun is most usually translated as ‘enjoyment,’ but in referring to an object’s transformative potential, I allude to the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan. In this frame, the word differs from pleasure and the general expression of orgasm, taking the “subject to that to that extreme point where the erotic borders upon death.” In this way, *jouissance* is conflated with eroticism, death and mysticism. Julia Kristeva reintroduces this theory as applicable to the feminine form, which involves “the whole of the body and the whole of psychical space.” Notes are from David Macey’s, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. 210.

unopened, can become almost foreplay, almost active – a promise. Similarly, the mundane bobby pin is a vehicle of transformation towards an ideal of beauty and a hope of difference; it is a promiscuous tool towards a becoming, and it offers the promise, of style.

### **More than meets the eye**

The aesthetic potentiality of the bobby pin lies not only in its intended use, because the functionality of this strip of metal signifies multiple potentials. These alternative uses are suggestive of the bobby pin's subterfuge. And in some cases, this little nothing, this often hidden item, is what makes it the perfect object for someone whose lifestyle is intent upon escaping notice, namely the thief, robber, or the burglar. The form is camouflage. It is precisely the nature of the bobby pin to fly under the radar of the authorities, be it the actual police or the fashion police. The fact that the bobby pin is most useful if hidden, belies its most important function, sublimation through submission, and the potential expression of *jouissance*.

This is an inherent promise; but sublimation is laden only via multiplicity, because the promise of beauty is often dependant on using more than one bobby pin. I argue that this promise is not constructed by machinations of social organization, it differs from other objects that are constructed and artificially imbued by a “naturalizing tendency [which] spontaneously assumes a burden of moral and psychological meanings.”<sup>3</sup> In the *System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard is referring to the “lexicon of advertising,” as being the artificial device that implodes the mundane with meaning. The bobby pin is a sort of virginal maiden, it shyly and discretely suggests something more, yet it is not advertised or branded in the usual all-consuming manner of most products. I wonder about this lack of advertising, it suggests almost an embarrassment, as if the bobby pin is too simple and unadorned to promote in the same breathless free-for-all as other hair care products like depilatories, the Scrunci ©, or L'Oréal “because I'm worth it” hair coloring. Bobby pins are accessibly and inexpensively sold in bulk-

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<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, 62.

like lots, in quantities of 20, 80 or 675, and affixed to a cardboard card or packaged in a plastic box. The functional style of the bobby pin is not hyped by media moguls, it is as common as they come, and its uncovering is an act of self-discovery in the drugstore aisle, at the beauty supply store, from the catalogue, or at an online retailer. One does not buy the object by brand, but simply by name, size and type: bobby pin or hairpin, long or short, in black, bronze or silver. While the bobby pin is no Gucci, it has value; and though no Faberge', it can be found in rare form and it is arguably the oldest collectable in all of antiquity.



### **Old as the hills, if the hills have hair**

The bobby pin, for practical purposes, is a *utensil* of esthetics and cosmetology; a thing utilized by amateurs and professionals alike, and in both cases its use implies a personal affect towards style. If desire lies in what the bobby pin can do for one's image, then it does not lie in the utensil itself. It is another type of bobby pin that is coveted, and this leads to the premise that, "[e]very object has two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed." Baudrillard explains this object-ive duality and its slipperiness, in trying to approach a definition of possession.

A utensil is never possessed, because a *utensil* refers one to the world; what is possessed is always an object *abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject*. In this context all owned objects partake of the same abstractness, and refer to one another only inasmuch as they refer solely to the subject. Such objects together make up the system through which the subject strives to construct a world, a private totality. (Italics intact)<sup>4</sup>

It is the collectable bobby pin that makes a Beckerian<sup>5</sup> world of antiques, that of *objets d'art*<sup>6</sup> and rare, old, loved things. Where the practical bobby pin "acquires a social status" in the world of cosmetology, the "pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection." It ceases to exist as an object of esthetics, but instead exists in the

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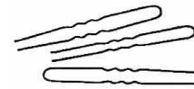
<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> I am referring to Howard Becker's book *Art Worlds*, which seeks to define a sociology of art.

<sup>6</sup> "Littré's [French] dictionary defines '*objet*' in one of its meanings as 'anything which is the cause of subject of a passion; figuratively – and *par excellence* – the loved object'." From Baudrillard, 85 (Italics intact.)

“passionate abstractness of possessions” where all aesthetic *objets* are equivalent.<sup>7</sup> To the collector, the bobby pin inhabits the same category as a hair shirt, the Excalibur, or the body of the Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia.

The progenitor of the bobby pin is the open-ended U-shaped hairpin, which was efficiently mass-produced in the States during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. American hairpin manufacturing was described in detail in an 1854 report provided to British industrialists wishing to produce pins of similar quality:



A quantity of wire is coiled upon a drum or cylinder, and turns round upon its axis, as suspended from the ceiling of the workshop. The pint of the wire being inserted into the machine, and the power applied, the wire is cut off to the requisite length, carried forward and bent to the proper angle, and then pointed with the necessary blunt points, and finally dropped into a receiver, quite finished, all but the lacquering or japanning. These pins are made at the rate of 180 per minute.<sup>8</sup>

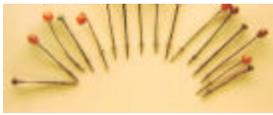
Hairpins are still manufactured today, and can be purchased in retail stores alongside the bobby pin, but less available and of more interest to the collector, is the one-point single pin. Considered one of the earliest human artifacts, straight pins were made of thorns, bone, or wood – in addition to being used for hair restraint, they also functioned to fasten clothing and skewer meat.<sup>9</sup> The long single-shafted metal one point hairpin has been noted to exist in early Greek, Roman and Egyptian times; its use was documented during the Chinese empires in the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

(*Photo from 600 BC*) These pins were adorned at the tip using a variety of motifs: Chinese pins featured flowers, animals and human heads fashioned into miniature busts; Etruscans and Romans often used a fruit motif on the head of their pins; Anglo-Saxons were fond of bird iconography and included gemstones, especially garnets, in their manufacture; Japanese pins were very long and did not have pin head adornments. The Bodkin was a Renaissance hairpin made of gold or silver and adorned with diamonds, pearls, emeralds, and other jewels, which served to advertise immense

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas V. DiBacco. “Pin-Ups; What Women Used Before They Let Their Hair Down.” *The Washington Post* June 15, 1995: T11. *LexisNexis Academic*. [02/20/06].

<sup>9</sup> Description partly compiled from “pin” entry in the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001-04. <[www.bartleby.com/65/](http://www.bartleby.com/65/)>. [04/17/06]



wealth.<sup>10</sup> Even the bobby pin's earliest incarnations reflect a tendency to transform the wearer into something beyond average, but these antique pins do not suggest a desire to remain hidden. They are deftly an ornament unto themselves, especially those made of precious metals; this tendency towards aesthetic craftsmanship changes as modernity and industrialization are on the rise, and there is a shift in the ornamentation of the bobby pin towards a simplicity reflective of economy.

Double point hairpins are also of ancient design and have been documented in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century China, and in addition, in 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Korea.<sup>11</sup> Primarily these pins were thin and made of delicate metal, because this material favored bending, unlike wood or bone. These pins are open, unlike the double point hairpin with shanks that touch in the middle, like today's bobby pin. And though the modern bobby pin can be bought and sold in a wide range of decorative forms, the adornment is most often an addition to the high-carbon steel object. The universal popularity of the bobby pin stems partly from its usefulness, but the fact that they are so inexpensive makes them nearly affordable to all – they equalize.<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that the aesthetic bobby pin dates



only from antiquity, for example the contemporary 1928

Jewelry Company makes retro jewelry in the flapper style, included in its products is an ornamental bobby pin. I found this advertisement on *eBay*:

1928 Hair Jewelry Copper Butterfly Bobby Pins

These adorable bobby pin style hair accessories from the 1928 Jewelry Company are done in a copper tone, with a copper toned butterfly on the end of the bobby pin. Inside the butterfly body are ruby red colored stones. This amazing brand new piece is

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<sup>10</sup> Information on the history of pins can be found on Karen Marie Shelton's website. "Hairpins: History and Practical Application." *HairBoutique*, June 15, 2003.

<<http://www.hairboutique.com/tips/tip3600.htm>>. [04/17/06] From the section, "One Point Hairpins."

<sup>11</sup> Shelton notes that Korea and China are the top producers of two prong hairpins today, from "Double Point Hairpin" section.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, the bobby pin was not designed with all hair types in mind; patent records show the invention of other bobby pins more adept at restraining thick, wooly or course hair.

still attached to the original 1928 card and original price tag of \$18.00. Good luck and enjoy! Condition: Mint.<sup>13</sup>

These pins are not vintage, and ultimately sold for \$9.99, while hardly an item of haute connoisseurship they perform a type of Baudrillardian *dressing-up*. Where the mundane object is met with a need to accessorize or de-vulgarize. Baudrillard stresses that functional objects tend to be designed to disappear – practicality equals modesty. Invisibility is a selling point for the everyday object. It is only when the object attempts to step up to the level of *objet d'art*, does it warrant eye-grabbing attention.

In its *serially produced*<sup>14</sup> form, the bobby pin is distributed en mass, a staple and necessary utensil, but as a distinctly woman's object. In homage to her Mother, Houston journalist, Priscilla Marie Hubenak, clearly describes this type of regularity and consistency.

Mother always bought the same type of bobby pins, and she always bought them at Halamicek's Pharmacy, until it closed. A new card of bobby pins would have the whole lot of them lined up like soldiers waiting for action. They were shiny black metal, the universal style with a slim, straight back and the wavy extension of metal on top. Each end of the metal had an elongated rubber tip in a black that was a shade brighter than that of the metal.<sup>15</sup>

The way Hubenak describes the card of bobby pins is not without passion, they are practical, yes, but useful with expectancy. And perhaps, part of this expectation lies in the beyond of what the bobby pin can do for the head, it changes when “[t]he rubber tips eventually would fall off from use, and these defrocked soldiers became candidates for other uses.” The object, over time, becomes connected to the person using it, “intimately bound up with the subject,”<sup>16</sup> for Hubenak's Mother the bobby pin becomes a way to fix her children's loose ends, to organize paperwork, something with which to pry, pick and fasten.



<sup>13</sup> Posted by buffbeads. “1928 Hair Jewelry Copper Butterfly Bobby Pins.” *eBay Inc.* 1995-2006. <[http://cgi.ebay.com/1928-Hair-Jewelry-Copper-Butterfly-Bobby-Pins\\_W0QQitemZ8921700894QQcategoryZ110405QqcmdZViewItem](http://cgi.ebay.com/1928-Hair-Jewelry-Copper-Butterfly-Bobby-Pins_W0QQitemZ8921700894QQcategoryZ110405QqcmdZViewItem)>. [04/17/06]

<sup>14</sup> See Baudrillard's discussion on page 61-62, especially the footnote on page 61.

<sup>15</sup> Priscilla Marie Hubenak. “The Bobby Pin.” *The Houston Chronicle* May 10, 1992: 4. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, 65.

I am not arguing that the humble bobby pin is never decorative; it can be dressed-up like any other mundane object. These adorned bobby pins are available for retail sale; even plastic bobby pins made for children are multi-colored with sprinkles of sparkles. A plethora of ornamental bobby pins are also produced by the crafter's market, homemade dazzlingly designed pins feature Austrian crystals and rhinestones, dangling ornaments like dolphins and flowers, and those with a patriotic American flag theme. This form of bobby pin is nearly synonymous with costume jewelry and can be purchased in shops, on-line, and at flea markets. In fact, the chignon or French hairpin (double-pointed) can "add instant sizzle to just about any hairstyle. Pearl and jewel encrusted French pins are often utilized to adorn a hot hair twist, knot or updo giving the illusion that tiny pearls and gems are 'floating' aimlessly on top of the strands."<sup>17</sup> But I am interested in the everyday potential and the habitual use of the bobby pin; it is primarily designed to disappear, and to aid in the function of promoting one's personal aesthetic. The following table charts the modern developments in manufacturing of the everyday bobby pin:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Name &amp; Location</b>	<b>Personnel</b>	<b>Products &amp; Retailers</b>	<b>Subsidiaries</b>
as of 1850			U-shaped hairpins. Sears, Roebuck & Co. 1897 catalogue sells 100-count box of pins in four sizes sold for a nickel.	
after 1850		Charles Goodyear	Rubber hairpins. Sears catalogue sells pins for .25 to .39 cents a dozen.	
as of 1907	H. Goodman & Sons Lower East Side, Manhattan, NY	H. Goodman	Ornamental Spanish combs, then hair notions at variety stores.	
1917	Solite Bronx, NY	Sol Smolen	Plastics. Debbly bobby pins – available only in 675 pack.	Purchased in 1961: MacKinac Steel & Wire Co., Bronx, NY.
as of 1920	Hump Hairpin Manufacturing Company Chicago, IL	Sol H. Goldberg, President	Hairpin-with-the-hump. Hold-Bob pins.	
as of 1940	Solo Products Corporation Englewood, NJ	Nat L. Solomon	Rubber-tipped bobby pin.	
as of 1960	Gaylord Products, Inc. Chicago, IL	Mrs. R. K. Gaylord, President	Bobby pins – available in 20 & 80 pack.	

<sup>17</sup> Shelton website from section, "Hairpins in 2003."

as of 1960	Patti Products Co. Mt. Vernon, NY		Bobby pins.	
as of 1980	<b>Goody</b> Products Inc. previously known as, H. Goodman & Sons Kearny, NJ	Leonard Goodman, President	Combs, brushes, barrettes, bobby pins, hair curlers, hairnets, headbands, shower caps – over 500 individual items. Sold at: Wal-Mart, Target, Fred's, Walgreen's, Eckerd, CVS/pharmacy, Rite Aid, Publix, Safeway, Kroger, Meijer, Food Lion, Claire's, AAFES.	Ace Comb Co., Booneville, AK. Duray, Brooklyn, NY. (cosmetic & travel accessories) Opti-Ray Inc., Farmingdale, IL (sunglasses).
1994	Newell Rubbermaid Atlanta, GA	Mark Ketchum, CEO	See list for Goody.	<b>Goody</b> Products, Inc., Rubbermaid, Calphalon, Graco, little tikes, Levolor, Sharpie, Paper Mate.
as of 1995	Sta-Rite Ginnie Lou Inc. Shelbyville, IL		Bobby pins. One of five remaining manufacturers of bobby pins in United States.	

As seen above, there was relatively consistent manufacturing of hairpins and bobby pins up to the 1960s. It seems that with a shift in styles in the seventies and the liberation of norms, genders, and subsequently hair – the pin manufacturing business began to diversify. The company Goody reflects this trend and begins to manufacture other items and acquires similar personal care subsidiaries. Like other products tied to personal hygiene, the bobby pin seems to be similar to the razor, comb, or toothbrush in that it is purchased new and not shared, except with those close to the user's family circle. In this way the bobby pin is different from another simple object made from a length of metal, the paper clip, which is often acquired as a free object, and does not develop a personal relationship with the user. Unlike the collectable pin, the bobby pin does not seem to have a resale market, whether online or at thrift stores. Even the 1928 Butterfly Bobby is advertised as *original* and *mint*. The bobby pin wears out – the rubber-coated tips fall off, the lacquering chips, the metal rusts, the tension stretches and the functional potential of the bobby pin decreases.

**What is the bobby pin?**

The bobby pin performs a sublime function because it posses the ability to elevate the user towards a higher state, through the concealment and subtlety



of its form.<sup>18</sup> It is an object that is not revealed, it does not speak out on its own or through the mouthpiece of advertising, but allows a finished product, the hairstyle, to assert individuality in its stead. Invisibility allows for the potential of transforming the average head of hair into something beautiful – this is the tradition of the bobby pin. But the bobby pin also serves a more humble use, it is designed to be functional, just one pin can restrain the adolescent flyaway, it can even be nerdy in its vulgarity. But for those who use it to express personal style, its use is a necessary exercise in camouflage, whether one is a be-wigged drag queen or a society matron. In fact, the task of looking for a photograph of the bobby pin performing its function in a hairdo is an elusive process, the pins are hidden, only the ‘do shines. Like other unmentionables invented in the same time period, like the girdle or brassiere, the bobby pin aids in presenting the body-as-beautiful, while remaining hidden. Like lying about one’s age, the bobby pin can imply subversion – a woman can be young and beautiful if there is no question concerning the construction of her presentation. It remains unseen like a surveillance camera or faux-brooch lapel-microphone, while it’s product, the hairstyle, takes the external aesthetic temperature of the way the wearer is perceived by others. Like spying, hair is serious business, and a bad hair day can make the wearer feel like she is dying.

I wonder if the spy-wear designers for Maxwell Smart, James Bond, or the FBI ever invented a bobby-mic or bobby-camera. If so, they would not have been the first to discover multiple uses for this bended length of steel, because the naive ingenuity of humanity is a close match to that of organized (and even fictional) espionage.

An airline hostess’ bobby pin was credited today with having helped avert the crash-landing of a plane carrying seventeen persons.

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<sup>18</sup> It is also worth mentioning the literal application of the definition of sublime, “to raise up or aloft, cause to ascend.” The bobby pin is an invention, like hairspray, that allows for hairstyles like the updo. This observation was not lost on my Father, Jerome Miller, when he lived in Mormon-country, Ogden, UT during the early sixties. He was known to remark, “the higher the hair, the closer to God.” Definition of *sublime* is from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press, 2006. [http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2088/cgi/entry/50240793?query\\_type=word&queryword=sublime&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&search\\_id=PFun-zmEL2J-10053&result\\_place=1&case\\_id=PFun-QkPiSE-10067&p=1&d=1&sp=1&qt=1&ct=0&ad=1&print=1](http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2088/cgi/entry/50240793?query_type=word&queryword=sublime&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=PFun-zmEL2J-10053&result_place=1&case_id=PFun-QkPiSE-10067&p=1&d=1&sp=1&qt=1&ct=0&ad=1&print=1) [04/17/06].

The Fokker Friendship airliner was en route from Brisbane to Sydney when the pilot, Capt. W. Jennings, discovered that the nose wheel in the aircraft's tricycle landing-gear assembly was jammed....

Then Captain Jennings borrowed the bobby pin to short-circuit the electrical system of the nose wheel. He put the plane through a series of dives to shake the nose wheel loose and made a perfect landing.<sup>19</sup>

The ingenious uses of the bobby pin are often exhibited in the jerry rigging of mechanical devices, like the airplane. In fact, it is even considered a tool in its own right. A BMW motorcycle online list-serve called, *The Chain Gang*, reveals the practical use of "the more expensive, high tech bobby pins," as an idle-mix screw screwdriver substitute. What is also interesting about the list serve discussion is how the bobby pin is gendered in the predominately male world of motorcycles. Richard #230 from Pacifica, CA tries to write a description of a bobby pin, and in reply William-USA feels a bit emasculated:



about.<sup>21</sup>

Richard #230: Bobby pins were used by women to keep their hair in place. They sort of look like thin black paper clips. They were sold in 5 & Dime stores for about a penny each and tended to end up at the bottom of every drawer ever accessed by a woman.<sup>20</sup>

William-USA: Geez. It's bad enough I admit to using a girlie item, but it's worse when I find out I'm old enough that hardly anybody knows what I am talking

I also discovered the use of bobby pins in the milieu of science and technology, in a 1961 article, "A Timing Device Suitable for Field Studies Under Adverse Conditions," the pin is used to construct "a simple, inexpensive, extremely sensitive, mechanical" timer for "determining the exact time at which an animal was trapped."<sup>22</sup> Microscopist, James D.



<sup>19</sup> "Bobby Pin Helps Save Airliner Carrying 17." *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 1960: 62. *Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2002)*.

<sup>20</sup> DiBacco notes that the 1897 Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue sold a box of 100 hairpins for a nickel. Shelton's website, section "Hairpins in the 40s, 50s & 60s", states that "back in the era of WW2 hairpins sold for approximately ten cents for a card that held an average of 24 pins..." Current online retailers like American Discount Beauty Supply sell 60-2" and 20-2 3/4" bobby pins for \$1.59 per card, these pins are available in black, bronze and silver. <http://www.adiscountbeauty.com/page66.html>. [04/20/06]

<sup>21</sup> Richard #230 and William-USA. "Idle Mix Screw FAQ." *The Chain Gang*. 1997-2005. [http://faq.f650.com/FAQs/Idle\\_Mix\\_Screw.htm](http://faq.f650.com/FAQs/Idle_Mix_Screw.htm). [04/20/06]

<sup>22</sup> M. W. Sorenson and John W. Twente. "A Timing Device Suitable for Field Studies Under Adverse Conditions." *Ecology*, 42, no. 1, Jan., 1961: 212. *JSTOR*. [02/20/06].

Anthony from the University of Wisconsin, rigged “A Bobby Pin Cover Glass Clip” in 1963 to aid in viewing specimen slides.<sup>23</sup> And what scientist (or nerdy BMW rider) wouldn’t be fully dressed without a bobby pin pocket clip?

These scientific adaptations are in good company with a plethora of homespun inventions. Notable enough to be printed in *The Toronto Star* is the Family Handyman’s helpful hint from 1998, “Another Use for Bobby Pins.”

If thin speaker wires have become stuck in gaps along baseboards, rafters and moulding (sic), try solving the problem with a bobby pin. Clip off one end, leaving a hook at the top which (sic) can slide into the cracks. Once the wire is caught, pull it out.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps contemporary and simple hairstyles that are not dependent on hair restraint, led the newspaper to find a way to rejuvenate the antiquated bobby pin. And, only a few years later across the globe in the *Sunday Herald Sun*, Australian home-helpers describe the how-to process for a “long-grippy-tool,” which employs the use of a bobby pin, string, and straws.<sup>25</sup> While devices like these are not so much lash-ups designed in the wake of the manufacture of bobby pins (like the bobby pin box,) they use the bobby pin as an ingredient or component towards the production of another invention. It functions in much the same way as it does for the hairstyle, the bobby pin is a step in the becoming of something else, its intended function is taken to a place beyond the ubiquitous styling of hair, towards a world of discovery and invention. But not all uses for the bobby pin are mechanical or scientific; some are just wacky and fun like the



Thumb Piano. If one has wood, masking tape, pushpins, rubber bands, craft sticks, and long bobby pins making the tiny piano is easily within arm’s reach.<sup>26</sup>

Bobby pin lore is rife with tales of subterranean use. In a pinch and in need of transportation? -use a bobby pin to steal a car. Arrested or

<sup>23</sup> James D. Anthony. “A Bobby Pin Cover Glass Clip.” *Transactions of the American Microscopical Society*, 82, no. 1, Jan., 1963: 105. *JSTOR*. [02/20/06].

<sup>24</sup> “Here’s Another Use for Bobby Pins.” *The Toronto Star*, May 3, 1998: People section. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

<sup>25</sup> “Try me.” *Sunday Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia), Mar., 17, 2002: F06. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

<sup>26</sup> “Make a Thumb Piano.” *Satisfied Mind*. 2000. <<http://www.satisfied-mind.com/make/thumb-piano.htm>>. [04/20/06].



handcuffed at an inopportune time? -a bobby pin can pick a lock in no time flat. This type of innovation labeled 1960s Chicago hoodlum, Jimmy Leonetti, the “Houdini of Handcuffs.” “On a number of occasions, Leonetti was arrested and cuffed, but by the time he was driven to a police station he had removed the cuffs and handed them to the gendarmes.” Police offered Leonetti a reward if he would reveal the secret, but only after his death in 1973 did his lawyer fess up to the straightened bobby pin that was hidden in a seam at the top of Leonetti’s trousers.<sup>27</sup> A 1959 article in *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* discusses the prevalence and types of prevention for automobile theft. Analysts state that there are several methods for starting a car without a key; one involves the use of a *jumper* “which short-circuits the ignition system by touching the three posts in the system simultaneously, so that the car can be started without the use of ignition wires.” The list of jumpers includes a beer can opener, a large coin, a long bobby pin, and tin foil.<sup>28</sup> With the aid of a bobby pin, picking a padlock can be fast and easy, the weblog *Electron Soup* features a how-to for lock picking:

You will need:

- a padlock – I used one from a \$2 shop
- a bobby pin – you know, a hairpin
- tool

The bobby pin simulates wrench applies the padlock’s barrel.<sup>29</sup>



the key’s ridges, and the tension necessary pressure to turn the

Such multiplicity of uses might suggest the perfection and the masterful *automatism*<sup>30</sup> of the bobby pin, where the functionality of the pin is tightly embedded in its design. In actuality, the opposite is true, the simple bobby pin always calls out in need for redesign, re-designation, and re-appropriation.

<sup>27</sup> “Kup’s Column.” *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jul. 24, 1992: 40. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

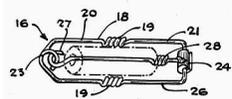
<sup>28</sup> Leonard D. Savitz. “Automobile Theft.” *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, 50, no. 2, Jul.-Aug., 1959: 139. *JSTOR*. [02/20/06].

<sup>29</sup> Flashman. “Opening a Padlock in Under a Minute.” *Electron Soup*. Oct. 18, 2005. Post submitted on Jan. 21, 2006. <<http://www.electronsoup.net/?q=node/199>>. [04/17/06]

<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard defines *automatism* as the modern object’s mechanical triumph and the “ideal of its mythology,” in this frame the object takes on the connotation of its function. For example, the tail fins of a vintage automobile connote speed. See discussion in *System* on page 109-112.

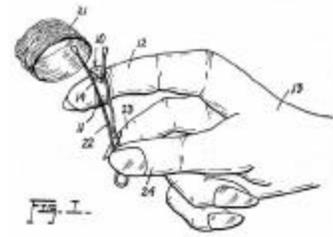
Far from having any intrinsic technical advantages, automatism always embodies the risk of arresting technical advance, for so long as an object has not been automated it remains susceptible of redesign, of self-transcendence through incorporation into a larger functional whole.

Baudrillard argues that, “[i]n order to automate a practical object, it is necessary to *stereotype it in its function*, thus making it more fragile.”<sup>31</sup> (Italics his.) This point is well taken, because if the bobby pin were indeed a perfect object it would exist in one form only, with one patent record and one inventor, but the history of the bobby pin is not so clear-cut. In 1974 a “Tension (Bobby) Pin” was invented that would “conform with the contour of the scalp so people can get a night’s rest, since people cannot sleep well with conventional bobby pins.” Even more glaring than the fact that the bobby pin is universally uncomfortable, is the suggestion from inventors James L. Terrell and Jerome Curry, that its design is preferential towards Anglo-type hair.



It is a further object of the present invention to provide a bobby pin for the Negro and some foreign people whose hair is thicker, coarser, but woolly, etc., and for use where the pin is in need to be a bit smaller and larger in various cases or requires more finger room, as some peoples hair is harder to control than others.<sup>32</sup>

A few of the many pin-like inventions unearthed from the United States Patent and Trademark Office include a bobby pin with a raised tip at the end (1935), the plastic bobby pin (1944), a tension clip for easier opening (1945), a bobby pin with “finger gripping means” (1964), and plastic-jacketed coverings (1975). Lash-up inventions include those for packaging (1949, 1950, 1958), for containment (1947 ornamental, 1948 magnetic (*see photos below*)), for spreading both as a finger-ring style (1948, 1968 (*see drawing previous page*)), and as a table-mounted spreader (1964).



In fact, the bobby pin is such an ingenious and multifarious device that there is discrepancy as to when it was actually

<sup>31</sup> Both quotes from Baudrillard, 110.

<sup>32</sup> James L. Terrell and Jerome Curry. “Tension (Bobby) Pin.” US 3,837,350. *United States Patent and Trademark Office*. Last updated Apr. 27, 2006. <<http://www.uspto.gov>> [04/18/06]

invented and who should be credited with its discovery. It seems impossible to pinpoint the definitive origin of this object, which is one of the oldest inventions of humankind, yet still indeterminate.

Of all the devices used in hairstyling the meek bobby pin must seem to be the simplest. Over a hundred variations have been patented. Controversy rages on the web about who invented bobby pins, with dates ranging from 1916 to 1928, and Omaha, Danville, PA, and New Zealand all being acclaimed as the place where the idea first saw light of day.... The earliest patent to use the distinctive crinkled bobby pin look appears to be US 1233195 by Samuel Creech and Perry Bland of Sullivan, IL, in 1917. They simply called it a “hair pin”.<sup>33</sup>



The above description, though brief, is one of the few I could find, perhaps the *meekness* of this object accounts for its slipperiness. Reference texts such as the *Encyclopedia of Modern Everyday Inventions* and *World of Invention* contain sections on “Hair Care” and



“Hair Styling Products,” but neither mentions the bobby pin in the exhaustive lists of curling irons, hair curlers, permanent wave products, hair color, hair dryers, depilatories, soap, mousses and gels, electric hair untanglers, two-in-one shampoo plus conditioners, and polymer hair spray.<sup>34</sup>

The following table is by no means a comprehensive list of every bobby pin ever invented, it merely highlights the major trends in bobby pin invention and innovation.

Date	Inventor or Company	Location	Name, US Patent Number & Notes
1917	Samuel Creech & Perry Bland	Sullivan, IL	Hair Pin – US 1,233,195
Sept. 21, 1937	Harry M. Snyder		Bobby Pin – US 2,093,934. A flat closed pin.
June 19, 1945	Samuel Berman & Vincent J. Macaluso		Plastic Bobby Pin – US 2,378,747. A ridged closed pin
March 11, 1947	Lloyd R. Westby		Bobby Pin – US 2,417,335. A flat closed pin with tension clip.
May 25, 1948	Clarence M. Welch		Bobby Pin Opener – US 2,441,947. A ring-like device to be worn on finger

<sup>33</sup> Stephen van Dulken. *American Inventions: a History of Curious, Extraordinary, and Just Plain Useful Patents*. New York: New York University Press, 2004 (180-181).

<sup>34</sup> David J. Cole, Eve Browning, and Fred E.H. Schroeder. *Encyclopedia of Modern Everyday Inventions*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003 (144-147). Kimberly A. McGrath, Editor. *World of Invention*. Detroit: Gale Press, 1999 (372-374).

Dec. 1947	Alice Wallace		Decorative Bobby Pin Box.
1948	Norloc Division, Norton Laboratories, Inc.	Lockport, NY	Magnetic Pin Bin. a round sectioned magnetized container
April 5, 1949	Wythe T. Bolling, Jr.		Bobby Pin Package – US 2,466,571. A matchbook like card.
May 2, 1950	Charles W. Ball		Holder for Bobby Pins or the Like. Ornamental design on holder.
Nov. 29, 1949	Samuel Tick		Bobby Pin – US 2,489,598. A ridged curved closed pin.
May 6, 1958	Joseph J. Campagna		Bobby Pin Holder – US 2,833,291. A card like, wall mounted holder.
Dec. 22, 1964	Leida M. Apri & Eduard V. Apri		Apparatus for Opening a Bobby Pin – US 3,162,202. A tabletop device.
May 2, 1967	Florence L. Westburg & Ruth Rosefsky		Bobby Pin with Finger Gripping Means – US 3,316,921. A ridged closed pin with grip and handle at fold.
Dec. 3, 1968	William M. Halstead		Bobby Pin Spreader – US 3,413,983. A ring-like device to be worn on finger.
Sept. 24, 1974	James L. Terrell & Jerome Curry	Waukegan, IL	Tension (Bobby) Pin – US 3,837,350. Designed to be comfortable, scalp conforming, suitable for African-American and thicker hair.
Oct. 28, 1975	Nathan L. Solomon Solo Products Corporation	Englewood, NJ	Plastic-Jacketed Article & Method of Making the Same – US 3,915,203. Designed to cover a hair clip with a thin, uniform, plastic covering to prevent corrosion and discoloration
1994	Russell Videtzky	South Africa	Hair Scroo designed for long hair.
March 2002	Do-It Corp. & Goody Products	Western MI	PrinTag – a hangtag and product label for the Goody Bobby Box.

The patent table reflects various social and cultural trends in the United States. During WWII inventors attempted to make bobby pins out of non-metal materials, and in the seventies, a time of revolutionary identity politics, the importance of hair care products for minoritarian populations began to take form.

### **The Bobby Pin and the Becoming Body**

How can I describe the bobby pin? In one sense it is utterly evasive – its origins are unknown or questionable, at best; its presence is bound in a disappearing act, so easily slipping from view. It reappears incarnate to save airplanes from crashing and controversially, it has a dark side, a life of crime hidden in the shadows. It is more an ends to a means, than a thing itself. And yet, it is tangible, perfectly functional, and absolutely ordinary. Such heterogeneity brings to mind another sublime object, the cigarette. At once, it is leaf and paper, and in no time it is up in smoke.

The cigarette seems, by nature, to be so ancillary, so insignificant and inessential, so trifling and disparaged, that it hardly has any proper identity or nature, any function or role of its own – it is at most a vanishing being, one least likely to acquire the status of a cultural artifact, of a poised, positioned thing in the world, deserving of being interrogated, philosophically, as to its being.

The cigarette not only has little being of its own, it is hardly ever singular, rather always myriad, multiple, proliferating.<sup>35</sup>

In *Cigarettes are Sublime*, Richard Klein suggests that the cigarette is an ambiguous sign with multiple meanings, and not unlike the bobby pin, these interpretations are centrally governed by a “murderous intrigue” towards the body.<sup>36</sup> Not only does the bobby pin push the limits of the body/hair towards sublimation and a transcendental state of beauty and style, but also has the potential to alter the body in dangerous ways. Klein calls this *appropriate possession*, a state of being where the object actually changes one’s corporeal form, where “the object becomes ‘mine’ by a process of ‘continuous destruction.’”<sup>37</sup>

In the 1950s, dental experts noted the rising prevalence of *bobby pin notch*, “a wearing down of irreplaceable tooth enamel by opening bobby pins with the teeth.”<sup>38</sup> And not to be undone by the mouth, is the damaged ear. Dr. Michael C. Ott includes in his study of tympanic membrane perforations, “instruments such as cotton swabs, bobby pins, and sticks” as being prevalent causes for punctured eardrums.<sup>39</sup> In a direct and causative way, the bobby pin not only affects the body, but also alters it, changing its form to accommodate the object. Baudrillard describes this indirect type of adaptation as a type of form-ative discourse.

Inasmuch as forms are relative to one another, and continually refer to other, homologous forms, they present the aspect of a finished discourse – the optimal realization of an essence of man and an essence of the world. This discourse is never innocent, however: the articulation of forms among themselves always conceals another, indirect discourse.<sup>40</sup>

What is indirect about the bobby pin is the mark that it leaves on the user’s body. This reciprocal relationship of the object to the body can also be seen in the formation of habits. Frequent users of bobby pins become habituated to their presence; need and patterns begin to emerge. Scarcity because of legislation and material constraints cause

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<sup>35</sup> Richard, Klein. *Cigarettes are Sublime*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> “Bobby Pins Harming Teeth.” *New York Times*, May 12, 1954: 34. *ProQuest NYT*.

<sup>39</sup> Dr. Michael C. Ott and Larry B. Lundy, MD. “Tympanic Membrane Perforation in Adults.” *Postgraduate Medicine*, 110, no. 5 (Nov. 2001): 81. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, 61.

the bobby pin wearer to either find alternatively creative solutions to hair design or alter their behavior to meet the limited availability.

During WWII, bobby pins were coined as “war victims”<sup>41</sup> and stylists from Chanute, Kansas to Manhattan began to use thread, ribbons, braids and other substitutes for bobby pins “with the idea that they will find better use in a bomber.”<sup>42</sup> The object is governed by the means of production and by the authorities that control those means, which in the case of the United States is a governing body rife with discrepancies and misinformation. A *New York Times* article from April 1943 states that the rumor of a manufacture ban on bobby pins is false, and that “War Production Board officials declared that even though the little pins are made of vital high carbon steel their production will be permitted.”<sup>43</sup> Less than a year later the *Times* reports that government restrictions have eased, but that manufactures are not able to purchase the steel wire necessary for their production, and that the machines used to make bobby pins have been appropriated by the government to manufacture aircraft cotter pins.<sup>44</sup> While not the first legislative intervention in the manufacture of pins, the impact was dramatic, not unlike that of England during the reign of Henry VIII, where “the consumption of the whole nation was, in 1863, estimated at twenty million of (sic) pins per day.”<sup>45</sup> Because of the shoddy manufacture of these pins, their costliness, and scarcity, Parliament limited their sale to the first two days of January, because of this women would save up money all year to buy their pins at the permitted time – hence the development of the term *pin money*.<sup>46</sup>

The modern invention of the bobby pin falls during what invention scholar, Rodney Carlisle, designates as the Electrical Age (1891-1934), which included other

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<sup>41</sup> “Bobby Pins War Victims.” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 18, 1942: S10. *ProQuest NYT*.

<sup>42</sup> “‘Bombshell Hair-Do’ to Save War Metal.” *The New York Times*, Mar. 17, 1942: 18. *ProQuest NYT*.

<sup>43</sup> “Bobby Pins Will Still Be Made.” *The New York Times*, Apr. 21, 1943: 33. *ProQuest NYT*.

<sup>44</sup> Martha Parker. “Scarcity of Bobby Pins Here Continues Despite Easing of Restriction on Metals.” *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1944: 14. *ProQuest NYT*.

<sup>45</sup> M. Springate. “A Brief History of the Pin” adapted from *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, LXIX (1864), 361. *Uniclectica Antiques and Collectibles Online*. 1997-2000.

<<http://www.uniclectica.com/misc/pins.html>>. [04/17/06]

<sup>46</sup> From “pin” entry in the *Columbia Encyclopedia*.

things such as airplanes, aspirin, breakfast cereal, the electron, instant coffee, motion pictures, penicillin, Pluto, stainless steel, the Uncertainty Principle, and the zipper.<sup>47</sup> The bobby pin oscillates between a practical specificity and an “absorption by a series or collection where it becomes one term in latent, repetitive discourse,” this is what Baudrillard defines as a *system of habits*. In two extremes, society functions on a foundation of a network of habits/inventions, at the other end, the individual becomes focused on behavioral routines. “[T]here is probably no habit that does not centre on an object. In everyday existence the two are inextricably bound up with each other.”<sup>48</sup> The repetition of use is paramount to forming habits as Priscilla Marie Hubenak observed of her Mother:

The procedure was always the same. Mother would dig around in the small round bowl of pinkish-golden carnival glass, searching for the bobby pins that still had black tips. With her right hand and in one continuous motion, she would put the end of a bobby pin against her teeth to part the metal and swiftly arc the pin to her hair. First a pin would be placed at an angle on the right side and then one on the left.<sup>49</sup>

Though I do not think the performance of style is limited to the world of women, it is women who primarily and habitually employ the use of the bobby pin.<sup>50</sup> The example from Hubenak depicts simplicity, practicality and suggests the restraint of modernity.

Period	Style	Comments
1920s	Bob	Bobby pins used to keep short hair in place.

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<sup>47</sup> Rodney Carlisle. “Scientific American Inventions and Discoveries: All the Milestones in Ingenuity - from the Discovery of Fire to the Invention of the Microwave Oven.” Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004. List gleaned from Table of Contents provided by *The Library of Congress Online Catalogue*. Updated Dec. 16, 2005. <<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/wiley041/2003023258.html>>. [04/23/06].

<sup>48</sup> Baudrillard, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Hubenak, 4.

<sup>50</sup> I could also suggest that in the world of collecting, the antique and rare pin (*objet*) is habitually consumed largely by men.

1942	“Bombshell” Hair-Do	Eliminated use of all metal clips, curlers and bobby pins. Created by, Albert of Fifth Avenue for the International Beauty Show, New York, NY. Featured feather curls, side waves and swirl curls.
during WWII	Feather-Cut Hair Wave	Did not need pins of any kind.
after WWII	Pin Curl	Coiled strands of hair secured by 30 to 40 bobby pins.
1950s	Ponytails	Bobby pins hold loose strands and bangs in place.
1960s	Bouffant	Large bobby pins used to hold orange juice cans, which act as giant curlers.
	French Twist	Also known as the Chignon.
1960s	Updo	Think height and lots of hairspray.
July 2003	Half up/half down	Sported by <i>Sex and the City’s</i> character Carrie Bradshaw, an odd placement of at least 20 black bobby pins in no particular order.

Not all styles in the modern period are as simple as Hubenak’s mother’s two-pin look, but they do suggest a restraint in the fashioning of the hair, and this brings me to the consideration of the postmodern post-seventies bobby pin.

### Style Wars Win

It is impossible to talk about the bobby pin without considering style; even the name of this object is referential of a hairstyle, the Bob. This hairstyle became popular in the 1920s and featured short hair set tightly against the head in a wavy pattern; this look was so popular that by 1930 almost ninety percent of American women had adopted the Bob. In addition, the number of hair salons increased from 5,000 to 23,000 to keep up with the demand, where previously most women had cut and set their hair at home. Rather than destroying the hairpin market that was dependent on long hair, inventors took the trend in bobbing as a call to arms, this history is reflected in the life of Sol H. Goldberg who was president of the Hump Hairpin Manufacturing Company based in Chicago.

Probably the most important event in his life was the reading of a magazine article in 1905 which (sic) stated that a fortune was waiting for the inventor of a satisfactory hair fastener for women. Mr. Goldberg promptly invented the hairpin-with-the-hump, which made his fortune. By the early 1920s his firm was making millions of hairpins yearly, and then Irene Castle bobbed her

hair. The hairpin market skidded to the bottom, but Mr. Goldberg didn't go with it. He began manufacturing the bobby pin.<sup>51</sup>

While cosmetology may not be a high art, the bobby pin is a tool of this trade, and is a vehicle for the sublimation towards beauty, in this way the bobby pin hums like the muses who speak to master painters, musicians and poets. Creating a hairstyle can be likened to composing a musical score, where the bearer of this style is met with gazes gleaming with appreciation, admiration, and awe. And while the bobby pin is not immune to the pressures of culture and history, neither is style. Generally, the potential of the bobby pin is unspoken, it is not advertised, and it is sold unadorned on a cardboard card or in a plastic box. It is sold in quantity, not in the singular, implying that one pin is exactly like the other.



The institutions of cultural production (like television) mark how the bobby pin emerges in an everyday contemporary metropolitan setting. Perhaps influenced by the postmodern acceptance of kitsch, artificiality and contradiction, is the 2003 style sported by the Carrie Bradshaw character on HBO's *Sex and the City*. This style was not only influential, at least in Carrie's world of fandom, but also passionately described in the press, on weblogs and at beauty-how-to websites. Because the style is so dramatic, these reviews are revealing enough to quote at length:

A few weeks ago, during the season premiere of *Sex and the City*, Carrie, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, wore a mess (at least twenty) of jet-black bobby pins in her highlighted blond hair. There was no rhyme or reason to their odd placement. It looked like her stylist just threw a handful of bobby pins at Carrie's hair to see how many would stick... In the days following the premiere, the walk to my 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue office proved that the Carrie disciples had fully embraced the bobby pin look. It started out slowly – just one or two girls proudly sporting an almost-acceptable one or two bobby pins. But soon the numbers grew. More and more young women clipped on more and more bobby pins. Five. Ten. Twenty. It was unbelievable. (About.com, July 28, 2003)<sup>52</sup>

Bobby pins! Many of them! Completely visible! In a matted rats nest of hair!

<sup>51</sup> "Sol H. Goldberg, Hairpin Maker, 53." *The New York Times*, June 6, 1940: 25. ProQuest NYT.

<sup>52</sup> Nichole Robertson. "Bobby Pins are the New Black." First published on, *About.com*. 2006 About, Inc. (A *New York Times* Company). Republished as blog post, "Sex and the City Fashion." *Gawker*. Edited by, Jessica Coen and Jesse Oxfeld. Published by, Gawker Media, Jul. 28, 2003. <<http://www.gawker.com/topic/sex-and-the-city-fashion-012875.php>>. [04/24/06].

Carrie sports the sloppy look one day while schlumping around the city, and when she spots her current crush ... approaching unexpectedly, she gasps and bolts in the opposite direction....

Unfortunately, she doesn't escape scot-free, and bumps into Berger around the corner. He gets a good long look at her hair, which is pulled back from her face with a scarf, then flattened to the back of her head with about a dozen black pins. Berger doesn't seem to mind the look, and neither do *Sex and the City* fans in New York, who apparently cleaned Manhattan drugstores out of simple black bobby pins the day after episode #5 aired there in late June. (*The Toronto Star*, September 11, 2003)<sup>53</sup>

[I]n the season's first episode, Carrie was spotted in several scenes wearing very obvious bobby pins to anchor her ponytail and in another scene to anchor her half up/half down casual style. (HairBoutique.com, October 29,2004)

At last, the vulgar bobby pin is revealed, it is obvious and contestedly considered sexy – a sort of turnabout revealing the guts of beauty, it is an exposure of the secretive hidden bobby pin that has been lauded and prescribed throughout history.

This speaking-out of the bobby pin describes what Baudrillard calls the *idea of the relationship*.<sup>54</sup> In this example, Baudrillard describes how advertising governs the status of an object and its consumption, but for the case of my argument I am conflating that style does a similar thing; the conversion of an object into a sign. Advertising can even be thought of as a stylish way of producing a commodity. Both style and consumption are a “reason for living;”<sup>55</sup> this is why there is never a saturation point, no limits to consumption, and an ever-changing style. In the performance of style “what is consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself, signified yet absent, simultaneously included and excluded.”<sup>56</sup> It the presentation of the hair that is important, and the bobby pin is always just a tool with which to achieve that goal. The bobby pin “has become abstract, been abolished, been transformed into a sign-object, and thus consumed.”<sup>57</sup> The Carrie style is expressed in the feminist anarchist voice of the postmodern, it retains ubiquitous potential, but exposes the framework of how style is fabricated – through a subsequent fandom and an obvious stylistic construction.

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<sup>53</sup> Daphne Gordon. “A Lesson in Imperfection.” *The Toronto Star*, Sept. 11, 2003: J02. *LexisNexis*. [02/20/06].

<sup>54</sup> Baudrillard, 201.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 204.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, 201.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*.

If the Carrie style suggests a trend in the future, the bobby pin is safely ensconced in the beauty supply market, and one can only imagine what could come next...



In this picture, the multitude of bobby pins speak a thousand words, they are revealed and undeniable like an exoskeleton. But it is ultimately the job for the hair stylist or the inventor of the object to make the next jump in innovation using only metal and the power of the imagination.



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