

INFINITE CHOICE

Mutation of Products in the State beyond Saturation.

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Abstract: This study is reflecting on the practice of producing meaning, and the mutation of products to signs, to offer implications for designers to conceptualize the variability of the subject-object relationship. A model of user-generated meaning to objects is introduced, identifying basic categories that classify today's products according to their sign value. Consumer objects nowadays are open to be formatted with arbitrary values and meanings. Consumers discover their capacity to play with, change and even construct the meaning of a product. There is a shift from passive to active consumers and users and the subject-object relationship is continuously evolving from material to immaterial values.

Key words: *Meaning and perception, object typologies, product semantics, experience in design.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the beginning of Industrialization Consumption was all about the capability to buy the newest things. In place of everlasting wealth, people started to exhibit their current purchase-power and their personal style through consumer products. Consumption had become more than just a necessity. The age of style and fashion began. Consumer products were upgraded or renewed in foreseeable and short-lived cycles and were given the task to support the individual in its quest for a unique identity. The sociologist Colin Campbell pointed out that the modern consumer society especially is not materialistic, because it puts forth objects that play important roles in fantasies and in processes of bestowing meaning and significance. The primary arguments for the purchase of objects were not their material features but rather their suitability to stimulate the consumers' imagination: "the real nature of products is of little consequence compared with (...) their potential for dream material" [2] To overcome the fear of powerlessness and to counter the limitations of human existence, the individualized consumers developed strategies of fictionalization. These strategies turned objects into signs, and material values into sign values. Products therefore mutated to means of representation, portrayal, and projection.

2. EVOLUTION – THE MUTATION OF THE ARTIFACT

2.1 Construction of a sign

As discussed in the previous chapter consumer objects in the state beyond saturation have mutated to object signs which can be differentiated according to their sign value. Sign value or significance here stands for the

meaning which is assigned to an object and through which an object gets its function. Two essential parts of a sign determine its value; the signifier or the object and the signified or the meaning. Only in their combination do they constitute a sign. Semiotics classifies three basic categories of signs which are distinguished by their relation between the signifier and the signified. [3]

THE SYMBOL is an arbitrary sign in which the object neither has a direct nor indicative relationship to a meaning. In stead it stands for a meaning that is just based on constructed conventions. The sign only is understandable if the relationship between the signifier and the signified are learned.

Example: A red star is a symbol for communism

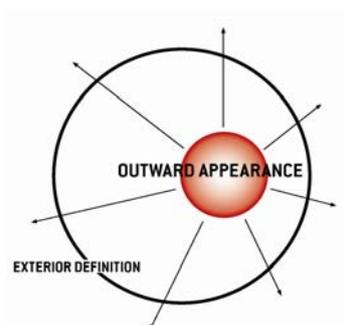
THE INDEX is a sign with a compulsory relationship between object and meaning. The signifier can be understood as a hint or indication to the signified. The more signifier there are the more precise the sign gets.

Example: Coughing, sneezing and a headache are indexes for a cold.

THE ICON is a sign in which the object displays the meaning by its resemblance to it. Signifier and signified are almost identical and very easy to understand without anything that has to be learned first.

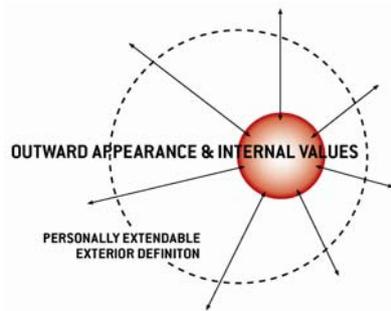
Example: A campfire is an icon for warmth and comfort.

2.2 The Representation Object



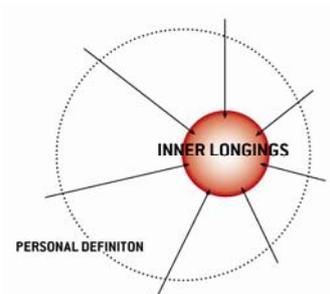
The Representation Object is a symbol for a societal and social class. Since ancient times laws that regulated the use of clothing and jewelry were passed on in nearly all countries and cultures. For instance, in the year 1564 Elizabeth I had determined in the "Enforcing Statutes of Apparel" [4] which vestures, decorations and colors were reserved for the gentry and thus prohibited to the common populace. The existence of such laws shows the lack of leeway and tolerance in terms of expressing oneself through consumption given to the individual. These laws even can be understood as an attempt to unambiguously code its status-indicating qualities with the intention of creating a language of objects. Apparel and accessories thereby clearly signal which societal standing a person has. Such kind of consumption laws were supposed to stabilize social conditions. What is eminently striking is the fact that the material value, which made up the difference between coveted objects and items of daily use, was exceeded by sign values that displayed the societal reputation and social class of a person.

2.3 The Portrayal Object



The Portrayal Object is an indication for an identity and mental attitude. In order to point out the analogy that is drawn to theatrical props, it is useful to first define that term. The prop in its original sense is a movable object that serves to equip scenes in theatres, operas or in TV and movie productions. During a theatrical performance the spectator not only gets to see the stage setting in which the actors play, but they also see a number of movable things that complement the general appearance. Props can be almost anything ranging from ashtrays, briefcases or a vase of flowers to pictures on the wall or furniture and even jewelry or food. In historic dramas there can also be swords, lanterns, a king's crown, etc. Props create an authentic and credible atmosphere by referring to special circumstances or a certain historical, social or psychological context. Consumer products resemble props in so far as they are indications of a scenographic context or an identity producing environment, since within the consumption beyond the state of saturation they point out to a person's identity. They fulfill the function of a portrayal.

2.4 The Projection Object



The Projection Object is an icon for a life style and activity. Here as well I would like to begin with a definition of terms in order to understand the analogy for this mutated object sign. A bibelot is an object that somebody takes and preserves as a memory to a specific event, place or person. In many countries it is also called souvenir coming from the French and meaning remembrance or just memory. In the following explanations the term bibelot and souvenir are used synonymously.

Quite often people bring souvenirs for other or for themselves from journeys and holiday trips abroad. Thereby, it usually is something typical for that particular country, or just simple products like cups, T-Shirts, key rings, etc. with names of the places printed on them. Also quite popular are souvenirs that show miniatures of famous buildings like the Eiffel tower, the Statue of Liberty or Big Ben for instance.

3. MODEL – EXTENSION OF THE PRODUCT

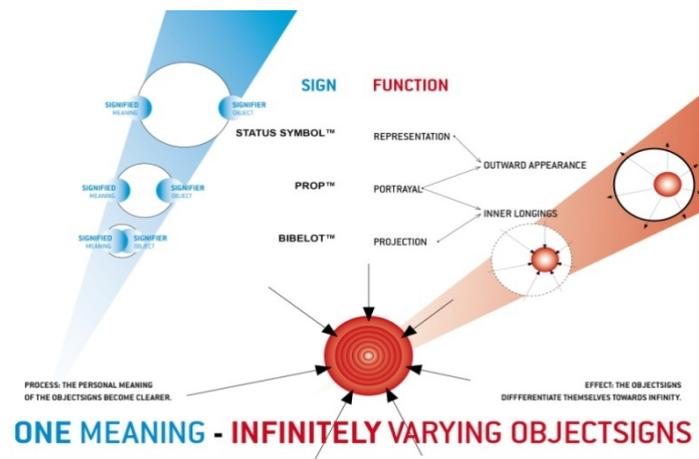


Fig. 4 Theory of object signs

Fig. 4 illustrates a theory of the object signs. The function of the three above mentioned object signs are: Representation, Portrayal, and Projection. A quantitative differentiation does not make sense since all three functions usually are found simultaneously in the object signs (actual meaning of the object of the consumer). However, a qualitative structuring can be made to point out their relationships and to picture their systemic function.

4. CONCLUSION

While the practical functions of consumer objects are increasingly displaced into the fantasies and inner life of the consumers, the individual and subjective meanings of the objects are more clarified and sharpened. This internalization has a decisive effect: By displacing the production of meanings to the inner life one starts to fictionalize it and the meanings become part of one's imagination, which are infinite. The complexity of today's object signs and object language therefore is not a consequence of pure mass (quantity), but rather the result of an infinite differentiation and thus a qualitative dimension which then in a second step produces the quantity. The chosen counteractions to this are strategies of reduction that are mostly not just acts of ignoring, but primarily of parallelization tactics, self-referencing and interlocked cycles of fictionalization, and infinite meaning-production that lead to an inward compression the "implosion of signs" [1] causing the infinite choices.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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5. REFERENCES

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