

# Object and Interpretation

**Raluca STANCIU (SOARE)**

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Facultatea de Științe Socio-Umane  
 Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences  
 Personal e-mail: ralucasoare2003@yahoo.co.uk

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The in-depth transformation of the public space, translated into a replacement of facts and things with a system of interpretation, is what determines new relational experiences and new schemes of perception that are working within a register of shared appearances. Significances receive a value of their own, and the symbolic function becomes autonomous in relation with the referent. Out of this, a new subject-object/mass-merchandise dialectics is born: the significances we bestow on objects emerge inside fields of interaction, and objects are reproduced inside a code that is structuring the social corpus.

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We may not be talking about a dissolution of subjectivity, yet we are witnessing instances of going beyond the subject and of the self, while symbolic significances receive a value of their own. Structuralism predicates a conventional reality, structured by and through conventions sprung out of techniques and practices associated with signification. Along with structuralism, semiotics also approaches in a constructive manner the formulation of laws and rules that allow it to wish for the status of becoming a theory of significance systems and of mechanisms of signification, thus obscuring the issue of subject and value. Nearing to meanings and values is performed within limits that are assumed and also given by codes, the universe of meanings is only tangentially accessible, and to catch the contents referring to the subject is to retort to techniques typical to hermeneutics.

In a world in which the subject becomes marginal, objects and things are placed in a new light, that reveals a new relation with these, therefore inducing “a reification of intersubjectivity”. “There is in this connection a sort of combination between what we

call possession rapport to things and the intersubjective relationship we transfer to them. This way, sometimes things become part of our dialoguing subject, and other times we go so far as to give things the quality of subject accompanying us in the world.” (Frunză, 15)

The seduction symbolism’s theme is developed against the background of postmodern debates over the disappearance of the subject, providing a passage from the world of individuals towards the world of objects. The consumption culture products simultaneously become objects of seduction and seduction-exerting subjects. Seduction is not an element intrinsic to things, but rather functions as an over-added reality to the spectrum of signs. It is entirely relational, things and beings are drawn into a communication process in which seducer and seduced sit on interchangeable positions. Within this continual exchange of significances, the distinction between seducer and seduced, between subject and object is dissolving. Seduction feeds on communication, its existence is strictly communicational, while the strategy of seduction presupposes a ritualic play as a



way of producing objects along the spectrum of shared appearances.

If we are talking about the symbolic construction of public space, we can depart from the prerequisite of a community's collective cultural memory, understood as a sum of relational experiences. Objects receive value as a result of collective recognition and authorization. In the absence of a universe that bestows meaning on them, objects would be no more than irrational gestures. All objects are subjected to categories of perception and appreciation. The logic of symbolic goods is contained within their double nature – merchandise and significances, or otherwise said, the very objects and the discourse about objects. "The endeavour of material manufacture means nothing in the absence of the endeavour of producing the manufactured object's value. The gown worn at the Royal Court, as evoked by old-time economists, has no value other than the one given by the Court, which, by producing and reproducing itself, is reproducing all that makes up life at the Court, that is, the entire system of agents and institutions responsible with the production and reproduction of habituses. (...) As an almost experimental verification of this fact, the value of a Court gown disappears along with the Court and the herewith associated habituses ." (Bourdieu, 2012, 231). By extrapolation, according to Bourdieu, no object will hold a purely utilitarian objective value, since at the origin of its value lie a set of subjective historically and socially determined dispositions. The schemes of perception, appreciation and expression function as a historical system that indicates the limits of production and circulation of objects as cultural produce.

The order of production is overlaid by a consumption order, both generating a system of objects. These are never offered alone, but rather within a context that speaks about them, which radically changes the individual's relation to the object, their approach to the object representing an approach to a set of contextually determined significances. Even more, as Baudrillard points out, objects organize themselves in a "panoply" or "collection", they "call on each other, respond to each other and decline on each other." (Baudrillard, 2008, 31). Therefore, we are not talking about a range of objects, but rather about a range of significances, where the objects organized in branches engage the consumer into a series of complex motivations, while his desires glide from one object to another, according to necessities that are internal to the system. Once separated from objective determinations, products are being consumed as image, that becomes itself consumed, as a semblance or substitute to reality. So it is, according to Baudrillard, that the individual is seating himself in the shadow of signs, refusing what is real. "Image, sign, message, all that we consume

represent our peace, sealed by the distance to the world." (Baudrillard, 2008, 41)

Everyday life is no more a space of convergence between things, facts and everyday gestures, but a system of interpretation, in which individuals consume the reality "by means of anticipation or retrospectively (...) from a distance, that distance that belongs to the sign." (Baudrillard, 2008, 39)

By performing an analysis of social interpretations, Ritzer (Ritzer, 2010) distinguishes between two categories of significance that he places in relation with human definitions given to social phenomena. The two social constructs – "nothing" and "something" are the result of opinions and actions referring to places, things, persons or services; reasonings about *nothing* and *something* are affected by the change of perceptions, standards or evaluations. The definition of branding given by Trout best illustrates Ritzer's analysis: "Marketing is a battle of perceptions, not of products (...). It's an illusion. There is no objective reality. There are no facts, no best products. All that exists in the world of marketing are perceptions in the minds of the customer or prospect. The perception is the reality. Everything else is an illusion." (Trout, 2001, 6-7). For want of a stable content, the nothing has a great capacity of signification and re-signification by means of branding; consumption of brands implies therefore a search for the meaning of life through consumption.

The nature of objects, the production mode and the categories of perception are the three fundamental changes brought by the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The multiplication techniques achieved under the slogan of accessibilisation – or bringing the object closer to people, spatially and as an appropriation of its meaning, are bringing in the way of our perception objects stripped by the aura<sup>1</sup> that confers them authenticity and uniqueness. This perception, structured by social rapports, reveals a re-structuring of man's relation with reality. One first characteristic of this new category of perception (or experience in relation with the object) is the repeatability of a context that places the knowing subject face to face with the object; the second characteristic emerges from the fact that the reproductive technique, with its mass dimension, is not addressing the individual perception any more, but the masses of consumer-observers, thus creating a new masses-merchandise dialectic. By multiplication of copies, the phenomenon of reproductiveness substitutes a once-in-a-time-only produced event with a mass phenomenon, this process leading to a shattered vision of reality, since it allows the reproduced object to offer itself to be seen or heard in any circumstance, thus gaining a permanently present character.

The hermeneutic tradition helps us understand

better the fact that the perception of symbolic forms always implies a contextualised and also creative process of reinterpretation; the significances we bestow on objects are born within well structured social frameworks or interaction fields, in which individuals develop a sense of the self, the others, the history and of their place in the world. Therefore, as Thompson says, “individuals place themselves on different positions within these fields, depending on the various types and quantities of resources they have at hand. In some cases, these positions gain a certain stability, while being institutionalised, that is, becoming part of a relatively stable group of rules, resources and relations having a certain degree of durability in time and a certain expansion in space, and which are linked with the purpose of attaining some of the general aims.” (Thompson, 2000, 17). Therefore, the ways in which people understand relations, actions and objects are spin-offs of human interaction within historically set contexts; the fact that these significances are created and re-created through human interaction gives them a fluid, changeable character. Yet, both knowledge and significant action are only possible by the use of culturally conditioned symbolic codes. An approach on the symbolic space from perspective of communication emphasizes the fact that the activities of public relations are acting more and more over social and cultural contexts through production of symbols. Organisations reproduce cultural traits that dominate the social environment out of which they emerged<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, beyond norms and formal procedures created by organisations, these themselves make up a symbolic space, in which the product becomes image, reliance and acceptance.

The consumed object is therefore not a produced object, a result of a person's effort, but one which is being re-produced, within a code that is structuring the social fabric. Production does not correspond to a concrete finality any more, but functions on grounds of some generalized social relations of reproduction, with a function of adaptation and integration of the social corpus. Material goods become ideals of social conformity that operate designations, classifications and hierarchical rosters.

We therefore bear witness to a pub-type culture, a sign of real autonomisation of this symbolic function of the object in relation with its utility. The objects around us, defined by new criteria, such as mobility, commutability or eclecticism, mark a new stage in our conception about culture, communication and values.

Note:

1. W. Benjamin is debating the symptomatic process by which the technical reproductiveness is depriving the object of its *aura*, dislocating it from the realm of tradition and stealing its authenticity, whereby is understood “all that constitutes the object of tradition”. When the material duration of an object or its tradition loses its relevance, then even “the historical authority of that object becomes questionable”. (Benjamin, 2012, 13) “What exactly is the aura? It is a strange fusion between time and space: a unique appearance of a remoteness, no matter how close it may otherwise be. (...) Yet, today's people are simultaneously characterized...”
2. Berger and Luckmann show that “legitimation produces new meanings that serve for an integration of significances already attached to certain institutional processes. (...) The symbolic universes are integrating various domains of significance and comprise inside a symbolic whole the institutional order. (...) The way in which the symbolic realm correlates itself to the most comprising level of legitimation is so obvious, and the field of practical application is long overdue.” (Berger, Luckmann, 2008, 129, 133)

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