

The Objects and Ikea’s Environmental Imaginary

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the sociological implications of everyday objects, highlighting the social connections they establish within the collective imaginary. Through theoretical research on the role of objects, it examines the social imaginaries created and institutionalized by specific objects and the community of consumers involved. Ikea, the narratives crafted by corporate marketing, and its products are the specific focus of this study. In the conclusions, the meanings associated with the environmentalism imaginary (of which Ikea is an example) are explored to understand current social dynamics.

Keywords: social imaginary, Ikea, environmentalism, commodity fetishism, eco-sustainability narratives

1. Theoretical perspectives

To understand the theoretical framework that this article considers, it is helpful to recall that the imaginary, rather than being “an object of study, offers itself as a perspective of analysis oriented to identify, in the surface of social phenomena, the invisible vanishing point that makes them visible” (Marzo & Mori, 2019, p. 52). The intention is to observe the superficial matter of the social realm to study its depths, considering objects as carriers and catalysts of symbolic orders, like mirrors through which one can observe and access the imaginary that constitutes the “real” (cf. Tramontana, 2019).

With Marx, we can glimpse the enigma of the commodity, introduced by the question of use-value and exchange-value. However, there exists a third factor, only partially addressed by Marx, which considers the universe of symbols, meanings, regimes of sense, needs, and seductions that an object

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embodies. The term “commodity fetish”¹ refers precisely to the magical character that commodities incorporate (Marx, 1996, 2021). It is precisely this magical and mysterious aspect embedded in the object that this article seeks to investigate. The enigma of the commodity lies in a dimension beyond mere use-value and survival purposes.

Simmel offers precise analyses of modern industrial society, with specific indications concerning the re-enchantment on which modernity is based (and which official narratives have cleverly mystified) and the functioning of objects and their places of worship in this era.

In modernity, a system saturated with stimuli, images, people, and products, objects must become seductive to be acquired. The process of aestheticization derives from these dynamics. Commodities, besides irreversibly altering human experience, constitute an ambiguous allegory (Simmel, 2006, p. 84)².

The Commodity-Object is at the center of the aestheticization process of everyday life, a stimulus in the intensification of nervous life (Simmel, 2021) and a material vanishing point for reassembling unified identity demands³.

With Walter Benjamin⁴, we access the metaphysical space opened by the object in its being a *phantasmagoria* (Benjamin, 2021). Analyzing Baudelaire’s work, Benjamin seems to understand more than anyone else the magical, mythical, and almost religious characteristic of modernity, of which commodities are nothing but symbolic icons. He writes in this regard that “Emblems return as commodities. The Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it from the inside” (Benjamin, 2021, p. 141).

In the crowd of Passages, it is possible to scrutinize the bourgeois class inside shops, and the proletariat captivated by observing the objects-commodities that incorporate an infinite series of values, ideas, representations, mediated by shop windows.

The Passage is the form capable of explaining the entire modernity, and through its observation, one can understand the process of commodification

¹ With this term, Marx refers to the magical character that the commodity (as a exchange value) embodies as an explanation for the change in perception that individuals have regarding relations of production (Marx, 1996, p. 76).

² All the citations in the text come from the Italian editions of the books. English translations are made by the author.

³ The process of intensification of nervous life is essential to understand part of the dynamics triggered by the social processes typical of modernity in Simmel’s conception.

⁴ To adequately understand Benjamin’s perspective on modernity, it’s important to mention the “theory of experience” through which he arrives at results like Simmel’s intensification of nervous life (Benjamin, 2021).

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(and the consequent window display of spaces) of everything. Fashion, from time to time, “prescribes the ritual by which the fetish of the commodity is to be adored” (Benjamin, 2021, p. 152).

This process affects all areas of life and human products, even reaching everyday objects. By personalizing the home, the private individual transfers his existential ambiguities into the intimacy of his walls; in this way:

“He does not at all think of extending his business considerations to reflections of a social order [...] Hence arise the phantasmagoria of the interior [...] His living room is a stage in the universal theater” (Benjamin, 2021, p. 153).

With Jean Baudrillard, we observe in detail what mass consumption society has been like since the post-war period, in which bourgeois apartments, with their style, furniture layout, and arrangement of objects, once rigidly symbolized the monoliths of the same social class (Baudrillard, 2003).

There is a sort of breaking of the symbolic chains that imprisoned objects, leading to the disintegration of rigid arrangements in homes. Losing their meaning, space becomes liberated, functionalized. A game begins in which the consumer can redistribute furnishings and objects. It is during this period that the sense of limitlessness, granted by industrial production to consumers, develops (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 36).

Through a process of abstraction, objects open to their functionality, and the environment is perceived as a problem to be solved with an ambiguous mix of styles, objects, lithographs, furnishings, and furniture that can restore that identity dissolved in the old bourgeoisie and achieved by those who, through their wages, become “middle class” (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 44).

In Baudrillard, the system of objects is a system of signs, a code with a legend that communicates the meanings assumed by various commodities. The individual of the middle class can “play” at creative composition, seeking an identity experienced as a problem (Bauman, 2009).

Arjun Appadurai in the volume he edited “The social life of things” (1986) decides to sink his analysis precisely into the role of objects, restarting from Karl Marx’s materialist thought and identifying alongside the intrinsically economic value a whole symbolic universe of much more complex meanings.

Appadurai confirms the existence of a practical and at the same time emotional dimension concerning objects, both in their use and in their specific aesthetic conformation, and again, in the way they are sold in special spaces created for this practice, which, in his eyes, is fully cultural and social.

In accordance with the conceptual apparatus of the book, objects serve as supports for the elaboration of cultural identities that can express belonging,

proximity and even recreate the logic of inside/outside typical of various communities, structuring values, and even complex social statuses.

Moving beyond the typical structuring of the past, modernity, and the contemporary exploit consumerism as a social sphere of identity elaboration, as Bauman also noted (2007).

More profoundly, Appadurai points out, commodities also encompass political value, not only, we say, because of the values elaborated by various consumer communities, but also because they, in the vein of the indications coming from the Frankfurt School, can offer fertile ground for the germination of practices of cultural control and domination (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2010).

However, the power of domination never meets a blank canvas but always fits within social and cultural dynamics that can instead either re-appropriate meanings lowered from above or construct new ones.

Igor Kopytoff, in the second chapter of the volume edited by Appadurai, (Kopytoff, 1986), inserts himself within these discussions by problematizing the term “commodity” itself and pointing out that the actual categorical disjunction between “people” and “commodities” is a cultural achievement of the West (Kopytoff, 1986, p.64).

Between use-value and exchange-value there is a large concrete world of relations, and in this sense, a commodity, within a commercial circuit, can go through, in its biographical path different stages and attributions of meaning that sway between a purely economic abstraction and a system of singularization that instead gives it intimate and personal values (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 68).

Kopytoff argues that commodification is not an exclusive aspect of Western capitalism and shows, through numerous ethnographic examples, how other peoples and cultures have elaborated complex patterns of trade and commodified spheres that nevertheless coexist with other forms of social structuring.

By this is meant to say that it is never possible to arrive at total commodification and, at the same time, it is never possible to totally eschew some elaboration of commodifying trade systems. For Kopytoff there are, ideally, two opposite poles within which it is possible to place all cultures with varying degrees of abstraction, socialization, and commodification.

One pole is composed of the total unfolding of the commodifying process and the other is composed of the extreme singularization.

Every society and within it every individual thus express two opposing tendencies that concern strictly cognitive needs, and, to a greater extent, we

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would say, have to do with the eminently human faculty of “imagining” and ordering the world⁵.

It is useful here to point out that according to the author, in contemporary reality, this conflict between commodification and singularization is experienced internally by individuals who deal with the problem, we would say, by moving strategically in the marketplace, operating in other noncommercial contexts, or attributing ethical or moral values to commodities.

The balance between processes of commodification and practices of singularization, for Kopytoff, is modulated and re-modulated differently by different communities and cultures, and it can be assumed that by getting too close to the ideal-typical pole of prevailing commodification, instances of de-mercification may instead begin to germinate.

It is precisely from this point that Colin Campbell (2005) restarts in his paper on the “*artisanal consumer*,” meaning those consumption practices that see a direct relationship of construction and re-modulation of the commodity itself and that can undoubtedly be understood by moving on the continuum between commodification, singularization and de-mercification.

It is therefore a matter of elaborating a complex view of consumer groups, attributing to the social act of purchasing a commodity additional meaning that go beyond the search for identity mentioned just above and indeed problematize this assumption, understanding consumption not so much (not only, we say) as an act of identity construction as a series of dynamics of affirming an identity that already exists.

Campbell highlights the critical thinking of some thinkers such as Marx and Veblen, according to whom, because of the unfolding of consumer capitalism, with modernity and then contemporaneity, one of the factors that most assured and enabled the expression of one's humanity, namely artisanal production, was lost, replacing it with the alienation of industrial labor (Campbell, 2005, p. 25). For Campbell, the imaginary that pits industrial and artisanal production against each other is still rooted in the contemporary world, but it is because such critical theories do not consider the potential inherent in the act of consumption itself. This schema of understanding begins to creak with the entry of mass consumer society from the post-World War II period onward, also studied by Baudrillard.

⁵ We cite the studies of philosophical anthropology (Gehlen, 2010) and Uexküll (2010), which have shown how human beings, deprived of a biological and bodily apparatus able to adapt them, like other animals, to a specific environment, can imagine additional meanings, creating an environment, or a cognitive horizon that is socially constructed, which Gehlen defines as *second artificial nature*.

No longer are most people alienated from work struggling to obtain livelihoods, but the colonization in homes of countless objects and commodities. The scheme that smoothly transitioned the alienation of labor to the alienation of consumption, for Campbell, is not satisfactory.

Contemporary consumption, in the elaboration adopted here, must consider the directions of the most critical thinkers but also insist on the potential of consumption as a “de-alienating” practice (Miller, 1987).

Campbell’s thesis is that in contemporary times much of the act of consumption can be understood as a craft practice. The writer’s view, however, is that it is an act, or a series of acts, that are extremely complex, re-mixing dominant ideology, craftsmanship, phantasmagoria, and fetishes, and that, as a result, the imaginary of an era, or at least a portion of it, can be studied primarily in the crystallizations of the products of those companies that most produce community aggregation, such as Ikea (cf. Campbell, 2005).

Unlike the classical concept of artisanal production, artisanal consumption does not involve the consumer’s involvement in the creation of the object and the choice of its design but an active use of it, choosing which one to buy from within a catalog or, for example, combining objects from different stores or apparatuses, to construct and translate an identity of one’s own that goes beyond the value system of a specific company, giving rise to real rituals of possession (cf. Campbell, 2005, p. 29; McCracken, 1990, p. 85).

It remains to understand how to connect these thoughts to the more recent indications of the sociology of the imaginary. If this perspective is adopted, the distinction between real and unreal ceases to make sense (Legros et al., 2006, p. 88)⁶.

It is useful to recall some indications from Castoriadis on how the individual, transcending their pure individual vital impulse, encounters the material concretions of the social (also) in objects, becoming part of them (Castoriadis, 2022).

⁶ It should be specified here that the dichotomy between the real and the unreal is present even in the thought of Baudrillard himself. When the French thinker writes about reality, simulacra, and hyperreality, he seems to fall into the kind of determinism that we carry over from the scientist episteme described just above in the social sciences. With the perspective of social imaginary, it’s not just about being constructivist and talking about “reality effects,” but specifically about considering the imagination itself as the matrix from which the “real” takes shape and becomes experiential through the imaginative processes inherent to humans. In this regard, it’s useful to mention the essay by Valentina Grassi and Fabio D’Andrea, in which they critically review these epistemological instances [D’Andrea & Grassi, 2019].

We observe processes related to the imaginary not only in religious instances, audio-visual content, or literature. The “real” is established by the social imaginary; it is catalyzed in objects, in their form, in the way they are consumed, and in the instances of socialization that revolve around them (cf. Castoriadis, 2022).

Fundamental indications also come from Carmagnola and Ferraresi, who adeptly navigate between the sociology of consumption and semiotics, showing the implications that objects have in relation to identity practices and the construction of a specific “narrative.” In this regard, terms like “cult,” “ritual,” and “tribe” seem capable of describing and synthesizing contemporary social processes (Carmagnola & Ferraresi, 1999, p. 8).

Furthermore, Molotch's thoughts are particularly fruitful, especially when he captures the communal instances that can coalesce around an everyday object like (Molotch, 2005).

Between the symbolic universes constructed by companies and active practices, including in terms of construction, there is a complexity that needs to be investigated considering all the indications we have dissected.

2. The imaginary of Ikea's objects

Ikea is one of the largest multinational corporations in the world and a pivotal center in the contemporary imaginary, much like Apple, Coca-Cola, and many other multinational companies. The company, founded in 1943 in Agunnaryd, Sweden, by Ingvar Kamprad, now produces low-cost, “sustainable,” and “functional” furniture, furnishings, and household items (as presented on the company's website). Its revenue for 2021 amounted to 41.9 billion euros⁷, with approximately 160,000 employees. Ikea is present in 42 countries, boasting a total of about 445 retail stores. These figures illustrate that it is indeed a colossal presence in the contemporary economy (and consequently in culture).

The multinational owes its success to its ability to adapt its core features to economic and cultural changes. The Ikea model is easily transportable, exportable, and replicable on a large scale, systematically capable of thriving amidst diverse and multifaceted social practices. A complex and robust semantics accompanies the roots of meaning that can take root and adapt to various contexts.

⁷ <https://it.marketscreener.com/notizie/ultimo/IKEA-riporta-un-fatturato-record-di-41-9-miliardi-di-euro-per-l-intero-anno-36680289/>

For this reason, it appears to be an excellent lens to observe the complex social mechanisms concerning the social construction of reality, the relationship between material and imaginary, and the identity system conveyed by the company.

The idea is to analyze Ikea as a container of identity drives and as a node capable of materializing that invisible grid that renders contemporary reality experiential, representing a portion of the contemporary imaginary.

Therefore, we can refine our perspective and identify specific instances contributing to the formation of a commodity-object. The first step is to observe the object, the crystallization of the social.

Figure 1. Sandsberg.



Source: <https://www.ikea.com/it/it/p/sandsberg-tavolo-nero-s29420393/> (accessed on 30.08.2023).

This is Sandsberg, an indoor table sold by Ikea. It will be analyzed, initially, using the sociological lenses provided by Marx. The first thing that immediately catches the eye is the cost of 55 euros. In the process of commodification, one can observe that the attribution of a monetary value to a human production contributes to disentangling it from its use value to allow access to the universal equivalent, which is money.

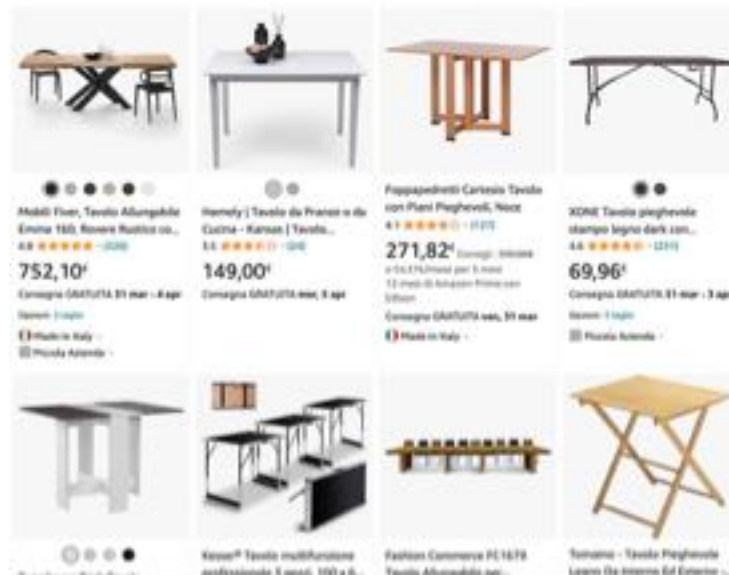
Here lies the portion of the imaginary that makes it possible to abstract from an object its exchange value and mystify its use value. Marx invites us to steer clear of this spectral realm to re-incorporate use value and deconstruct bourgeois ideology. As already stated, it is believed that there are further levels of analysis.

In dialogue with Simmel, let's imagine navigating on Amazon and typing "indoor table" in the e-commerce search engine. It is possible to grasp additional sociological meanings as all commodity-objects swiftly scroll in front of the consumer's eyes.

With Kopytoff, it could be said here that the particularity of Ikea lies in presenting commodities in a decidedly interesting way, endowing them with their own name and fostering that process of integration into the personal value universe, that is, “singularization.”

Between exchangeable commodity to unique and “proper” object passes exactly that social process of active consumption explicated just above.

Figure 2. Results of the search from the Amazon catalog for “indoor table”.



https://www.amazon.it/s?k=Tavolo+da+interno&rh=n%3A524015031&dc&ds=v1%3AGoWx6CQjsnGpqcvqSpA6G5qbm5dK5NjGfXlqLKA9qU&__mk_it_IT=ÁMÁZÓN&crid=3239WVSO6EUMP&qid=1679990491&rnid=1640607031&sprefix=tavolo+da+interno%2Caps%2C185&ref=sr_nr_n_1 (accessed on 30.08.2023).

For the process of aestheticizing everyday life, a small table competes with others and, to be effectively purchased, it must become beautiful and alluring; it somehow needs to convince the consumer on multiple fronts. Hence, one can observe tables that serve the same function taking on various shapes and motifs; a glass one for an elegant and refined tone, a simple and unadorned one, and even a more economical one made of plain white plastic. The functions that an outdoor table should perform are, all in all, rather straightforward (at least if one focuses on the features that common sense would judge as “functional”); for instance, it should be easily transportable from one corner to another of a hypothetical terrace and should support the weight of supplies and

food. In this sense, a simple PVC table could suffice. However, Ikea proposes Sandsberg, an outdoor table that responds to aesthetic as well as practical needs.

The matter becomes even more complex when considering the concept of phantasmagoria. In the phantasmagoria, objects allow access to those metaphysical spaces (though no less real for that) that produce society; strictly speaking, here defined as “imaginary.” Consequently, in the labyrinthine corridor of Ikea, one can identify the post-modern version of the Passage.

However, the objects no longer compete but contribute to delineate a specific unified and coherent semantics.

Strolling through an Ikea store or browsing through the website’s pages, one can observe processes of aestheticization that serve a different function; they function as a gateway to the imaginary desired by the company itself.

Notably, a totalizing experience is felt in Ikea (physical store and virtual store in this sense constitute more of a continuum than a dichotomy⁸) as one walks through a present-furnished that brings together commodification, spectacularizing, and phantasmagoria. If one were to summarize the transformation related to objects with two images, considering both the relationships of continuity and rupture, it could be said that we have gone from the Passages of Paris to the furnished space of Ikea.

Figure 3. The typical hallway set up by IKEA.



Source: <https://www.wikiwand.com/en/IKEA> (accessed on 30.08.2023).

⁸ Regarding the effects of digitization practices on Ikea’s business, refer to the study by Hagberg and Jonnson, (2022).

Figure 4. *A Passage of Paris nowadays.*



Source: <https://www.parigi.it/it/i-passages-couverts-di-parigi.php> (accessed on 30.08.2023).

Just as the Flâneur managed to grasp the modern experience while traversing the crowded passages, it is possible to try to capture the essence of contemporaneity in the arranged spaces of Ikea⁹.

Thanks to relatively low prices, the typical consumer can enter the store, indulge themselves in dreams opened by the displays, and then actually purchase one of the pieces that most “warmed” their imagination. With Benjamin, it becomes apparent that one does not merely “consume” that small table; instead, one luxuriates in the dreamlike and elusive phantasmagoria embedded in it.

Another significant characteristic of Ikea to strongly consider is its ability to provide a coherent value system that is easily personalized and exportable.

Observing the product page of the analyzed table, one can see that in the presentation photos, it is depicted inside a furnished house. Many details contribute to forming a specific semantic space in which to place the object itself and, by extension, Ikea.

⁹ The topic would deserve an in-depth treatment by integrating Ritzer's concepts and reflections on cathedrals of consumption (2010), places where objects are displayed. This paper, wanting to focus more on the social imaginary conveyed, constructed, and re-created by objects, considering them as materializations of it, does not explore the issue in depth.

Figure 5. Representative image of the Sandsberg table.



Source: <https://www.ikea.com/it/it/p/sandsberg-tavolo-nero-s29420393/> (accessed on 30.08.2023).

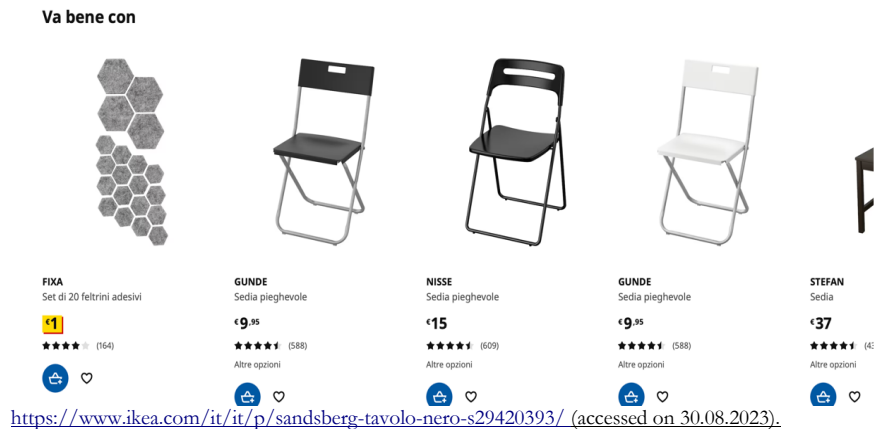
Here, a minimalist environment is outlined, with glasses, bottles, and containers designed in the same style, accompanied by other furnishings created specifically for this table. In this way, access to a strong identity system is made possible, embodied by objects that communicate coherently with each other.

They relieve the consumer from the burden of extreme personalization, which is often perceived as a problem, while providing ready-made, freeze-dried identities ready to be consumed (Appadurai, 2012). The identity bricolage that follows the dissolution of rigid bourgeois categories, now experienced more as an existential problem than an opportunity, is equipped with simple, quick, clear, and cost-effective assembly tools. Notably, on the same page, the company offers a whole range of accessories that contribute to this process.

Starting from how it is displayed and arranged in stores, and from similar methods proposed on the website, we can observe the system of objects described by Baudrillard. Even from its name, the company communicates directly, simply, and instantly its world of furnishings and the identity it wants to convey. The lettering and font, strongly connotated, are intrinsically tied to the commercial identity itself so that, much like those of Coca-Cola (Carmagnola & Ferraresi, 1999), they could be recognized anywhere.

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Figure 6. Related articles about the table. Source.



IKEA stands for I (Ingvar), K (Kamprad), E (Elmtaryd, the farm where the founder grew up), and A (Agunnaryd, the place where it all began). Simple, direct, effective.

To clarify the object of study, it is useful to remember that IKEA is, in all respects, a brand, a term which, in marketing, indicates the complex identity-communicative apparatus associated with a trademark by the company, making it distinguishable from others (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008).

The brand encompasses feelings, identity, symbols, signs, suggestions, and models of identification; it is necessary to guide customers and foster a certain loyalty, as well as to differentiate various industries (Codeluppi, 2012). In other words, without a brand, there could not exist all that “coagulation of meaning,” nor the amalgamation of behaviors and associations from which Ikea has derived its fortune¹⁰. If goods, in contemporary society, function as emblems and signposts of the social, it is also due to their ability to fit into pre-designed semantic spaces, namely the materialization in various brands. They are containers and points of synthesis of an entire corporate vision; crystallizing values, perceptions, and above all, the idea and image of the company.

While Ikea objects contain this value universe, they are also perceived, experienced, and re-semantized directly by the consumers themselves.

A practical example of how this relationship is structured lies in observing the ambiguous intermingling of technical apparatus, the effect of the machine on craftsmanship, and active practices present in Ikea and the fact that its

¹⁰ On the community of Ikea consumers united by their appreciation for the company and the effects of word-of-mouth on consumption, there is an interesting study by Rodrigues and Brandão (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2020).

objects, furniture, and furnishings come from an industrial production system that, as seen above, produces phantasmatic crystallizations of imaginaries.

They are, however, directly manipulated by consumers through the possibility of assembling objects. In this sense, the technical tool becomes subservient to the active act of the person who can incorporate an imaginary and re-create it through the assemblage that allows him or her to come into direct contact with the materiality of the object. If, symbolically, design, texture, and materiality incorporate meanings, visions, and values, they are re-adapted, incorporated, and mediated in the practical act of assembly in which the person transmits a part of himself to the object, in turn taking a part of that complex phantasmagoria typical of Ikea goods.

The Manichean vision of Homo Faber comes to be re-explored in an even more complex and ambivalent way, which makes this practice decisively explanatory of contemporary times in which individuals and, even more, social groups strategically use objects to elaborate new worldviews and guiding values, to construct coherent symbolic universes within everyday fragmentariness (cf. Grassi, 2015).

Not only assembling and directly manipulating furniture but also physically placing it in one's own apartment, expressing both a connection and a distancing from the company's guiding values, is an extremely fertile act for exploring contemporaneity. The active purchase and artisanal consumption at Ikea translate into true possession rituals in which, through manipulation, the object is stripped, at least partially, from its semantic entirety of corporate marketing, to enter the symbolic horizon of one or more consumers. What is proposed here is that there is always a relationship of reciprocal exchange between the symbolic universes of a company, the broader social imaginaries linked to a sphere of consumption, and the will of individuals.

Ikea appears paradigmatic, therefore, not only for having effectively constructed porous symbolic cavities in which to implant moral orders (in this case related to ecological sensitivity) but also because it allows consumer groups to semantically remap such orders through the ritual practices of assembly, placement, and creative blending among objects from its catalog and others. What is more explicitly apparent with Campbell, Kopytoff, and Appadurai is that the consumer actively participates in the imaginative construction of a horizon of meaning, negotiated through social relationships, in which objects lose part of their commodifying charge to enter the personal and social sphere of a restricted group.

This is directly evident in the fact that, as noted above, Ikea offers a whole range of items to care for its furniture, to bring to life what Campbell calls "grooming rituals," activities such as polishing a table, equipping it with personally chosen accessories, and goods that facilitate personal activities such

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as studying (see the various lamps created for this purpose or footrests or PC supports) or relaxation (curtains that are supposed to promote relaxation) (cfr. Campbell, 2005, p. 29).

Furthermore, Ikea is particularly interesting because it enables a prosumer activity (Ritzer, 2010) since, through the creative assembly of furniture and objects, it is possible to “produce” “other” environments not explicitly provided for in the catalogs. There are various Facebook groups on this topic, created with the purpose of sharing ideas and advice on how to best realize these creative endeavors. The figure of the contemporary Homo Faber, linked to active consumption, emerges in all its heuristic capacity in these practices, offering not only an activity that potentially involves the whole family but also a de-problematized and safe return to a playful activity that engages with the consumer's willingness to shuttle between moral and ethical orders and re-creative practices.

Visiting the Ikea store, choosing one or more items, feeling part of a niche of consumers, purchasing them, bringing them home, and assembling them is a decidedly complex activity that encompasses various dimensions and in which one can observe a whole universe of meanings and practices that can shed light on more general contemporary trends, for example, on how ecological sensitivity fosters community aggregation but also on how consumption practices conceal significant complexities. However, accounting for the actual spaces of autonomy in the “personalization” of Ikea items is interesting because it allows us to identify practices that can be placed within an ideal-typical continuum composed of points such as passive consumption dictated by marketing, “weak” customization (furnishing one's home), a stronger and more creative one (creating new objects such as tables from wooden planks, equipped walls by combining cubes and shelves), and perhaps even a “subversive” one (Campbell, 2005, p. 31).

Ikea is decidedly interesting because it provides useful tools both for those consumers who wish to be guided in the company's semantic universe (comprehensive catalogs, experts who can advise on how to complete the furnishings, websites and apps capable of virtually materializing a piece of furniture in one's home through the “magical” mediation of the smartphone, expert assembly service) and for those who need to be more “free” and artisanal and who, in this sense, strategically use Ikea. Furthermore, it must be assumed that a certain endowment in terms of cultural capital (Campbell, 2005, p. 35) is necessary to embrace both the ecological sensitivity, which seems to be of primary importance in the Ikea imaginary, and to elaborate the need for “craftsmanship” in consumption practices. The web and the online dimension of consumption appear to be of fundamental importance for this multinational.

Confirmation of this can be found in the fact that the logo font has not been changed since 1967, unlike the one used in the layout of catalogs and web communication. Each font and graphic style correspond to precise communicative intentions, as significant as the more explicit ones.

In this regard, the news of the change in the company's font from the Futura typeface to Microsoft Verdana dates to 2009.

Figure 7. *Ikea font before and after.*



Source: <https://blog.pixell.it/ikea-cambia-font-istituzionale/> accessed on 30.08.2023.

This change can also be partially explained by the shift in general and specific consumption practices that began in the early 2000s (the spread of the internet, the rise of e-commerce, and the boom of smartphones). Verdana, in fact, adapts more effectively to web pages at the expense of traditional print layouts.

This event brings with it two considerations of absolute relevance:

- The importance of the web in sales dynamics, consumption, and the identity processes linked to the company.

- The identity of a brand, perhaps paradoxically in contrast to the companies' desire to provide unity and "moments of fixation," is constantly in motion¹¹.

Indeed, while the font of product descriptions has changed, the logo font, after the last modification in 1967, has not been touched. It still reigns as a guide to the ever-changing space of furnishings that the market demands.

Figure 8. The different logos of IKEA.



Source: <https://www.rundesign.it/la-storia-del-logo-ikea/> (accessed on 30.08.2023).

Looking at the colors, a paradigmatic change can be observed. Since the adoption of the current font, the company has transitioned from a black and white logo to a red and white one, and then to yellow and blue. This change should not be underestimated.

The yellow and blue colors explicitly recall the colors of the Swedish flag and consequently some identity traits and values of the nation.

¹¹ This issue has been investigated, along with various brand-building dynamics, in an interesting work by David A. Aaker (Aaker, 1991).

Figure 9. The Swedish flag.



Source: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/country-profiles/sweden_it. (Accessed on 30.08.2023).

It almost seems like Ikea has engaged in an incredibly effective game of re-semanticization and application of values instinctively associated with Sweden.

To invoke Baudrillard and Amendola again, it is difficult to ascertain whether Ikea borrowed pre-existing values from the collective consciousness of Swedes, packaged them, and made them available in the global market; or if, in the hyper-real stage, the exact opposite has occurred (Baudrillard, 1987; Amendola, 2010).

Thus, the lettering, font, and colors have been functionally incorporated into the Ikea imaginary, providing the company with solid (yet porous) roots of meaning around which consumers can have fun and congregate around these identity emblems.

Figure 10. The logo, as it appears today, remains almost unchanged compared to the one from 1983



Source: <https://www.ikea.com/>. (Accessed on 30.08.2023).

3. Ikea: Eco-Sustainability and Contemporaneity

An attentive eye cannot overlook the complex set of values that Ikea has managed to establish over time, finding, in recent years, a favorable conjunction regarding principles compatible with environmental preservation, reduced consumption, and the adoption of an eco-sustainable lifestyle. Observing the

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company's website, we can identify three core values that permeate the communicative system of this multinational corporation:

- Eco-sustainability
- Functionality
- Affordable prices

This triad drives a significant portion of the company's economic and social processes. In this context, we will focus on analyzing the paradigm related to eco-sustainability.

This element is perceived as one of the qualities that a good citizen and, consequently, a "good" company should possess to effectively address the crucial issue of climate change, a true watershed in global collective perception.

Mass phenomena, organized with various degrees of hierarchy (Mostaccio & Musolino, 2017), and spontaneously, demonstrate the importance that this new grand narrative holds in the life of the contemporary individual.

Think of figures like Greta Thunberg or the recent Fridays for Future movements.

Figure 11. Greta Thunberg in protest in front of the Swedish Parliament.



Source: <https://www.kennew.it/news/greta-thunberg-leroina-svedese-che-si-batte-per-il-pianeta/> (Accessed on 30.08.2023).

From Sweden (not by chance), the wave of protest spreads to many European and non-European squares (including Italy). In addition to the distrust towards institutions, the crisis of mass parties, and the apathy experienced by post-modern individuals, there is a strong opportunity for social aggregation. Even contemporary individuals can gather to perceive themselves again as a collective. The peculiarity of this phenomenon, and all that follows, lies in its ability to be assimilated within the paradigmatic logic of the current era.

In this cultural context, Ikea plays a totemic role. The company is paradigmatic because it had already embraced a series of imperatives related to the “eco-friendly” world long before they became prevalent in other sectors of global capitalism. As a result, in the green transition of production cycles for major international retailers, Ikea stands at the forefront. The company has long been “greenified,” and this readiness allows it to be perceived as the archetype of the capitalist model that should emerge. Naturally, within the broad context of environmental activism, there are radically critical instances towards the current capitalist system, while others firmly believe in its extreme necessity (albeit with a different configuration). This instance holds central importance in the collective and global narrative.

The climate crisis, now perceived as imminent, and the resulting activism can be seen as forms of active citizenship, as an assumption of unified roles and identities in the crisis of values in post-modern society.

Thus, the possibility of identifying the development of new “tribalisms” (Maffesoli, 2004) in the post-modern context emerges. Eco-sustainability acts as a catalyst for individuals. In the collective imagination, the global crisis looms larger every day, demanding a response to this tremendous fear. The contrast lies in assuming an active role in the exchange of identities. The green revolution involves both collective demands for a focus on institutions regarding CO2 emissions, single-use plastics, and consumption reduction, and its absorption into the private sphere.

The green revolution also goes (perhaps paradoxically) through consumption practices. If, as observed, commodities incorporate more than meets the eye, it is possible to purchase a sort of environmentally conscious revolution in a box, ready for use, embedded in the social dynamics manifested in the described objects above. There is a strong and ambiguous connotation in this process. The new great hope is to overcome the environmental crisis, and the response is a forceful critique of the capitalist system, which, however, becomes absorbed within it. Ikea provides a practical guide for being responsible consumers, which is evident in the sustainability guide available on the company’s website. The dream of a world capable of overcoming the environmental crisis drives individualistic consumption practices, and the utopia of a “green” world generates these collective instances. The utopia is generated by ambiguity, that is, the intermingling of seemingly opposing elements like the consumeristic system and eco-sustainability. This consideration explains the extreme fertility of environmentalism and how Ikea drives consumption and identities. With Benjamin, one could say:

“Ambiguity is the pictured appearance of dialectics, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This arrest or standstill is utopia, and the dialectical image is an

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image of a dream. Such an image is the commodity itself: as a fetish” (Benjamin, 2021, p. 156).

In this case, the utopia of a green society, generated within the ambiguity of the context, becomes embodied as a fetish in Ikea's merchandise.

What has been discussed so far represents only a small part of the meanings and narratives that can be found within the complexity of Ikea.

Therefore, other issues remain open for further exploration, such as the corporate meanings contained in various catalogs, the semantics present in other sections of the website and the consumer behavior in relation to the morphology of Ikea's spaces.

However, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding certain aspects of contemporaneity, which involve individuality in identity consumption and its connection to the environmentalist imaginary.

The semantic core related to Ikea's eco-sustainability, as specified, supports, and reproduces a much broader overall phenomenon concerning the environmentalist imaginary, the new perceptions of the planet, ecological movements, and the fear of the climate change crisis (Nocenzi, 2004).

These movements can be seen as a response of civil society to the stagnation and lack of representation in institutionalized politics, and as an agglomeration around a new social imaginary that, as will be seen, is ambivalent and complex (cfr. Mostaccio & Musolino, 2017, p. 16).

The collective sentiment related to the idea of nature and the environment has undergone significant changes linked to the different epistemological footprints that have marked (and continue to mark) Western sciences and social practices (Vidali, 2022).

Nature, once reduced to a mere “object,” progressively dichotomized from culture (Descola, 2021), is now becoming one of the central actors in contemporary issues, forcing a reflection on new ways of thinking about the world (Morin, 2016) and the economic model to adopt.

Descola described this process of mortification of nature as an “object” (as the “naturalization of the world” (Descola, 2021, p. 44), and through his analysis, it is possible to recognize the link between this form of domination and the founding imaginaries of Western societies from modernity onwards (capitalism, modern science, and rationalism, above all).

This issue becomes central if, as emphasized, some of the environmentalist demands are absorbed into the sphere of consumption, potentially downsizing (or perhaps weakening) the critical stance towards the global economic system.

Baudrillard, already in 1976, identified in the “ecological crises” a way in which the capitalist system itself, rather than tending towards its “overcoming,” could re-establish or find a new order of legitimacy:

“The entire ecological turn of recent years had already introduced this process of regeneration through crisis – a crisis that is no longer one of ‘production’ as was the case in 1929, but of the system’s involution and recycling of its lost identity. A crisis no longer of ‘production’ but of ‘reproduction’ (hence the impossibility of understanding what there is of truth and simulacrum in this crisis). Ecology is the production that is resurrected as a specter of scarcity, which rediscovers a natural necessity in which to revitalize the law of value” (Baudrillard, 2022, p. 47).

Combining this perspective with broader reflections on social imaginaries, it becomes evident how environmentalism (at least partially) represents a thematic nucleus that provides new lifeblood to the capitalist system. Through an ambiguous game of narrative patchwork, capitalism bounces between the media story of its own critique and renewed confidence in its ability to address the problem, namely the idea of a sort of “green” capitalism (Tanuro, 2011).

This issue becomes even more significant when reflecting on the contemporary conditions of Western society. The disintegration of many unifying factors typical of modernity seems to elevate object-merchandise to the centers of rotation and formation of the social. Post-modern tribes gather around merchandise, no longer considered solely in its materiality but considering the beliefs generated and the stories that run through these catalysts.

In a sense, it is incorrect to think of post-modernity solely as the unfolding of the “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 2014, p. 6). Alongside the disenchantment theorized by Weber (Weber, 2006), we can perceive a kind of “re-enchantment” coagulated around and within merchandise. In the post-modernity, micro-cults of brands, multinational corporations, merchandise, and objects provide identity, spectacle, entertainment, and meaning (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 39).

In the current era, this process well explains the success of different brands associated with multinational corporations and their respective loyalty practices. Ikea provides a valid example of these contemporary trends with his ability to construct and reshape the environmentalist imaginary, a semantic core of utmost centrality in contemporaneity and the near future.

In addition to these dynamics, which can be characterized as both “manipulative” and “passive,” it is of undeniable importance to highlight that ecological sensitivities are directly manipulated by consumers who use Ikea products according to their explicit intentions, giving rise to strategic games of re-semanticization that also concern the democratic nature of prices and the functionality of furniture.

It is not only Ikea that reaches and constructs an ecological imaginary, but also broader groups that, by strategically seeking, exploit Ikea to materialize their own system of values.

These consumers, therefore, far from experiencing the socially conveyed imaginary of the company uncritically, deconstruct it, anchoring complex values and linking them to their own daily experiences and personal value systems, through the mutual incorporation arising from the assembly phases, construction of new furniture, and placement within the apartment, as well as through all those phrases typical of social relations.

Ikea, by allowing the possibility of buying furniture and furnishings and then assembling them directly oneself, through simple instructions, allows a kind of de-problematized access to a direct activity of manipulation, made more experiential by the totality of meaning elaborated by corporate marketing, and re-created by the consumer group.

The ambiguity that needs to be investigated is dialectical in Benjamin's sense, a sensory image and an aesthetic materialization that can open utopias and re-enchantments, bouncing on the one hand as a mass-produced product and on the other in the cultural re-appropriation (the artisanal assembly).

In this article, it has been observed how it is possible to access some traits of the social imaginary that establish reality by analyzing a single object-merchandise and a company. However, this does not exclude further reflections and theoretical integrations that consider the complexity of contemporary times and its rapid changes.

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