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Reflections on the Cultures of the New and the Second Hand in Italy[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to interpret changes in consumer society through the socio-anthropological concept of material culture. Consumption, which is an act of social communication, is expressed through the acquisition and circulation of goods. To consider material culture as an *area of symbolic mediation* means assuming that it is a means of interpreting social reality, where the notion of what we consider as 'new' or 'used' acquires a value transcending the substance of the goods, emphasizing, on the contrary, their symbolic meaning.
Keywords: material culture, consumption, second-hand culture

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on material culture in its twofold role as a synthesis of the relationship between the individual and the market and as a space of social mediation, thus suggesting that we could consider the 'culture of the new' and the 'culture of the used' as two different ways of interpreting the symbolic meaning of material culture. The use of 'spheres of consumption' and 'spheres of social communication' (Secondulfo, 2002) will enable us to analyse the relationship with "the world of things", considering the different value goods and objects acquire when circulating inside relational structures. The concept of New, like the concept of Used, is a form of consumption that goes beyond the material value of the goods, analysing their symbolic dimension. The dichotomy between New/Used is investigated in order to highlight the different cultural characteristics of the two forms of consumption, even though it is clear that in consumer society the cultural line that separates new goods from used goods is blurred. As every object tells the story of its production and of the consumers who have used it over time, the purpose of this essay is to offer a basic analysis of the fragments of material culture that, like remnants of past civilizations, paint a picture of daily life in our time.

2. Material Culture and Consumer Society: Spheres of Consumption and Spheres of Social Communication

A joint study on material culture and relational systems can be found in the model *Spheres of Consumption and Spheres of Social Communication* (Secondulfo, 2002) in which consumption is an activity aimed at the maximum satisfaction of social utility. As an integral part of the model, material culture is examined under two main aspects: as an extension of the individual's inorganic body and as an area of symbolic mediation. It represents the social dimension of man; a symbol of the widening of his physical limits, it is equally a 'prosthetic' used in the creation and maintenance

[1] This essay is derived from a conference paper presented on a panel entitled "Transformation of Consumption Patterns and Lifestyles" at the 3rd China-Europe Forum (Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou-China) held in July 2010. The conference was coordinated by Dominique Desjeux.

of social relations. At the same time, it is a system of symbolic mediation created and experienced by individuals in order to establish a relationship with society. Considering material culture as an objective area of social communication implies the recognition of the existence of object-systems that circulate independently through distinct spheres of relations and at the same time implies the acceptance of the symbolic meaning of the assets (Secondulfo, 1995). The model is composed of five spheres: 1) relationships with the natural environment, governed by use value; 2) relationships with the social body represented by the social division of work, based on an exchange value; 3) relationships based on the distribution and circulation of the wealth within a society: in short, status value; 4) interpersonal relationships created within community systems based on the gift mechanism and characterized as "bond" value; 5) the relationship that the individual establishes with his self image, known as identity value (Secondulfo, 2002).

The first is characterized by a binary code of the in-out type and it represents "the central symbolic message concerns the power and expansion of the ego" (*ibid.*, p. 144); the second is governed by a code of equivalence that allows goods to be exchanged within society: "this is a sphere that reinstates the social division of work and it is the social essence of the act of transforming and anthropomorphizing the environment" (*ibid.*, p. 145); the third is distinguished by a code of differentiation that considers goods as instruments used together in the generation of status, therefore representing the "marriage of material culture and social stratification" (*ibid*., p. 146); the fourth is controlled by the binary code of acceptance or refusal of the bond, in which "relations of community and system interact" (*ibid*., p. 147). Lastly, the fifth sphere is maintained by the code of identification within which "control of communication is essential for the support and coherence of the identity with which the subject is recognized." (*ibid*., p. 148).

Material culture makes visible the five relational structures defined by the model and presents itself as an area of symbolic mediation. Objects move within social bonds and across the different areas of social interaction. In other words, single objects or systems of objects transmit a different type of value according to the relationship they are called upon to concretize. The fusion between consumption and the relation system that takes place through the symbolic understanding of the objects leads us to bridge any gaps between intangible and material culture.

3. The Fascination of the New: the Social Construction of Material Culture

Given the central role of material culture in the study of the relationship between the individual and the market, the New stands as a concept that surpasses the concepts of "manipulation of desire" or "consumers' needs" transmitted by corporations and the mass media, thus becoming a form of consumerism transcending the material nature of goods. As is common knowledge, the practice of planned obsolescence is a way of reducing the life-cycle of objects in order to boost the propensity to consume and purchase.

The joint use of participant observation and interviews[2] proves the existence of a cultural construct that impels individuals to purchase and consume products regardless of their physical wear and tear. In other words, it supplies a cultural response to the social acceptance of the practice of planned obsolescence[3].

[2] The concept of the New presented in this essay is the result of theoretical and empirical research based on the data collected through 20 semi-structured interviews and several periods of ethnographic research. The research lasted four months (both the ethnographic research and the gathering of interviews) and it was based on data regarding Italians residing in London for at least ten years. A further phase of ethnographic research aiming at studying second-hand culture was carried out in the Veneto region in: July and August 2008, October and November 2009 and February 2010. The combined use of observation and the gathering of interviews was essential to produce an interpretation of the relationship between individual and material culture mediated by the ritual of consumerism in the culture of the New, and mediated by the ritual of purification in the culture of the Used. For further details see Setiffi (2009; 2008). A more in-depth methodological analysis of the study of consumption using multi-technique analysis is provided by Secondulfo (2011).
The research offered the means to interpret the *implicit meanings* and "the evocative power" (McCracken, 1990) of material culture providing important hints for reflections on the perception of social exclusion and inclusion consumers attribute to the possession of new and second-hand goods which could lead to an evolution in the studies about the concepts of New and Used.

[3] Studying the processes of business innovation and the practice of planned obsolescence requires an understanding of

The concept of *the New* (Setiffi, 2009) consists of four dimensions: a) progress; b) speed; c) fashion; 4) confidence in the market. The four distinct levels of analysis represent the New as a form of consumption that transcends the material quality of the product. Understanding both the dimensions of progress and confidence then represents the participation of the individual in economic and social growth, while the function of distinguishing material culture, through consumption, remains anchored in the dimensions of fashion and speed.

-Progress. The advance of technological research expresses itself through consumer goods, which by definition tend to represent the development of society. All consumers are aware of the short life of the products but most of them believe this is an inevitable result of market competition.

-Speed. This arises at two different times: at the moment of purchase and when the product is put to daily use. In the first case there is a sudden loss of the novelty value linked to ideas of the object as 'pure' and 'without blemish'. In the second case, a clear split emerges in the perception of the objects touched or immune to change: a fetish in the former instance, a totem in the latter. The subjection of fetishes and totems to the phenomenon of the New, understood in the wider sense as the renewal of the inorganic body of the individual, takes two different forms. Both are part of material culture and on an individual level they represent a 'social body' that communicates equally with the self and with others. As Miller wrote, "it is their [objects'] physical presence that makes them real, but at the same time it is associated with the unconscious and agreed knowledge." (2005: 408). From this perspective, the consumption of novelty, beyond its intrinsic destructive capacity, becomes a ritual for strengthening shared meanings, the key to interpreting the spread of new inventions. In this way, the roots of change are linked to cultural examples and the idea of 'physiological needs' is extended to the wider social dimension.

-Fashion and Confidence in the Market. Fashion takes pride of place in the dimension of the New, with which it certainly shares the feature of high-speed change. The two concepts must be kept separate, however. Whilst the New is presented as a form of consumption, fashion is part of the change process nourished by the circulation of objects in society. Trust in the market's capacity to improve the quality of the products on offer and fashion are the locus of production and the circulation of novelty; they compete in the construction of a cultural concept that, besides representing a form of consumption, is presented as the meeting point between the cultural production of the market and that of society.

It appears more and more evident both for fetishes and totems that "goods are endowed with a kind of 'humility' expressed through their reluctance to demonstrate a power able to determine what we consider socially correct" (*ibid.*). In the case of the fetish, the new object cancels out the presence of its predecessor. The totem, by contrast, as it relates to a bond – whether divine or affective – is an irreplaceable object that represents both the individual and their link with material culture (the community).

Replacing a fetish renews the anonymous extension of the inorganic body. Replacement of the totem tends to enlarge the system of symbolic meanings of the bodily extension. This is particularly evident in the double route followed by products that are eliminated (in the case of fetishes), while the totems are accumulated and sometimes become collectors' items without ever being fully replaced by new products.

4. The Used: Towards Construction of the Concept[4]

The present cultural and social crisis in Italy is above all linked to economic instability and, as

company strategy. On the one hand, undertaking an analysis of a cultural construct - the New - means placing the consumer, who sometimes produces new forms of social meaning which go beyond the meanings 'imposed' by the system of production, at the centre of the research.

[4] This paragraph analyses the cultural dimension of the relationship between the individual and material culture with reference to second-hand objects. This analysis establishes a connection between the culture of second-hand objects as opposed to the culture of new ones. More precisely, only the concept of the New is the result of empirical analysis; the field research about the concept of the Used based on ethnographic research is still in progress (see footnote, 2). A further development of the research could reveal if, in the world of consumption the economic crisis - and consequently a reduction in the disposable income of some social classes - has produced growth in the culture of the second-hand.

Boeri (2009) claims, the crisis (in Italy) is not the same for everybody. Many Italian families find themselves in financial difficulty. But recourse to second-hand goods is therefore not a choice either for those in financial straits or for those who are forced to lower their purchasing of consumer goods. A study conducted in June 2010 by C.R*i*.S. (Centre for Social Research)[5] at the University of Verona produced a disturbing picture of the situation Italian families find themselves in. "19.2% claim that their monthly income is insufficient and 20.8% have been obliged to seek financial help in the past year. The effect on consumption is both foreseeable and alarming. 85.3% of family units in difficulty claim they have changed their spending habits in order to face the crisis. In particular, on a scale of 1 (minimum agreement) to 10 (total agreement), Italian families state that they strongly agree with the choice of reducing purchases of expensive brands (7.77) indicating that they have given up expensive products (8.0) that would weigh heavily on their budget, instead choosing goods on special offer (8.21) and generally making a reduction in waste and anything superfluous (8.53)" (Setiffi, OSCF, 2010)[6].

Waste, from the point of view of maximizing the available resources, acquires a morally negative value. This does not mean that a certain quantity of "waste" – as Veblen (1899) considers it – or of "potlatch" is not still present in society, but that, due to a lean period, consumer behaviour requires an austerity that is socially shared and justified by the crisis.

The social life of things (Appadurai, 1986) tells us about people's daily lives, while the circulation of objects exemplifies relational structures (Secondulfo, 2002). To consider material culture both as an area of symbolic mediation and a social space for expansion of the subject's body[7] means adopting it as a way of interpreting social reality. A reduced income compared to the past could favour the growth of the second-hand market, as maintained by Gregson and Crewe (2003); the culture of the second-hand implies a relationship between the individual and material culture that transcends the value of "second rate" compared to the first-hand market, where the dynamics of contamination and de-contamination are emphasized.

Material culture is the prosthetic used by the individual to enter into relation with others. The "prosthetic body" is a central figure for the understanding of the mechanisms of social relations. Studies about clothing, seen as the epicentre of analyses on fashion, are one of the ways of interpreting material culture where clothes act as "prosthetic of the skin in its role as protection from the elements but also in its seductive and communicative power."[8] (Volli, 2002: 236). Consumption is one of the phases of the "circle of material culture" (Secondulfo, 2001), the starting point from which we can begin to understand the communicative function of objects by pairing them with the different spheres of social communication. The objects circulate within the network of relations with the task of making them real. If we consider the consumer as the builder of the social and material reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) surrounding it, consumption becomes the key to interpreting exchange processes[9].

Through being broken down into four distinct dimensions, the culture of the New becomes the node for interpreting a society that recognizes the essence of the bond between consumer and market in its mutability. In the market of the New, the speed of circulation and transformation of goods is directed towards the future, while in the Used the advance turns about-face, slowing the cultural processes of innovation through its discovery of the past. A dual approach is required in order to interpret the phenomenon of the second-hand and vintage. The first is based on the absence of a break with the present in moments of change and the second regards the mechanism of "cultural decontamination" (Douglas, 1970; 1999). As stated by Crewe and Gregson (1998), to remove traces of previous owners – in other words to "purify the material culture" – individuals ritually try to remove physical and ideological impurities through "repairing, altering, cleaning and polishing" (p. 48).

The rituals of consumerism, as the rituals of purification, are "conventions, generated by

[5] National survey coordinated by Domenico Secondulfo, Luigi Tronca and S.W.G. For details see: http://profs.formazione.univr.it/cris/osservaconsumi.htm.
[6] July 2010 newsletter: http://profs.formazione.univr.it/crisvr/files/2011/07/OSCF_news2_2010.pdf
[7] See also: Bartoletti (2002); White (2010); Desjeux (2006). A more in-depth analysis of the study of consumption at macro and micro level, through the "scales of observation" methodological approach is provided by Desjeux (1996).
[8] My translation.
[9] See also Sassatelli (2007).

intersubjectivity that mark visible collective definitions. Through these the definition of what possesses or does not possess social value and relevance is developed, and for this reason they have a function of integration and social control, influencing the individuals' behaviour" (Patrinieri, 2004: 98-99). Also the rituals of purification represent a re-establishment of the order of daily life through a process of socialization to the dichotomies order/disorder, right/wrong, correct/incorrect (Secondulfo, forthcoming 2012). In Second-hand Culture the ritual of purification comes before the act of "re-contextualizing" (Miller, 1998) the object in the consumer's life; it is the phase during which the consumer "accepts" the material culture beginning to attach to it meanings which go beyond those set down by marketing, communication and by the former owner.

The lack of a dimension of purification through material culture, in its symbolic meaning, could lead us to consider goods as unable to convey the rejuvenation of the "prosthetic body" that the culture of the New supports. An analogy could exist between the ritual of replacement (and of the reiteration of purchasing) that characterizes the culture of the New and the ritual of purification. According to Douglas (1999), a ritual is a form of communication: it represents a language designed to communicate the social information that allows individuals to renew collective meanings. Having said this, the purification rituals of the consumption of food and transfer of objects are connected to the same cultural system, even though their manifestations and the arguments we adopt in our analysis of them differ greatly. The placing of objects in places that respect the rules of hygiene, the consumption of food as communicative meaning and the circulation of objects within a group represent an analogy of the cultural system of a given society. Ritual forms like dialogues are instruments for transmitting the culture generated within social relations, which have the double effect of consolidating cultural classifications and affecting the social behaviour of individuals (Douglas, 1996; Fardon, 1999).

Second-hand objects represent a thread of continuity with the past experienced both by the society in question and the owners of the objects; their appearance on the market is the final proof of the sedimentation of social meanings on the goods produced and consumed by individuals. Vintage fashion is a cultural mechanism that draws together the revisiting of the past and the phase of change along with the emergence of the subject (owner) from the object (goods). The vintage object dissociated from the wear and tear that symbolically evokes the second-hand object is distinguished in value for the consumer through the transformation of time and earlier use. Despite representing the past, it is inserted into the present, thus becoming a form of communicative innovation.

As a form of consumption, the second hand is therefore a manifestation of the *status quo*, of the lack of: innovation linked to the Enlightenment concept of 'progress' (through the absence of velocity of circulation), fashion linked to market brands (with the exception of vintage) and lastly confidence in retail companies. Therefore it carries the opposite semantics to the concept of New, specifically immobility (looking at the past), slowness and the centrality of the exchange in which a personal relationship emerges. Let us attempt to explain the above aspects with some brief notes:

a) *immobility* refers to the incapacity to move towards innovation (no negative or positive connotation intended)
a) *slowness* relates to a reduction of planned obsolescence
c) *the centrality of the personal relationship* highlights the interpersonal relationship that, although mediated by the form of merchandise, is part of the game of exchange on two levels: the acceptance of the previous owner of the purchased object and the negotiation (even when only imaginary) between seller and buyer.

The image of immobility provided by the material culture of the used is the mirror of an economy that is unable to grow and or to move towards the future. The birth of the mass consumer society following the Italian economic boom brought with it both the potential risk of creating a "one-dimensional man", and the certainty of better material living conditions for people. As Scarpellini (2008) argues, the act of owning a larger quantity of objects than in the past was (subjectively) a synonym of happiness. Putting objects produced in the past back into circulation means slowing down the circulation of the New as a form of consumption looking to the future. In other words, it means pulling out characteristic 'values' of the past, thus taking attention away from the future. In terms of the circulation of material culture, we witness a new life for the used objects,

which can undergo either a new phase of commoditization (Kopytoff, 1986) or enter the relational dynamics of gifts.

The material culture of second-hand objects circulates slowly in relational structures since it represents the antithesis of the tendency towards disposable consumption. Second-hand goods have been 'saved' from the process of programmed obsolescence and, moving away from the connotations assigned by the world of production, they represent a remnant of the "civilization of the past". This is a fragment of the past brought forward to the present day, where it acquires the value of goods through its exchange and status value, the connotation of a gift through its value as a bond of affection, and the dimension of object through its identity value (Secondulfo, 2002). Absorbing a "used" material culture means taking on the life of the object, the life of its former owner and of the temporal dimension crystallized in the material culture. If consumerism, in a vision that draws on the Hegelian concept of alienation, can be considered as the place where material culture, totally alienated from each consumer, is re-appropriated (Miller, 1994), this means that the relationship between the individual and material culture becomes the moment when the "past" of the material culture is absorbed through its present social representation.

The relationship is often shaped by the circulation of used objects. Their movement within family relations revitalizes family and friendship ties. A particular place where the material culture of second-hand objects is expressed is therefore the Maussian structure of giving, receiving and reciprocating. Used objects that acquire "relationship value" (Secondulfo, 2002) are generally accepted by the receivers without being subjected to the dynamics of decontamination. Moving within the dichotomous relational structure of acceptance or refusal of the relationship, the subject of the relationship (the giver) and the thing (the given object) underline their symbolic value because the given object reminds its new owner (in much the same way as a symbol does) of the presence or the absence of the giver, and links to the emotional dimension of the relationship. In fact, this is the circulation of objects, not goods – in other words of a material culture excluded by the market mentality and temporarily without its connotation of exchange value.

Considering the places of consumption of material culture, we can assume the existence of three places, according to social class. The lower-income groups use a material culture circuit based on social cooperatives or warehouse-shops located in the outskirts (*e.g.* the industrial areas); the better off tend to use temporary shops located in the city centre while both middle- and higher-income groups get together for "swap-parties" and run courses to learn how to update their wardrobes in line with the latest fashions. "Vintage", on the other hand, is a cultural product that is intentionally "out of place" (Pasquinelli, 2004) compared to current social trends[10]. Since there is a residual (symbolic) "pollution/contamination" between the original owner and the new purchaser, vintage goods form a sphere of objects acquired especially by middle- and upper-income groups, even though it may become the target of the less well-off because the difference from "second hand" is not inherent to the object itself but lies in its communicative aspects. Therefore, second-hand circuits are different when we take the income group variables into account, as they determine a different set of communicative meanings[11].

Goods and objects circulate within the relational structures that shape them, and individuals communicate an intelligible cultural code through the objects. Only a broad view will allow us to consider goods in their capacity to construct social reality. Thus we find the 'action' of the objects, which, besides carrying symbolic content, are capable of creating a shared social reality through their use in the rituals of consumption.

According to Marx (1844), goods are vulgar because they hide economic and social relations and the worker does not recognize them as fruits of his own work; in consumerist societies the "fetish" nature of the goods, which is a split between object and subject – the Marx theory of alienation – is distinguished from the "totem" dimension that material culture can acquire. In *The Comfort of Things* (Miller, 2005), the reconstruction of the objects' life is inevitably linked to

[10] On the cultural dimension of the concept of contamination and normalization, see also: Hamilton, (2011), Kempson *et al.,* (1994); Shove (2003). An analysis of cultural manifestations of dirtiness and cleanliness is provided by Campkin *et al.,* (2007).

[11] A more in-depth analysis of the collective representation of retro retailers is provided by Crewe *et al.,* (2003) in which "the ambiguous location of retro retailing as an activity positioned between mainstream retailing on the one hand, and the creative industries on the other" is analyzed (p. 63).

people's lives; this means that sometimes, for some types of objects, consumers associate meanings to "things" that go beyond their "original" brand identity. Fetish goods as a relational network and relational fracture become a place of identity recognition between the consumer and their social space (Desjeux *et al*., 2000). If the space of inter-individual relations is occupied by material culture in its double aspect as fetish and totem, one might wonder if the revealed relationship with the objects is an analytical indicator of social relations. In other words, we could study the influence that the renewal of the inorganic body could have on social bonds, whether analogies can be drawn and whether the relationship that ties the individual to the system of goods can be considered a subset of analyses of collective beliefs.

As with the 'culture of the new' that characterizes the capitalist system, so does the 'culture of the second hand' need to create itself a network of symbolic meanings in which people from every income group could find their place within the "changeable" cultural scenario. The growing attention towards "re-use" requires a reassessment of the Used, in order to represent a relationship between the individual and material culture that stands in antithesis to the New. The theoretical meanings of New and Used represent two ways of interacting with culture, transcending the materiality of the objects in order to become a way to interpret the socioeconomic situation. If objects give us information about *the changing cultural scene* (Douglas, 1979), their being part of different circuits provides us with different means of creating the social reality. Each social group assigns a different meaning to the present historical period and material culture sums up the change through the symbolic connotations of New and Used.

5. Conclusions

Looking at extreme situations, if on the one hand we take compulsive shopping and on the other anti-consumerism, we can see that the two opposing impulses regarding the market oscillate between maximum dependence on and equally extreme independence from the system of production. Such positions also represent a different expression of the individual in a social dimension, given that the material culture acquired via the market is not only destroyed by the individual but is introduced into relational systems that make it more real. Material culture is a kind of magnifying glass for the social reality of the past, but it is also an aid to understanding the present and a map for interpreting the future. The Used, as a theoretical meaning connected both to the relationship between the individual and material culture and the representation of the economic and social situation, is both a way to analyse the symbolic pure/impure dichotomy (culturally tied to the relational structures of society) and a way to recount the socioeconomic transformations embedded in material culture. Material culture reinforces its capacity to explain social phenomena and, through the analysis of New and Used, focuses its capacity to interpret cultural change.

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