

Meaning, Function and Design of Object in Culture

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Abstract: In the article object as material embodiment of axiological system of society, as artefact of material culture is under investigation. Object is viewed in a variety of functions and meanings. Its dualistic nature is determined by two essential sides – utility and sacral. In the process of development of civilization the priority of one or another of them changes. In the article these changes are analysed from the viewpoint of historic, social and cultural aspects. Objects of material world in the age of pre-industrial society were created by means of handicraft technique where the whole process of creation from idea to its realization was centred in the hands of one man. Craftsman not only created form, but also gave it certain meaning, that became the basis of cultural tradition. Object transmitted that tradition through generations. Scientific and technical progress changed the process of creation crucially - to machine production. An age of industrial society began, that gave boost to design culture. Design appeared as a new kind of applied arts and method of arrangement of material world. Functionalism as a primary style of early design highlighted utility as a dominating function of object. Production process that was estranged from man deprived object of sacral content. Quality of industrially produced objects was completely determined by their capacity to serve man's needs. On the other hand man himself started to depend on object. In the end of the XXth century humanity steps into a new period – an age of post-industrial society, ideological concept of which is postmodern culture. Object loses pragmatic function as main manifestation of its essence. Art design appears, where objects are focused not especially on utility, but on artistic experiment. Main function of object becomes provision of communication. Artistic form is filled with plenty of meanings and their interpretation depends on context. Object retrieves its sacral meaning which becomes symbol.

Keywords: *Object; material culture; method of production; design; utility of object; symbolic essence of object; postmodernist concept of object.*

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1. Introduction

Object represents material embodiment of value system of social being. An inherent part of cultural practice of man is rationalization of material world with regard both to technical and aesthetic criteria. Interaction of man and object evolutionizes, reflecting social and cultural dynamics. Man creates object to cover his needs. On the other hand object provokes desire to possess it, subordinating man's will to his possessive instinct. Thus, object both serves man and rules over him.

Technical progress, that takes qualitative perfection of object at each historic stage to a higher level, changes not only formal but also content-related context of this phenomenon. The goal of the research is to analyze the alteration dynamics of the functional essence of object in the context of social and cultural development. The subject area of the research is social, cultural and axiological aspects of design method of formation of material culture.

Material culture is comprised of instruments of labour, equipment and everyday objects. Objects of material culture don't only serve the practical purposes of society, but also are means of keeping and transmitting of essence and meanings that regulate and govern activity, behavior and communication (*New philosophical encyclopedia*, 2000, v.2, p.342). When an object is created, it's endued with certain essence and meaning, and moreover as a result this object doesn't only keep and transmit this meaning but also imposes and assigns it. Existence of an object in culture is characterized by variability that is mainly caused by flexibility of any sign system, change of functions and production of new objects (*Encyclopedia*, 1998, p.119). Progress in science and technology gave a boost to alterations in organizational mode and production, and thereby changed meaning and place of objects in culture.

2. Essence of object in the age of handicrafts

In the pre-industrial society creation and shape of handcraft objects and their decoration used to be carried out within the framework of a folk tradition and bore the impress of individuality of its creator. Each object usually was viewed in the context of a canon and had spiritual and symbolic meanings. Craftsman created object according to a pattern that was symbolically connected with the fore type, i.e. the process of creating of an object was viewed close to act of creation. Object as a symbol represented transcendental world (Sidorenko, 1990).

At the turn of the XIXth century a rapid progress of industrial production made usage of traditional handicraft forms less applicable and less possible for industrial objects. Designing and manufacturing processes were performed only on the basis of engineering design and analysis. Design culture of production process was developing at that time.

The tendency of prettification and decoration failed to meet the requirements of the society. In the beginning of the process of industrial development public perception hold tightly on traditional forms of manufacturing system. Development of science and scientific breakthrough changed this world-outlook and modified public value-laden concepts.

A new evolutionary phase of vision structure and way of outlook was being shaped and limited already not only by world of different forms of art but also by the coming age of scientific and technical determinism (Selesnev, 1978, pp. 32-33). Productive forces became immediate organ of social practice, of a real life process (Marx & Engels, 1962, v.46, part 2, p.215). Machine possessed neither creative will of man nor his fantasy that helped constantly to recreate form. However machine brought incredible technical opportunities and high performance. Industrial production of objects led to discovery of new opportunities and content of form. A great number of objects were produced according to one sample. Thus, they were identical and equal. Industrial production saturated the world with objects. Existence of an object in many equal samples played a principal role for its functioning as well as for shaping of its aesthetic value (Ikonnikov, 1984, p.14). Quantity required emergence of new qualities.

Sacred connections of object with deep cultural layers and its symbolic aura were fading. New production opportunities gave rise to plenty of graphic forms that possessed indisputable aesthetic qualities, but lacked deep meaning. Convenient habit and smart mischievousness stood behind it.

Solving the essential issues about “object”, “beauty” and “usefulness”, “form”/”function”, “intuitive”/”sensible”, “artistic”/technical” made it possible to form design creativity. Design became a new project-oriented artistic kind of activity that was able to solve tasks of product competitiveness and of creation of anthropo-oriented objective world of a new industrial society.

3. Object as an object of mass replication

Necessity to beforehand design an object appeared together with division of labour. Progressive development of mechanisms and technique, disengagement of men in production process, buy and sell relations resulted in destruction of harmony between the functional and the aesthetic. Object

turned into an object of mass replication. Industrial production gave a chance to see new opportunities and new content of form.

Design appeared from attempt to make an alien world more familiar (Ikonnikov, 1984, p.14). A need of man to create places for self-presence in the existing surrounding reflected in design (Heidegger, 1993, p.254).

Essence of objects of mass production changed: they lost its exclusiveness, became a product of estranged technology. A unique object was replaced by a plenty of identical standard things. Existence of an object in many equal copies played a crucial role for its functioning and for shaping of its aesthetic value (Ikonnikov, 1984).

Technology of production became the most important point of origin that determined shape and external existence of object. Practical relations between object and man were determined by modern industrial production. Methods of shape-building started to be a base for psychology and aesthetics of collective consciousness, engineering logic and rational principles of designing.

Evolution of methods of production shaped social and material life (Marx & Engels, 1962, v.3, p.26). It had to be also the basis for understanding and interpreting of consequences that followed (Lukianov, 1988, p.17).

The method of production of objects of material life shaped social, political and spiritual process of life as a whole (Marx & Engels, 1962, v.13, p.7). The world of objects influenced man and, thus, formed man's attitude towards those objects.

Industrial production generated appearance of articles of consumption, method of consumption and attraction to consumption. As a result capacities of producer emerged and made producer identify his goal and followed it (Marx & Engels, 1962, v.13, p.7).

When man created shapes of objects and gave them functions, he made them a part of his culture. He expressed his world-outlook in objects. Interaction of man with objects in everyday life and in his form of organization of labour determined the ways of inclusion of man into society and its structure: every object to a certain extent expressed a traditional way of perception of everyday life where a well-established understanding of area, perspective, style and fashion and the correspondent form existed. Form was interpreted as an external image of object and as an image created by man (artistic, everyday, lyric). External shape was a border between the external and inner aspects of object. Function was hidden inside object behind the shape.

When nature of products changed and became of mass production, as a consequence it influenced character of collective consciousness. Object

which was produced in industrial production presupposed an average consumer, and not individual tastes. Characteristics of industrial products had definite cultural meanings. Artistic activity entered industrial production and this gave a way to harmonization not only of shapes of material objects, but of the activity itself. Production process interconnections with organization of way of living gave a way to an absolutely new systematized arrangement of surroundings that was everywhere around a modern man (Marx & Engels, 1962, v.12, p.4).

Civilization of cities progressed with high speed and led to enlargement of production: production of more and more generations of objects that followed in quick succession. Consummation needed to be constantly stimulated and this fact led to constant modification of shape of objects and products that were produced in great amounts. Thus production and consummation were stimulated by non-stop alteration of form and construction of objects and renewal assortment. This process was closed in a continuous round. Progressing scientific and technical world and as a result reorientational understanding and sensual emotional perception of its phenomena and processes induced criticism towards the existing industrial forms, refusal of intuition-driven statements that weren't proven scientifically and practically. This all gave rise to new criteria of aesthetic valuation of those phenomena and processes. Empiric shaping without taking into account scientific, technical and aesthetic principles revealed conflict with inner structure and in doing so it ruined dialectic unity of those principles because the inner structure of industrial object was material realization of objective laws by means of precise physical and mathematic solution (Selesnev, 1978, p.36).

Objects stopped to be manual implements. Machine production used new types of energy instead of muscle energy of man (or animal). Gesture was used not for organization of production but for control of production processes. Objects were abstracted from sources of energy and consequently lost their anthropomorphous status (Selesnev, 1978, p.40). Industrially produced objects differ from the hand-made objects mainly in their image: their shape and image don't depend on personal preferences of their creator, and these industrially produced objects are completely systematized by modern industrial production.

Objects are in a state of constant modification and expansion in its historic evolution. They depend on technical progress. It became the main tendency of the industrial society.

In the 20s industrial design became the center of appearance and verification of new ideas. Industrial methods of production brought their

specific ways of rational shape-building into industrial production of objects. New forms were based on aesthetics of collective consciousness, engineering logic and rational methods of designing. Tradition of decorating became abundant and faded away. Technology became a part of everyday life of every person through objects that surrounded him. The concept of functionalism was based on the statement of direct dependence of the form on the function, meaning that form follows function.

The form of object used to be a design concept of inner structure of object. Function was a direct practical realization of purpose of object. Function of object was viewed aesthetically. Society started to realize commonality of technical and artistic tasks and it determined significant success in association of structural integrity with harmonic and expressive form. Object had to evoke associations of functionality, practicability and constructability. Practicability became a criterion of beauty. Poetization of machine and utility attitude devaluated role of man in production and creation to a certain extent. The period of early design placed unified collective principle above the individual one. The gap between man and industrially produced object was deepening due to diversity of the aesthetic, the functional, the beauty and the useful in technology. The technical ideals were opposed to the aesthetic ones. Dehumanizing tendency in technology was in contradiction to certain social principles (Selesnev, 1978, p.40). Alteration of form led to alteration of functional tasks of objects. Object became more polyfunctional. It experienced a period of emancipation (Dobritsyna, 2004).

To dialectically solve inconsistency of the beauty and the use in the process of shaping and constructing, to reach aesthetic value and functional perfection of objects – it was possible for such sphere of creative activity that would have this creative approach. Design became such activity. It created a theoretical model where it became possible to synthesize the opposition of science, technology and art, which was typical for the period. (Selesnev, 1978, p.40) Utility and aesthetic aspects became equal in their importance. Simultaneously two problems are being solved – use and beauty. Depending on preferences in the process of designing either utility or aesthetic aspect rose to the fore.

Inner capacities of design developed and gave rise to such aspects as comprehensive structure, content and form of an article of mass industrial production, programming of expressivity forms of object, designing of emotions, creating the direction of relations between people with help of ordinary objects, and systemic design. The design-system was characterized not only by objective morphology and image-bearing aspects but also functionality, i.e. processes, actions, and operations that had to be designed

according to man's material and spiritual needs. Design object has a dialectic balance, interaction of morphology (construction, structure and form) and axiology (content, meaning and value).

Jean Baudrillard (1988) interpreted functionality of object as adaptability of one form to another, and not imprint of real labour in an object. In this adaptability real labour processes were omitted, deleted. From his point of view the main function of object is to be embodiment of relations between people, to populate the room where they live. Objects go before people in organization of their environment and, thus, provoke people's these or those actions.

We are moving towards absolute rule of form: only form is needed, only form is seen and style of things is determined by functionality of form (Baudrillard, 1998, p.46).

Role of man changes in communication with objects. Man doesn't just consume/use objects. He is not only a user of everyday objects and dwelling, but he also becomes an active organizer of its surroundings, controls objects, and determines the order of their existence and their functioning. However man has a limited connection with the system, reverse dependence on this system. Consequently he himself becomes functional. Thus his manner and way of thinking are formed by the surroundings. The boarder between the inner and the outer sides within object is being destroyed. Dialectics of content and form changes in favor of more responsible attitude to real life of object (Baudrillard, 1998).

The Russian art expert and theorist of design A. Ikonnikov (1986) gives special requirements to form of industrially produced objects. Form should not show special and individual character but the most typical of this kind of objects and of preferences of this class of consumers. Form of objects should provide a wide range of combinations with other objects and adjusting to a great number of different systems of objective spatial surroundings. It means that form should be polyvalent.

Image of object reflects its construction, technology of production. But simultaneously it reflects social, everyday life and taste particularities of real life.

Material surroundings keep and strengthen traditions of culture and support stable types of behavior. Surroundings waken emotions and satisfy needs that are typical for this or that culture. Objects acquire new aesthetic, social, informational functions. Their meanings are so diverse as man's need in the modern century.

Inner product logic in the design system rises from interaction of existing systems of factors and means of designing. Factors are nature (natural laws), society (social laws), men (biosocial laws) culture (social

cultural laws). The process of designing requires mathematic, technological, artistic and semiotic tools (Kagan, 1983, p.32).

4. Sacralization of object in the age of postmodern

Changeability and flexibility of existence of object in culture bring about its ability of qualitative transformation. This process is permanent, and speeds up with the development of scientific and technical capacities. In the age of industrial society object lost its transcendental meaning, its essence decreased to utility function. At the end of the XXth century a new boost happens – a period of post-industrial society starts. Technical perfection of object is already so evident and easily reached that it loses its priority meaning. Image of essence of objective world changes crucially. In practice of early design object had to serve its creator, satisfying his diverse pragmatic needs. Postmodern culture as a paradigm of post-industrial society brought significant corrections in this hierarchy and changed essence of objects and phenomena (Blackburn, 2005).

Interpretation approach to understanding of reality gave objective world a new functional content. Object received meaning of a symbol, content-related context of which undergoes permanent transformations and presents itself a source of infinite variety of spontaneous ideas and meanings. American philosopher Susanne Langer saw the main aim of cultural activity in creation of symbols. She stated, *It is a peculiar fact that every major advance in thinking, every epoch-making new insight, springs from a new type of symbolic transformation* (Langer, 1942). Anticipating philosophical concepts of postmodernism Langer studied permanent process of creation of meanings in the human mind by means of ability to see one object in terms of another.

In the postmodern culture object loses its pragmatic function as a supremacy of its essence. Design that was initially aimed at designing utility objects that were industrially produced, changes its mission. Art-design appears, its objects are not oriented to perform only everyday functions. These objects become objects of admiration, prestige and artistic experiment. Now the main function of object is to provide effective communication. Designed fills artistic form with plenty of meanings and values that can be decoded by each spectacular as he wishes and depending on context (Ermarth, 1998).

Postmodern concept of design appeared first in the group “Memphis” that was formed in Milan in 1981. Creative approaches of the members of the group were real anarchy in design. They denied unity of principles of form formation of objects, and promoted exclusively

uniqueness of a designer on the basis of his personal experience and understanding of being. Their creative methods were historic allusions, deliberate mixture of styles, bold game with materials, textures and forms (Taylor & Winquist, 2001). In spite of ironic attitude towards canons those designers transformed object into a context riddle, gave it symbolic implication. *Citation, simulation, reappropriation – they all are not just terms of modern art, but its essence as well* – this way J. Baudrillard (Kellner & Baudrillard, 1989) defines concept of postmodern art.

Their position of individualism in creative work was close to ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. He stated estrangement of man with the world as objective reality that was hostile and destabilizing consciousness. Man can discover true meaning of eternal values only with discovery of meaning of his own existence. His aim is self-actualization, his resources are inner principles, formed on the basis of his own personal life experience and understanding of laws of physical and spiritual development (Foucault, 1965).

Italian philosopher and literary man, specialist in semiotics Umberto Eco, speaking about conventionality of symbol, claimed that everything in the world is doubtful and relative. For him a specific characteristic of postmodernism is a union of elite art with mass culture. Objective world turns into a ludic field where interpretation of meaning of object gives more pleasure than its physical usage. Object retrieves sacral meaning but on a more intellectual level (Eco, 2009).

Postmodernism changed classical image of beauty and use of objects. Now its value is determined by the possibility of involvement of user into an intellectual play of meanings. According to Eco's opinion a characteristic feature of symbol is its capacity to give an aesthetic pleasure from understanding of its meaning (Eco, 1990).

While in the age of industrial society the main aim of development of knowledge was to master the world, postmodern approach proposes an idea of interaction with the world. The singular, not the universal, is in the focus of attention of design, since every man structures the reality by himself. This context gives conclusion that deviance from the norm is more important than the norm, individuality is more important than sociality.

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