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## **DESIGN AND SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the mechanism of symbolic consumption in modern culture as interaction of communicative and industrial design. Product design means creating a form of functionality that meets market requirements. Packaging, labeling and advertising immerse a produced object into the cultural context with imparts the associations with progress and the myths about commodity-based happiness to it. Brands are a semiotic system that connects the values of objects to market segments. A certain class of produced objects, machines and constructions receive the role of status markers for the owner who identifies himself through such object-signs. Industrial and communicative design stimulates sales, stratifies and segments the consumer market. Marketing dictates the design objectives, and the emerging exchange value depends on the use value of objects and the saturation of the market with both low-end and high-end products.

### **Keywords**

Design – Consumption – Object – Commodity – Value – Social Status

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## Introduction

The excessive production and consumption of things and signs in modern culture makes one consider the mechanism of stimulation of needs. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, which refers to Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>, Baudrillard<sup>2</sup> focuses on the consumption of signs. Despite the different cultural and historical situations, in which these two authors wrote their works, they are united by the endeavor to understand the problem of exchange in political economy. The problem of commodity production and movement of capital is connected with the value of objects, acquisition of which satisfies the human desire for possession and increases consumer needs.

In the information society, the avalanche-like growth of sign and symbol flows creates an illusion that the symbolic component of objects is extremely important. As a result, consumption of commodities can be reduced to a symbolic exchange, explored by Baudrillard. The source of the subversion of objects and signs is the understanding of objects in the system of social relations in economic terms of *utility*, which perfectly explains the movement of capital, but fails to explain the mass production of objects with the same function. At the same time, the monetary standpoint allows that the material mass and the utility of objects are secondary to the sign nature of objects.

The aim of this article is to analyze the mechanism of symbolic consumption in modern cultural and historical situation where a significant role belongs to design.

## The Problem of Symbolic Exchange

In the capitalist society, the utility of objects for the consumer is determined by the economic value. Karl Marx conducted his studies in the conditions of developing commodity production and underserved market in the industrial society, while Baudrillard wrote in the conditions of overproduction of both objects and signs in the post-industrial society. The mid-19th century knew no mass production and had *deficit* of objects, although it was at that time that the symbolic component of consumption was formed. Karl Marx distinguishes use value and exchange value of commodities, and Baudrillard, on the contrary, reduces it all to exchange value. Such reduction was prompted by the theories of marginal utility, supply and demand, which, excluding socially useful labor, lock value in the circle of exchange between market actors.

To explain the symbolic exchange, Baudrillard chooses de Saussure's model<sup>3</sup> of the sign among the theories of connotation and denotation. The signified and the signifier are in a conventional relation and, therefore, can be locked into a system of relations between subjects. Therefore, exchange value appears as 'sign' value. Exchange value refers to use value as the signifier to the signified. Utility and functionality are reduced to the mode of signification<sup>4</sup>. So, the materiality and functionality of objects are replaced by the theory of

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. 1859/1999. Retrieved 29.11.2018 from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> J. Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd, 1972/1981).

<sup>3</sup> There are two original approaches to sign and its meaning: <sup>(1)</sup> the meaning of a sign is a concept that arises from the interpretation of denotation (an object or a relation) in a given context (Charles Peirce, Friedrich) and <sup>(2)</sup> the meaning of a sign is a mental representation (de Saussure).

<sup>4</sup> J. Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd., 1972/1981)



exchange of signs, in which our world represents a universe of abstract, incorporeal objects that have become simulacra of themselves<sup>5</sup>. More precisely, in the system of social relations consumption is reduced to discourse<sup>6</sup>. Consumption is understood not just as the acquisition and use of material goods, but as a method of social organization, manipulation and identification of the individual in the post-industrial society<sup>7</sup>.

From the standpoint of the game played by the signifier and the signified, consumption has somewhat lost its utilitarian character and has come to being the consumption of the signs of status, prestige, social differentiation, hierarchy, happiness and joy. The development of mass-media and the digital revolution made the production of signs all-encompassing. As a result, culture, which was interpreted as a set of values in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has become a hypertext with systematically manipulated signs at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This argues for the theory of sign value. However, are the essentialism and functionalism of commodity production lost for symbolic consumption? No, the utilitarian component is implied yet expelled to the background. It is clear that consumption is an attitude not only to objects, but to other people through objects. After all, not all objects can serve as status markers. Tools, things for routine use, work clothes, most food stuffs, etc. are signs attached to objects. For the bulk of objects created due to a need, the elimination of denotation is impossible and theoretically unacceptable.

In this hierarchy of values attributed to object-signs, it is design that becomes the mechanism for converting use value into exchange value. Design arises from the development of industrial production and mass communications; it engineers forms, functions and quality of objects and devices and creates a language of messages. It combines the functional and communicative aspects of production and consumption. Moreover, expressing the human ability of goal-setting in a material form, design stimulates people's needs. The all-encompassing nature of design brings our attention to the mechanism of designing functions and significations, as well as to their hierarchy in the system of objects. Design is a "specific project mechanism operating in a socio-economic system"<sup>8</sup>.

### **The Problem of Object-Sign in Industrial Society**

Every object serves something and means something. The primary aspect is the instrumental function of objects, which implies 'the knowledge of what' and 'the knowledge of how.' This knowledge cannot be a pure discourse, for it is installed into the human body as skills in physical activities and crafts. People do not control thoughts with words (discursive practices), since most of our actions are, in essence, automatic behaviors and skills. The instrumental function of objects does not permit the elimination of their material nature because human abilities develop through labor, sensory perception, and substantive work. One of the aspects of design is ergonomics that searches for ways to optimally couple the human body with tools in the labor process.

Another aspect is symbolic. Marx showed that an object embodies socially useful labor and social relations. In contrast to a hand-crafted object, to which the master's hand, the customized measurements and the class preferences give uniqueness, an industrial,

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<sup>5</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Passwords*. Russian Edition (Yekaterinburg: U-Faktoria, 2000/2006).

<sup>6</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The System of Things*. Russian Edition (Izdatel'stvo "Rudomuno", 1968/1995).

<sup>7</sup> A. Ovrutskiy, *Social philosophy of consumption* (Rostov-on don: South federal university, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> M. Koskov, *Objective World of Culture* (Saint Petersburg: Saint Petersburg State University, 2004).

standardized object embodies the entire system of relations of production and exchange. In addition to the instrumental function, an object signifies value, property, attractiveness, prestige, personal meaning, etc. The original purpose of an object is to satisfy needs of people and to be an instrument of labor. The symbolic meaning of an object exceeds the scope of utilitarian purpose. Of course, people never consume objects purely for their utility, since objects incorporate various relationships and significations, tied to them as if to a substrate<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, many objects are appropriated precisely in the symbolic way to emphasize the lifestyle and the status of the owner, for example, wealth, respectability, democratic character or identity. The historical milestones of symbolic consumption were, first, the emergence packaging and labeling as a method of retail distribution; second, the design revolution and setting of the standards of beauty; third, the development of styling, i.e. giving an attractive form to industrial products; fourth, the idea that production of commodities can focus on target audiences that products are intended for; and, fifth, the design of semantics of objects.

The industrial revolution, which replaced manual labor with machine labor, opened up the possibility of mass production of typified objects, thus reducing their cost for the sake of affordability for broad population. As early as the beginning of the 19th century, manufacturers sought to diversify functionally identical objects: apart from differentiation of goods by social class (for 'masters' and for 'servants'), products were divided into men's, women's, children's and professional. Moreover, there appeared many varieties of same objects. The reasons for the release of products in wide selections root in the manufacturers' pursuit of sales. Even a minor variation can prompt to buy a second and a third such thing. Next came the idea to produce different products for different market segments and social groups<sup>10</sup>.

### **Symbolic Transformation**

How to turn animal food into gourmet food for humans? This seemingly absurd question was solved by the serial production of packaging. In the second half of the 19th century, the distribution system developed alongside the mass production. First packages—paper bags and carton boxes—became sales incentives, because one can carry more in a package than in hands. With the machine production of carton boxes that appeared in 1879, convenient dosing and shipping of goods became possible. Labeled and supplemented with instructions how to use the product, packaging gave rise to symbolic consumption. The first products in carton boxes with images on them were oatmeal from Quaker Oats and biscuits from Uneeda. They demonstrate the transformation of a product into a consumer product. Oats, usually fed to animals, turn into oatmeal, a desirable gourmet product, a relief for the sick, a treat for the little ones, if packaged into a box with a recipe and a Quaker character on it<sup>11</sup>. Absolutely the same oats, packaged into bags or nice boxes, are different consumer products. The packaged product becomes isolated from the mass, localized and marked with connotations, for example, a recipe signifies high cuisine and gastronomy, involving the product into the cultural and historical context. The invention of lithography in 1798 allowed using colorful drawings as labels and advertising posters. Thanks to packaging, products

<sup>9</sup> A. Gritsakov & N. Katsuk, Jean Baudrillard (Minsk: knozhnyidom, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> A. Forty, Objects of desire. Design and society since 1750. Russian edition (Moscow: art. Lebedev studio, 1986/2013).

<sup>11</sup> T. Hine, The total package. Russian edition (Moscow: art. Lebedev studio, 1995/2017).

can be consumed physically yet, most notably, symbolically. Thus, packaging, labeling and advertising became the foundation of symbolic consumption.

### Design Revolution and Modernist Utopia

The question of beauty of the object at the design level is solved by separating design from production and transferring the principles of abstract art into design. International style emerged when simple geometric forms were applied in design and such principles as 'form follows function', 'simpler means better' and 'less is more' were formulated. The introduction of DIN 426 in Germany in 1922 and then the creation of the Modulor by Le Corbusier in 1948 established that beauty should become the standard of design. The design revolution allows reducing all the characteristics of an object to function and form, benefit and beauty. The form becomes a consequence of a given useful purpose or form of functionality.

This revolution, which may be seen as puritan, has eliminated everything excessive, adorning, and decorative. Designing as an abstract development of form according to beauty standards means a universal calculation of the entire objective world, and "everything becomes the object of a calculus of function and of signification"<sup>12</sup>. From the standpoint of production, the problem of beauty and utility is the matter of form and function, not exchange value. Hence the question of rationalization, unification and reduction of production costs is resolved insofar as beauty in design projects is not given, but selected: "Economy is the fundamental principle of beauty" (Le Corbusier, 1924). Progress is a consequence of the economic law by virtue of which costs of production continually fall while living labor continually becomes more productive<sup>13</sup>. Modernism (functionalism), striving to create elegant consumer goods, aims to reduce use value. The result of this is the isolation of a 'modest consumer' as the target audience, for example, by *Braun* that adheres to quality, economy and utility. Widespread since the 1950s, the BraunStyle is characterized by *Gute Form* and distinguished by its extreme laconism, sober colors, high quality, rationalism, understandability and elegance.

Functionalism makes it possible to fill the world with cheap elegant things, which gives rise to the modernist utopia. This is the idea that the design of clean and comfortable cities, the construction of cheap affordable apartments ("a machine for living in" according to Le Corbusier) can improve the social situation of workers. In architecture and urban planning there is an illusion that functional organization of space is capable of harmonizing social contradictions, solving the problems of society by means of design and architecture. In 1927, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe observed that the struggle for new housing is only part of a large-scale struggle for a new social order.

The myth of comfort has become a way of stimulating the need in a better life. In Western society, the central ideas of modernism are order, hygiene and cleanliness. Unlike in aristocratic society, where the mistress of the house entrusts the work to the servants, in bourgeois society the owners keep the household themselves. One gets an illusion that housekeeping is not labor, but some other kind of activity. Also, performing this activity requires mechanical assistants—a washing machine, a refrigerator, a gas stove, electrical

<sup>12</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd., 1972/1981).

<sup>13</sup>KarlMarx &Engels Friedrich, *The Complete Works. Russian Edition, Vol: 46 Part 1* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968). Retrieved 15.10.2018 from: [http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/M/MARKS\\_Karl,\\_ENGEL'S\\_Fridrih/\\_Marks\\_K.,\\_Engel's\\_F..html](http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/M/MARKS_Karl,_ENGEL'S_Fridrih/_Marks_K.,_Engel's_F..html)

appliances, designed to ease the household chores, child care and maintenance of order, hygiene and cleanliness<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the ideas of hygiene and labor saving lead to more frequent cleanings and powerfully stimulate the demand for laundry detergents, household appliances and other everyday products. All utensils and household appliances serve to ensure the comfort in everyday life, and, consequently, improvement of comfort requires constant update of objects. This pathological desire for novelty is encouraged by scientific and technological progress. The myth of technical assistants, the most versatile of which is a robot, includes the constant striving for 'advancement.' The design revolution and the myth of comfortable life are the basis of mass production and consumption.

The production of consumer goods creates a new problem. If producers create a mass of typical cheap goods for poor people, they will not constantly consume only such goods. They are already living the dream of beautiful life and have prejudices about the monetary reputation of objects. No matter how elegant they can be, consumer goods, mass-produced on industrial scale, repel consumers because they constantly remind people of their scanty lifestyle<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, symbolic consumption is built on the functional purpose, and "the two together go to make up the unanalyzed aggregate serviceability of the goods"<sup>16</sup>.

### **Economic Crisis and Styling**

The economic boom, overproduction, stock speculations and the concentration of capital in the hands of big bourgeoisie resulted in the economic crisis, known as the Great Depression. It entailed mass unemployment, impoverishment of the middle class and a sharp drop in demand for unsightly generic products. There was an urgent need to stimulate demand, and industrial designer Raymond Loewy felt it. Working on the appearance of a duplicating machine by Gesthetner and on the Coldspout refrigerator for Sears-Roebuck in 1929, Loewy turned unbeautiful objects into practical and streamlined installations. Beauty increases demand dramatically. With equal cost of production, it is the attractive form that becomes the stimulus of consumption, and hence Loewy's slogan 'Ugliness Doesn't Sell'. After all, the main requirements to industrial design are good sales and profit-making.

In 1931, amid the economic crisis, James Adams published *The Epic of America*, which expresses confidence that every person, thanks to his energy and hard work, is able to succeed in life, for America is a country of equal opportunities. Thus, the American dream was born as a moral and psychological stimulus for unemployed, homeless and unhappy people. The dream gave people faith in their own strengths and capabilities. When Norman Norman Bel Geddes's *Horizons*, a book of future engineering projects in the streamlined form, appeared in 1932, the American dream received its shape. Streamlined style came into fashion as a visual metaphor of aspiration for the future and progress<sup>17</sup>. To create a thirst for renewal of technology and stimulate demand, industry introduced the idea of a 'dream car.' When buying a big car with chrome-plated parts and an appearance package, an average American felt wealthy and modern. Subsequently, the American dream was made ever escaping to force people constantly update cars and lifestyle.

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<sup>14</sup> A. Forty, *Objects of desire. Design and society since 1750*. Russian edition (Moscow: art. Lebedev studio, 1986/2013).

<sup>15</sup> Thorstein Bunde Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Russian Edition (Moscow: Progress, 1899/1984).

<sup>16</sup> Thorstein Bunde Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class...*

<sup>17</sup> B. Hillier, *The style of the century*. Russian edition (Moscow: slovo, 2004).

Commercial design and the American dream spawned styling. Its purpose is not the stylization of form, but the seduction of consumer and the promotion of sales. The form should receive as much attention as the function; the formula of styling is “form and function are one.” Later, organic design, biodesign and biomorphism presented objects with naturally occurring contours and shapes as attractive<sup>18</sup>. In pursuit of the dream, design supports excitement for anything new and requires constant updating. Styling is reminiscent of the horizontal stimulation of symbolic consumption through innovation and constant demand for novelty.

The phenomena that can be considered as a vertical stratification of commodity fetishism appeared in the mid-1960s. Abundance was growing; the costs of goods, services and leisure were increasing while working time decreased; the processes of self-identification of consumers were unfolding, and people purchased “positional goods” that demonstrated their belonging to a particular social group; consumers were proclaimed more important than manufacturers<sup>19</sup>. Advertising and credit provision create a *myth of commodity happiness*, embodied in shopping malls and boutiques. People became more interested in style, elegance and novelty, rather than functionality, economy and reliability. Transience, frivolity and the cult of consumption form the demand for disposable items, for example, cardboard furniture, disposable dishes, towels, packaging, and even paper clothes<sup>20</sup>.

Design for such stores as Biba, Selfridges, and Habitat began to focus more on the objects for aesthetic pleasure rather than for practical needs. Under the influence of the spirit of consumerism, the standards of ‘good design’ gave way to pop culture, catering to the mass demand and abiding by the average taste in order to create an effect of rich life for cheap. One would think that the above processes confirm the idea that objects have turned into simulacra. However, they indicate, rather, how a cheap imitation, referring to the myth of commodity happiness, creates a trend of fashionable life.

Against the background of disposable items that turn into mountains of rubbish, there emerges stratification and differentiation of the market. Individuals and social groups begin to identify themselves through the system of objects. If unfashionably dressed, a person feels ‘poor’ or ‘inferior.’ Today, many things are produced to be identical in purpose but diverse in form; the ongoing pursuit of novelty, fashion and prestige is intended to stimulate a consumer’s desires. The needs obey the hysterical logic of transition from one value to another, which is driven not by need in such an object, but by the need in difference in a social sense<sup>21</sup>. In modern culture, difference has been raised to a cult under the influence of consumer culture and lifestyle<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> William Lidwell; Kritina Holden and Jill Butler, *Universal Principles of Design*. Russian Edition (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2012)

<sup>19</sup> Penguin Dictionary of Sociology: Third Edition. Consumer Society (Penguin Books, 1994) Retrieved 12.11.2018 from: <http://text-translator.com/wp-content/filesfa/Dic-of-Sociology.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> B. Hillier, *The style of the century*. Russian edition (Moscow: slovo, 2004)

<sup>21</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*. Russian Edition (Moscow: Respublika, 1970/2006).

<sup>22</sup> Michael R. Solomon, *Consumer Behavior* (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1994); D. Chaney, *Lifestyles* (London: routledge, 1996); R. Bocoock, *Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1993); M. Featherstone, *consumer culture and postmodernism* (London, 1991); H. Mackay, *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London, 1997); M. Bannister, “Consumer Attitude towards Imports”. *European Journal of Marketing*, num 12 (1978): 562–570; J. Cain, “Experience-based Design: Towards a Science of art Full Business Innovation”. *Design Management Journal*, num 9 (1998): 10–16; D. K. Rhea, “A New Perspective on Design: Focusing on customer Experience”. *Design Management Journal*, num 3 (4)

In the development of post-industrial society with its flows of information and advertising, symbolic consumption becomes the search for an answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ while city life, impersonalizing institutions, alienated labor, and mass production of same objects undermine the stability of self-identification. Under these conditions, consumption fills the resulting vacuum of identity<sup>23</sup>. Object-signs become markers of the hierarchy of people and the differentiation of social groups. With the help of object-signs, we define ourselves, make it clear who we are and who we are not. This role belongs to jewelry or clothes that we are wearing or furniture that we choose for our homes<sup>24</sup>. Identification is not associated with the possession of any goods, but with specific types of goods.

### **Consumption Segments: Identification and Hierarchy**

In reality, market-minded design isolates luxury brands, premium brands, countercultural trends and mass market products. Basically, such symbolic differentiation of goods is intended for the middle class. With the 1990s began the time of domination of brands, designer labels and fashion labels. Clothing from leading fashion houses and premium accessories—Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, Piaget, Zenith, Omega, Audemars Piguet, Parker, Sheaffer, Montblanc, Montegrappa, to name a few—have become signs of respectability and prestige. A brand is an added value that turns a thing into an object of desire. Possession of such cult objects signifies success of the individual. Armani jeans, a Zippo lighter, a Rolex watch, Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses, and dressing style allude to a young man’s high profile. Thus, the yuppie generation thinks it necessary to possess a BMW and a Rolex, indicating love for speed, sport and career advancement.

A car has a special object of consumption with a symbolic meaning of prestige. The car body style is a special concern of the designer because it replaces both packaging and advertising. Car body styling makes the person, who changes an outdated car, follow the dream and the fashion. A number of expensive car brands are distinguished as indicators of respectability, such as Jaguar XJ, Maserati, Aston Martin, Bugatti, Lamborghini, Bentley and others. Among them, Rolls-Royce becomes a symbol of luxury and comfort, and Ferrari, a symbol of power and speed. These are not just brands with a high exchange value, but brands that represent hand-assembled machines of high quality with special technical characteristics, the machines that the best craftsmen and the leading design studios, such as Ghia, Pininfarina and Bertone, work on. Aesthetics, quality, functionality and prestige, i.e. a high use value, determine a high exchange value.

However, countercultural trends emerged as a counterweight to mainstream consumer consumption and luxury brands in design. Youth subcultures, from beatniks and hippies to punks and goths, follow an anarchic lifestyle, rejecting money-making, careerism and bureaucracy and adhering to the philosophy of the Great Refusal. They prefer Vespa scooters, leather jackets and jeans. Connotations, surrounding Vespa brand, are associated with what Umberto Eco describes as offense, sin and temptation. Harley-Davidson plays a special role for bikers; not that fast and technically old-fashioned motorcycle, which due to exquisite tuning, can signify brutality and anarchist rebellion. Harley-Davidson owners are identified by their tattoos, leather clothing and piercing.

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(1992): 40–48 y V. Walsh, *Winning by Design: Technology, Product Design and International Competitiveness* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> M. J. Tomas, “Consumer Market Research: Does it have Validity? Some Postmodern Thoughts”. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* num 15(2) (1997): 56.

<sup>24</sup> Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things*. Russian Edition (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2015)

In advertising design, DDB used the countercultural philosophy to promote Volkswagen in the American market. A little car called the Beetle was ironically opposed to large American prestige cars. The irony and self-debasement in the adverts relied, however, on the high quality of the product and service. As a result, the 'people's car' found its buyers among young people with corresponding attitudes. This successful advertising campaign shows that although the 'spirit of times' determines the connotations of the project, supported by advertising, only certain objects can receive a symbolic status. An object of such status should, firstly, have a high quality, secondly, be unique compared to mainstream and, thirdly, be oriented on a certain social group. At the same time, the spirit of counterculture does not necessarily cheap marks things. In these examples, the cost of the motorcycle is high while the car is quite affordable, although the rebellious meaning of a too large series (car) and a too little one (bike) is similar.

### Design as a Marketing Tool

In the 1960s, lifestyle and personal items were a way of self-identification but they became marketing tools in the 1980s<sup>25</sup>. By the end of the 20th century, the quality of competing things became more equable, and the market was filled with a mass of functionally identical goods of sufficient quality. It was no longer possible to make a unique selling proposition, and, therefore, the role of advertising as a means of differentiating brands, labels and products increased. Advertising design, activated as a marketing tool, focuses on the emotionally charged selling propositions. Marketing resorts to positioning, creating an image, creativity, building trust in the brand, humor, entertainment, promoting a certain lifestyle; in other words, to anything, except *product features*. Sign simulation expands, but simulacra become possible, given the equal quality of industrial products.

However, in marketing wars, communicative design has always occupied a leading place as a way to visualize a legend, a mainstream mythology or a story: the consumers have already seen wars of sodas, cigarettes, hamburgers, sneakers, etc.<sup>26</sup>. It is indicative that in the post-industrial society design as a marketing tool comes to completely ignore the differences of the goods. Such is the power of the advertising image and designer brand. An illustrative example to this is the global ad campaigns for denim by Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren, which engaged the same master of visual myths Bruce Weber to develop the competing concepts. In the advertising features, jeans differed not in quality or cut, but in image and label. For Calvin Klein the photographer used the sexual appeal hinting to depravity, and for Ralph Lauren, images of sports lifestyle with a languid erotic undertone. Thus, the difference between the two products was served as purely symbolic.

In the conditions of growth and differentiation of symbolic consumption, marketing methods resort to imposing high exchange value, based on the myth of luxurious and wealthy lifestyle. Let us take N.W. Ayer & Son's ad campaign for De Beers 'A Diamond is forever' as an example. The campaign was based on the idea to sell luxury to women through men. It portrayed men as noble conquerors who bring diamonds to their princesses. This legend, supported up to now, artificially raised the cost of diamonds, making them a way to demonstrate the social superiority for women. It was not the diamond that was sold, but status, prestige and luxury.

<sup>25</sup> B. Hillier, *The style of the century*. Russian edition (Moscow: slovo, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Al. Ries and Jack Trout, *Marketing Warfare*. Russian Edition (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2007).

Another example of marketing ploy, aimed at an artificial addition of exchange value, is a *tourbillon* in watches. In terms of engineering, *tourbillon*, designed for regulating a watch escapement, is recognized as Abraham Breguet's mistake. Used in wristwatches, the 'whirlwind' mechanism is witty, but not required to improve a time-measuring accuracy, and it consumes more energy than the spring. Modern micro-fabrication techniques helped reduce the number of its parts to a minimum, and the cost of watches dropped sharply but no one would buy them. Only when a prohibitively high price was set on watches with *tourbillon*, they began to sell. Thus, the object, signifying status, acquired a high exchange value at a low cost and technological redundancy<sup>27</sup>. Apparently, these examples confirm the thought that "use value no longer appears anywhere in the system. The determining logic of exchange value is, however, ubiquitous as ever"<sup>28</sup>. Such marketing ploys are parasitic. They are possible in the collection of really high-quality, exclusive objects with a high use value. Connotations, arising in relation to designed objects, are latent, diffusive and aggressive—due to the dominant ideology; they seek to suppress and supplant the signs of the denotative system<sup>29</sup>. Such situation is supported by the myth of exclusive objects and brands as indicators of wealth and status of the owner.

### The Problem of Meaning in Post-Industrial Society

The postindustrial stage coincides with the transition from modern to postmodern. The completion of modernity is marked by the devaluation of such concepts as progress, education, history, development and growth<sup>30</sup>. The marketing approach still exploits the thirst for novelty, and with their love for changes consumers should receive at least an illusion of them<sup>31</sup> (However, the vector of progress loses its meaning, for we are stuck between the past and the future. The world is overloaded with objects and information flows, and the culture appears to be just as a hypertext embodying past experiences where everything has been already said. Accordingly, industrial design generates new accents as compared to mass market goods, styling, design of luxury items and countercultural rioting of the past. The old landmarks are changing. The overproduction of sign-objects creates an impression that an individual, buying objects with labels, can construct his own appearance himself and such consumption allegedly erases differences in social status<sup>32</sup>. The question "what do we need?" is no longer asked; it is replaced with "what else would we like?" The correct answer to the questions about the purpose of objects is not technical, but semantic.

In such hypertext environment, the problems of semantics are solved by playing upon the past and quoting it, by combining innovative technologies and fantasies. On the one hand, the past is cited, and on the other hand, entertaining is required. Advertising generates 'creative' content that surprises and shocks. Such advertising is consumed in and of itself, stimulating daydreaming and creating a thirst for an unusual and trendy lifestyle. New adage "Form follows emotion" is promoted as one of the principles of industrial design. It is assumed that objects and images should be intimate to a person. First, Anti-design or Radical movement, which originated in Italy, and then Studio Alchymia (1980) and the Memphis Group rejected the boredom of functionalism and offered the extravagant effects

<sup>27</sup> P. Obratsov and A. Savin, *The secret history of things* (Moscow: knizhnyklub 36.6, 2007)

<sup>28</sup> J. Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo: Telos press Ltd, 1972/1981)

<sup>29</sup> L. Elmslev, "Prolegomena to the theory of language", *Novoye v lingvistike*, num 1 (1960): 264–389.

<sup>30</sup> Goran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945–2000* (London, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 1995)

<sup>31</sup> G. Nelson, *Problems of design*. Russian edition (Moscow: iskustvo, 1971)

<sup>32</sup> R. Bocoock, *Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1993)



of pop design, kitsch and counterculture. Then, there appeared high-tech, post-industrialism, deconstruction and other movements. The diversity of small series and the embodiment of emotional impressions were seeking approval. Such design is created to stimulate dreams and aesthetic tastes of the consumer. For example, Philippe Starck thinks about the opportunity to embody the person's dream in the object rather than about the technical and commercial components of design<sup>33</sup>.

However, the design of semantic objects implies not strict symbolism, but a *game, irony, pastish*. The irony allows looking at the world of banal objects from a different angle, to experience joy or surprise. Irony, metaphor, humor, style evoke mixed feelings, being only some of the properties that make a product go beyond its functional, formal qualities<sup>34</sup>. This approach expresses the postmodern principle 'Form swallows function.' Objects are designed for the sake of an emotional reaction; they can be beautiful, witty, intricate, but also rude, banal and spiteful<sup>35</sup>. Design items by Ettore Sottsass, such as Tahiti lamp (1981) and Carlton bookcase (1981), Philippe Starck, such as Juicy Salif squeezer (1990), Hot Bertaa kettle (1987), Mademoiselle chair (2004), and L'Air du Temps perfume bottle (2009), and Gaetano Pesce, such as iconic Donna chair (1980), are distinguished by wit, sophistication and ability to give an emotional impression. This means designing an interesting scenery and deconstructing stereotypes, creating original objects of the urban environment for the sake of diversity and opportunities for self-identification. Symbolic consumption of unusual objects adds accents to the interior, makes our way of life special and attractive. Not only status and prestige are sold now, but also *aesthetic taste and originality*. Design develops the myth of comfort and identification through lifestyle by design projects, which are comparable to art and related to the cultural context in their semantics.

## Conclusion

The cultural-historical analysis of symbolic consumption from the point of view of design and language of communications shows that the utility of an object is determined by the functional purpose, while its use value, by the quality and complexity of manufacturing (including socially useful labor) and its exchange value, by the myths of wealth, comfort and prestige, brands, industrial design, packaging and advertising. The consumption is stimulated by the form of functionality and attractiveness. Being a sign, the form is involved in the context of cultural mythology and in the system of packaging and labeling signs and visualized advertising stories. Industrial design is a way of signifying objects and, therefore, it determines the exchange value of objects and also regulates the satisfaction of demand, stimulates symbolic consumption and production of sociocultural values.

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<sup>33</sup> S. Hodge, What makes great art: 80 masterpieces explained. Russian edition (Moscow: Sinbad, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> R. A. Morgan, "Positive Reaction". Journal KAK, num 2 (2010): 71.

<sup>35</sup> Deyan Sudjic, The Language of Things. Russian Edition (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2015).

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