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The System of Objects

Garap

If we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising. Let us imagine for the moment modern cities stripped of all their signs, with walls bare like a guiltless conscience [conscience vide]. And then GARAP appears. This single expression, GARAP, is inscribed on all the walls: pure signifier, without a signified, signifying itself. It is read, discussed, and interpreted to no end. Signified despite itself, it is consumed as sign. Then what does it signify, if not a society capable of generating such a sign? And yet despite its lack of significance it has mobilized a complete imaginary collectivity; it has become characteristic of the (w)hole of society. To some extent, people have come to “believe” in GARAP. We have seen in it the sign (indice) of the omnipotence of advertising. And one might think that it would suffice to associate the sign GARAP with a product for it to impose itself immediately. Yet, nothing is less certain, and the trick of advertisers has been, in effect, to conceal this, since individual resistances could express themselves on an explicit signified. Whereas consensus, even when ironic, establishes itself on faith in a pure sign. All of a sudden, the real signified of advertising appears in all its purity. Advertising, like GARAP, is mass society, which, with the aid of an arbitrary and systematic sign, induces receptivity, mobilizes consciousness, and reconstitutes itself in the very process as the collective.¹ Through advertising mass society and consumer society continuously ratify themselves.²

A new humanism?

Serial conditioning

In the themes of competition and “personalization” we are better able to see the underlying system of conditioning at work. In fact,
the ideology of competition, which under the sign of "freedom" was previously the golden rule of production, has now been transferred entirely to the domain of consumption. Thousands of marginal differences and an often formal differentiation of a single product through conditioning have, at all levels, intensified competition and created an enormous range of precarious freedoms. The latest such freedom is the random selection of objects that will distinguish any individual from others.\(^3\) In fact, one would think that the ideology of competition is here dedicated to the same process, and consequently to the same end, as it is in the field of production. If we can still view consumption as an independent activity (profession libérale), allowing the expression of personal preferences, while on the contrary production appears to be quite definitively planned, this is simply because the techniques of psychological conditioning (planification) are not as developed as those of economic planning.

We still want what others do not have. We are still at the competitive and heroic stage of product selection and use, at least in Western European societies (in the East the problem is deferred) where the systematic replacement and cyclical synchronization of models has not yet been established as it has in the United States.\(^4\) Psychological resistance? The force of tradition? More simply, the majority of people are still far from achieving the economic status where only one repertoire of models would be available as all commodities would comply with the same maximum standard; where diversity would matter less than possessing the "latest" model – the imperative fetish of social valorization. In the United States 90 per cent of the population experience no other desire than to possess what others possess. From year to year, consumer choices are focused en masse on the latest model which is uniformly the best. A fixed class of "normal" consumers has been created that coincides with the whole population. If we have not yet reached this stage in Europe, we can already clearly detect, according to the irreversible trend towards the American model, the ambiguity of advertising: it provokes us to compete; yet, through this imaginary competition, it already invokes a profound monotony, a uniformula (postulation uniforme), a devolution in the bliss of the consuming masses.\(^5\) Advertising tells us, at the same time: "Buy this, for it is like nothing else!" ("The meat of the elite, the cigarette of the happy few!" etc.); but also: "Buy this because everyone else is using it!"\(^7\) And this is in no way contradictory. We can imagine that each individual feels unique while resembling everyone else: all we need is a schema of collective and mythological projection – a model.\(^8\)

Hence, one could think that the ultimate goal of consumer society
not through any technocratic Machiavellianism, but through the ordinary structural play of competition) is the functionalization of the consumer and the psychological monopolization of all needs—a unanimity in consumption which at last would harmoniously conform to the complete consolidation and control of production.

Freedom by default

Everywhere today, in fact, the ideology of competition gives way to a "philosophy" of self-fulfillment. In a more integrated society individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own. The leitmotiv is no longer one of selective competition, it is personalization for all. At the same time, advertising has changed from a commercial practice to a theory of the praxis of consumption, a theory that crowns the whole edifice of society. We find this illustrated by American advertisers (Dichter, Martineau, etc.) The reasoning is simple:

1 Consumer society (objects, products, advertising), for the first time in history, offers the individual the opportunity for total fulfillment and liberation;
2 The system of consumption constitutes an authentic language, a new culture, when pure and simple consumption is transformed into a means of individual and collective expression. Thus, a "new humanism" of consumption is opposed to the "nihilism" of consumption.

The first issue: self-fulfillment. Dr Dichter, director of the Institute for Motivational Research, defines at once the problematics of this new man:

We are now confronted with the problem of permitting the average American to feel moral even as he flirts, even when he spends, or when he buys a second or third car. One of the fundamental problems of prosperity is to sanction and to justify its enjoyment, to convince people that making their life enjoyable is moral, and not immoral. One of the fundamental tasks of all advertising, and of every project destined to promote sales, should be to permit the consumer freely to enjoy life and confirm his right to surround himself with products that enrich his existence and make him happy.

Hence, through planned (dirigée) motivation we find ourselves in an era where advertising takes over the moral responsibility for all of
society and replaces a puritan morality with a hedonistic morality of pure satisfaction, like a new state of nature at the heart of hypercivilization. Dichter’s last sentence is ambiguous, however. Is the goal of advertising to liberate man’s resistance to happiness or to promote sales? Do advertisers wish to reorganize society in relation to satisfaction, or in relation to profit? “No,” answers Bleustein-Blanchet (Preface to Packard’s The Hidden Persuaders), “motivation research does not threaten the freedom of individuals and in no way impinges on the individual’s right to be rational or irrational.” There is too much honesty in these words, or perhaps too much cunning. Dichter is more clear. What we have are conceded freedoms: “To permit the consumer . . .” we must allow men to be children without being ashamed of it. “Free to be oneself” in fact means: free to project one’s desires onto produced goods. “Free to enjoy life” means: free to regress and be irrational, and thus adapt to a certain social organization of production. This sales “philosophy” is in no way encumbered by paradox. It advertises a rational goal (to enlighten people about their wants) and scientific methods, in order to promote irrational behavior in man (to accept being only a complex of immediate drives and to be satisfied with their satisfaction). Even drives are dangerous however, and the neo-sorcerers of consumption are careful not to liberate people in accordance with some explosive end state of happiness. They only offer the resolution of tensions, that is to say, a freedom by default: “Every time a tension differential is created, which leads to frustration and action, we can expect a product to overcome this tension by responding to the aspirations of the group. Then the product has a chance of success.” The goal is to allow the drives that were previously blocked by mental determinants (instances) (taboo, superego, guilt) to crystallize on objects, concrete determinants where the explosive force of desire is annulled and the ritual repressive function of social organization is materialized. The freedom of existence that pits the individual against society is dangerous. But the freedom to possess is harmless, since it enters the game without knowing it. As Dr Dichter claims, this freedom is a moral one. It is even the ultimate in morality, since the consumer is simultaneously reconciled with himself and with the group. He becomes the perfect social being. Traditional morality only required that the individual conform to the group; advertising “philosophy” requires that they now conform to themselves, and that they resolve their own conflicts. In this way it invests him morally as never before. Taboos, anxieties, and neuroses, which made the individual a deviant and an outlaw, are lifted at the cost of a regression in the security of objects, thus
reinforcing the images of the Father and the Mother. The irrationality of drives increasingly more “free” at the base will go hand in hand with control increasingly more restricted at the top.

A new language?

A second issue: does the object/advertising system form a language? The idealist-consumerist philosophy is based on the substitution of lived and conflictual human relations with “personalized” relations to objects. According to Pierre Martineau, “Any buying process is an interaction between the personality of the individual and the so-called ‘personality’ of the product itself.” We make believe that products are so differentiated and multiplied that they have become complex beings, and consequently purchasing and consumption must have the same value as any human relation. But precisely: is there an active syntax? Do objects instruct needs and structure them in a new way? Conversely, do needs instruct new social structures through the mediation of objects and their production? If this is the case, we can speak of a language. Otherwise, this is nothing more than a manager’s cunning idealism.

Structure and demarcation: the brand

The act of buying is neither a lived nor a free form of exchange. It is a preconditioned activity where two irreducible systems confront each other. At the level of the individual, with his or her needs, conflicts, and negativity, the system is fluid and disconnected. At the level of products, in all of their positivity, the system is codified, classified, discontinuous, and relatively integrated. This is not interaction but rather the forced integration of the system of needs within the system of products. Of course, together they constitute a system of signification, and not merely one of satisfaction. But a syntax is necessary for there to be “language”: the objects of mass consumption merely form a repertoire. Let me explain.

At the stage of artisanal production objects reflect the contingent and singular character of needs. While the two systems are adapted to one another they are no better integrated since they depend on the relative coherence of needs, which are fluid and contingent: there is no objective technological (technique) progress. Since the beginning of the industrial era, manufactured goods have acquired coherence from technological organization (l’ordre technique) and from the economic structure. The system of needs has become less integrated
than the system of objects; the latter imposes its own coherence and thus acquires the capacity to fashion an entire society.\textsuperscript{16} We could add that “the machine has replaced the unlimited series of variables (objects ‘made to measure’ in accordance with needs) with a limited number of constants.”\textsuperscript{17} Certainly we can identify the premises of a language in this transformation: internal structuration, simplification, transition to the limited and discontinuous, constitution of technemes and the increasing convergence of these technemes. If the artisanal object is at the level of speech (parole), industrial technology institutes a set of expressions (langue). But a set of expressions (langue) is not language (langage):\textsuperscript{18} it is not the concrete structure of the automobile engine that is expressed but rather the form, color, shape, the accessories, and the “social standing” of the object. Here we have the tower of Babel: each item speaks its own idiom. Yet at the same time, through calculated differences and combinatorial variations, serial production demarcates significations, establishes a repertoire and creates a lexicon of forms and colors in which recurrent modalities of “speech” can be expressed: nevertheless, is this language? This immense paradigm lacks a true syntax. It neither has the rigorous syntax of the technological level, nor the loose syntax of needs: floating from one to the other like an extensive repertoire, reduced, at the level of the quotidian, to an immense combinatorial matrix of types and models, where incoherent needs are distributed (ventiler) without any reciprocal structuration occurring. Needs disappear into products which have a greater degree of coherence. Parceled out and discontinuous, needs are inserted arbitrarily and with difficulty into a matrix of objects. Actually, the world of objects is overwhelmed by the absolute contingency of the system of individual needs. But this contingency is in some way indexed, classified, and demarcated by objects: it can therefore be directed (and this is the system’s real objective on the socioeconomic level).

If the industrial technological order is capable of shaping our society it is, in a way that is contradictory, a function of society’s coherence and incoherence: through its structural (technological) coherence “at the top;” and through the astructural (yet directed) incoherence of the process of product commercialization and the satisfaction of needs “at the base.” We can see that language, because it is actually neither consumed nor possessed by those who speak it, still maintains the possibility of the “essential” and of a syntax of exchange (the structuration of communication). The object/advertising system, however, is overwhelmed by the “inessential” and by a destructured world of needs; it is content to satisfy those needs in
their detail, without ever establishing any new structures of collective exchange.

Martineau adds: “There is no simple relationship between kinds of buyers and kinds of cars, however. Any human is a complex of many motives … which may vary in countless combinations. Nevertheless the different makes and models are seen as helping people give expression to their own personality dimensions.”¹⁹ He goes on to illustrate this “personalization” with a few examples.

The conservative, in choosing and using a car, wishes to convey such ideas as dignity, reserve, maturity, seriousness … Another definite series of automotive personalities is selected by the people wanting to make known their middle-of-the-road moderation, their being fashionable … Further along the range of personalities are the innovators and the ultramoderns …”²⁰

No doubt Martineau is right: it is in this way that people define themselves in relation to objects. But this also shows that it is not a language, but rather a gamut of distinguishing criteria more or less arbitrarily indexed on a gamut of stereotyped personalities. It is as if the differential system of consumption significantly helped to distinguish:

1 Within the consumer, categories of needs which now have but a distant relation with the person as a living being;
2 Within society, categories or “status groups,” recognizable in a specific collection of objects. The hierarchicised gamuts of objects and products play exactly the same role as the set of distinguishing values played in previous times: the foundation of group morality.

On both levels, there is solicitation, coerced grouping and categorization of the social and personal world based on objects, developing into a hierarchal repertoire without syntax; that is, into a system of classification, and not a language. It is as if, through the demarcation of the social, and not by a dialectic, an imposed order was created, and through this order, for each group, a kind of objective future (materialized in objects): in short, a grid in which relations become rather impoverished. The euphoric and wily “motivation” philosophers would like to persuade themselves and others that the reign of the object is still the shortest path to freedom. They offer as proof the spectacular mélange of needs and satisfactions, the abundance of choice, and the festival of supply and demand whose effervescence can provide the illusion of culture. But let us not be fooled: objects are categories of objects which quite
tyrannically induce *categories of persons*. They undertake the policing of social meanings, and the significations they engender are controlled. Their proliferation, simultaneously arbitrary and coherent, is the best vehicle for a social order, equally arbitrary and coherent, to materialize itself effectively under the sign of affluence.

The concept of "brand," the principal concept of advertising, summarizes well the possibilities of a "language" of consumption. All products (except perishable foods) are offered today as a specific acronym: each product "worthy of the name" has a brand name (which at times is substituted for the thing itself: Frigidaire or Xerox). The function of the brand name is to signal the product; its secondary function is to mobilize connotations of affect:

Actually, in our highly competitive system, few products are able to maintain any technical superiority for long. They must be invested with overtones to individualize them; they must be endowed with richness of associations and imagery; they must have many levels of meaning, if we expect them to be top sellers, if we hope that they will achieve the emotional attachment which shows up as brand loyalty.²¹

The psychological restructuration of the consumer is performed through a single word – Philips, Olida, General Motors – a word capable of summing up both the diversity of objects and a host of diffuse meanings. Words of synthesis summarizing a synthesis of affects: that is the miracle of the "psychological label." In effect this is the only language in which the object speaks to us, the only one it has invented. Yet, this basic lexicon, which covers walls and haunts consciences, is strictly syntactic: diverse brands follow one another, are juxtaposed and substituted for one another without an articulation or transition. It is an erratic lexicon where one brand devours the other, each living for its own endless repetition. This is undoubtedly the most impoverished of languages: full of signification and empty of meaning. It is a language of signals. And the "loyalty" to a brand name is nothing more than the conditioned reflex of a controlled affect.

But is it not a beneficial thing, our philosophers object, to tap into deep motives (*forces profondes*) (in order to reintegrate them within the impoverished system of labels)? Liberate yourself from censorship! Overcome your superego! Take courage in your desires! Yet, are we actually tapping into these deep motives in order to articulate them in language? Does this system of signification give meaning to presently hidden aspects of the individual, and if so, to which meanings? Let us listen once again to Martineau:
Naturally it is better to use acceptable, stereotyped terms ... This is the very essence of metaphor ... If I ask for a "mild" cigarette or a "beautiful" car, while I can't define these attributes literally, I still know that they indicate something desirable ... The average motorist isn't sure at all what "octane" in gasoline actually is ... But he does know vaguely that it is something good. So he orders "high-octane" gasoline, because he desires this essential quality behind the meaningless surface jargon.22

In other words, the discourse of advertising only arouses desire in order to generalize it in the most vague terms. "Deep motives," rephrased in their simplest expression, are indexed on an institutionalized code of connotations. And in fact, "choice" only confirms the collusion between this moral order and my most profound whims (velleités): this is the alchemy of the "psychological label."

The stereotyped evocation of "deep motives" is simply equivalent to censorship. The ideology of personal fulfillment, the triumphant illogicality of drives cleansed of guilt (deculpabilisées), is nothing more than a tremendous endeavor to materialize the superego. It is a censor, first of all, that is "personalized" in the object. The philosophers of consumption may well speak of "deep motives" as the immediate possibilities of happiness which need only be liberated. But the unconscious is conflictual and, in so far as advertising mobilizes it, it is mobilized as conflict. Advertising does not liberate drives. Primarily, it mobilizes phantasms which block these drives. Hence, the ambiguity of the object, in which individuals never have the opportunity to surpass themselves, but can only re-collect themselves in contradiction, in their desires and in the forces that censor their desires. We have here a general schema of gratification/frustration:23 under the formal resolution of tensions and an incomplete regression, the object serves as a vehicle for the perpetual rechannelling of conflicts. This could possibly be a definition of the specific form of contemporary alienation: in the process of consumption internal conflicts or "deep drives" are mobilized and alienated in the same way as labor power is in the process of production.

Nothing has changed, or rather it has: restrictions in personal fulfillment no longer manifest themselves through repressive laws, or norms of obedience. Censorship operates through "unconstrained" behaviors (purchasing, choice consumption), and through spontaneous investment. In a way, it is internalized in pleasure (jouissance).
A universal code: social standing

The object/advertising system constitutes a system of signification but not language, for it lacks an active syntax: it has the simplicity and effectiveness of a code. It does not structure the personality; it designates and classifies it. It does not structure social relations: it demarcates them in a hierarchical repertoire. It is formalized in a universal system of recognition of social statuses: a code of “social standing.”

Within “consumer society,” the notion of status, as the criterion which defines social being, tends increasingly to simplify and to coincide with the notion of “social standing.” Yet “social standing” is also measured in relation to power, authority, and responsibility. But in fact: There is no real responsibility without a Rolex watch! Advertising refers explicitly to the object as a necessary criterion: You will be judged on ... An elegant woman is recognized by ... etc. Undoubtedly objects have always constituted a system of recognition (repérage), but in conjunction with, and often in addition to, other systems (gestural, ritual, ceremonial, language, birth status, code of moral values, etc.) What is specific to our society is that other systems of recognition (reconnaissance) are progressively withdrawing, primarily to the advantage of the code of “social standing.” Obviously this code is more or less determinant given the social and economic level; nevertheless, the collective function of advertising is to convert us all to the code. Since it is sanctioned by the group the code is moral, and every infraction is more or less charged with guilt. The code is totalitarian; no one escapes it: our individual flights do not negate the fact that each day we participate in its collective elaboration. Not believing in the code requires at least that we believe that others sufficiently believe in it so that we can enter the game, even if only ironically. Even actions that resist the code are carried out in relation to a society that conforms to it. This code has positive aspects, however:

1. It is no more arbitrary than any other code: the manifestation of value, even for ourselves, is the car we periodically trade in, the neighborhood we live in, and the multitude of objects that surround us and distinguish us from others. But that’s not all. Have not all codes of values always been partial and arbitrary (moral codes to begin with)?

2. The code is a form of socialization, the total secularization of signs of recognition: it is therefore involved in the – at least formal – emancipation of social relations. Objects do not only facilitate
material existence through their proliferation as commodities, but, generalized into signs of recognition, they facilitate the reciprocation of status among people. The system of social standing, at least, has the advantage of rendering obsolete the rituals of caste or of class and, generally, all preceding (and internal) criteria of social discrimination.

3 The code establishes, for the first time in history, a *universal* system of signs and interpretation (*lecture*). One may regret that it supplants all others. But conversely, it could be noted that the progressive decline of all other systems (of birth, of class, of positions) – the extension of competition, the largest social migration in history, the ever-increasing differentiation of social groups, and the instability of languages and their proliferation – necessitated the institution of a clear, unambiguous, and universal code of recognition. In a world where millions of strangers cross each other daily in the streets the code of "social standing" fulfills an essential social function, while it satisfies the vital need of people to be always informed about one another.

Nevertheless:

1 This universalization, this efficiency is obtained at the price of a radical simplification, of an impoverishment, and of an almost irrevocable regression in the "language" of value: "All individuals are described in terms of their objects." Coherence is obtained through the formation of a combinatorial matrix or a repertoire: hence a functional language is established, but one that is symbolically and structurally impoverished.

2 The fact that a system of interpretation (*lecture*) and recognition is today applied by everyone, or that value signs are completely socialized and objectified does not necessarily lead to true "democratization." On the contrary, it appears that the *constraint of a single referent only acts to exacerbate the desire for discrimination*. Within the very framework of this homogeneous system, we can observe the unfolding of an always renewed obsession with hierarchy and distinction. While the barriers of morality, of stereotypes, and of language collapse, new barriers and new exclusions are erected in the field of objects: a new morality of class, or caste, can now invest itself in the most material and most undeniable of things.

Society is not becoming any more transparent, even if today the code of "social standing" is in the process of constituting an immediately legible, universal structure of signification, one that
enables the fluid circulation of social representations within the group hierarchy. The code provides the image of a false transparency, of a false legibility of social relations, behind which the real structures of production and social relations remain illegible. A society would be transparent only if knowledge of the order of signification was also knowledge of the organization (ordre) of its structures and of social facts. This is not the case with the object/advertising system, which only offers a code of significations that is always complicit and opaque. In addition, if the code’s coherence provides a formal sense of security, that is also the best means for it to extend its immanent and permanent jurisdiction over all individuals in society.

**Conclusion: towards a definition of “consumption”**

I would like to conclude the analysis of our relation to objects as a systematic process, which was developed on different levels, with a definition of “consumption,” since it is here that all the elements of an actual practice in this domain converge.

In fact we can conceive of consumption as a characteristic mode of industrial civilization on the condition that we separate it fundamentally from its current meaning as a process of satisfaction of needs. Consumption is not a passive mode of assimilation (absorption) and appropriation which we can oppose to an active mode of production, in order to bring to bear naive concepts of action (and alienation). From the outset, we must clearly state that consumption is an active mode of relations (not only to objects, but to the collectivity and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole cultural system is founded.

We must clearly state that material goods are not the objects of consumption: they are merely the objects of need and satisfaction. We have all at times purchased, possessed, enjoyed, and spent, and yet not “consumed.” “Primitive” festivities, the prodigality of the feudal lord, or the luxury of the nineteenth-century bourgeois – these are not acts of consumption. And if we are justified in using this term for contemporary society, it is not because we are better fed, or that we assimilate more images and messages, or that we have more appliances and gadgets at our disposal. Neither the quantity of goods, nor the satisfaction of needs is sufficient to define the concept of consumption: they are merely its preconditions.

Consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of “affluence.” It is not defined by the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, nor by the visual and oral substance of
images and messages, but in the organization of all this as signifying substance. Consumption is the virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse. Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is a systematic act of the manipulation of signs.

The traditional object-symbol (tools, furniture, even the house), mediator of a real relation or of a lived (veçue) situation, clearly bears the trace, in its substance and in its form, of the conscious and unconscious dynamics of this relation, and is therefore not arbitrary. This object, which is bound, impregnated, and heavy with connotation, yet actualized (vivant) through its relation of interiority and transitivity with the human gesture or fact (collective or individual), is not consumed. In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, a-signed arbitrarily and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes “personalized,” and enters in the series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference.

The conversion of the object to a systematized status of signs entails a concomitant modification in the human relation, which becomes a relation of consumption. That is to say, human relations tend to be consumed (consommer) (in the double sense of the word: to be “fulfilled,” and to be “annulled”) in and through objects, which become the necessary mediation and, rapidly, the substitutive sign, the alibi, of the relation.

We can see that what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself—signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time—it is the idea of the relation that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it.

This is no longer a lived relation: it is abstracted and annulled in an object-sign where it is consumed.

At all levels, the status of the relation/object is orchestrated by the order of production. All of advertising suggests that the lived and contradictory relation must not disturb the “rational” order of production. It is to be consumed like all the rest. In order to be integrated it must be “personalized.” We rejoin here, in its conclusions, the formal logic of commodities analyzed by Marx: needs, affects, culture, knowledge—all specifically human capacities are integrated in the order of production as commodities, and materialized as productive forces in order to be sold. Today every desire, plan, need, every passion and relation is abstracted (or
materialized) as sign and as object to be purchased and consumed. For example, a couple’s ultimate objective becomes the consumption of objects that previously symbolized the relation.²⁵

The beginning of Georges Perec’s novel *Les Choses: a Story of the Sixties* reads:

The eye, at first, would glide over the gray rug of a long corridor, high and narrow. The wall would be cabinets, whose copper fittings would gleam. Three engravings . . . would lead to a leather curtain, hanging from large rings of black-veined wood, that a simple gesture would suffice to slide back . . . [Then] It would be a living room, about twenty-one feet long and nine feet wide. On the left, in a sort of alcove, a large couch of worn black leather would be flanked by two book cases in pale wild-cherry wood, on which books would be piled helter-skelter. Above the divan a nautical chart would run the whole length of the wall panel. Beyond a little low table, under a silk prayer rug attached to the wall with three copper nails with large heads, and balancing the leather hanging, another divan, perpendicular to the first, upholstered in light brown velvet, would lead to a small piece of furniture on high legs, lacquered in dark red, with three shelves that would hold bric-a-brac; agates and stone eggs, snuffboxes, jade ashtrays, [etc.] . . . Farther on . . . small boxes and records, next to a closed phonograph of which only four machine-turned steel knobs would be visible . . .²⁶

Clearly nothing here has any symbolic value, despite the dense and voluptuous nostalgia of the “interior” decor. It only suffices to compare this description with Balzac’s description of an interior to see that here human relations are not inscribed in things: everything is sign, pure sign. Not a single object has presence or history, and yet everything is full of reference: Oriental, Scottish, early American, etc.²⁷ All these objects *merely possess a characteristic singularity*; in difference (their mode of referentiality) they are abstract, and are combined precisely by virtue of this abstraction. We are in the domain (*univers*) of consumption.²⁸

The rest of the story provides a glimpse of the function of such an object/sign system: far from symbolizing a relationship, these objects are external to it in their continual “reference.” They describe the absence of a relationship, which everywhere can be read in the two partners’ absence to one another. Jerome and Sylvia do not exist as a couple: their only reality is “Jerome-and-Sylvia,” as sign in pure complicity with the system of objects which signifies it. Which is not to say that objects are mechanically substituted for an absent relation, to fill a void, no; they *describe* the void, the locus of the relation, in a development which actually is a way of not
experiencing (vivre) it, while always referring to the possibility of an experience (except in the case of total regression). The relation is not absorbed in the absolute positivity of objects, it is articulated on objects, as if through so many material points of contact on a chain of signification. In most cases however, this signifying configuration of objects is impoverished, schematic, and bound, where the idea of a relation, unavailable to experience, merely repeats itself over and over again. Leather couch, phonograph, bric-a-brac, jade ashrays: it is the idea of a relation that is signified in these objects, “consumed” in them, and consequently annulled as a lived relation.

This defines consumption as a systematic and total idealist practice, which far exceeds our relations to objects and relations among individuals, one that extends to all manifestations (registres) of history, communication and culture. Thus, the need for culture is alive: but in the collector’s book or in the dining room lithograph; only the idea is consumed. The revolutionary imperative is alive, but unable to realize itself in practice; it is consumed in the idea of Revolution. As idea, Revolution is in fact eternal, and will be eternally consumable in the same way as any other idea. All ideas, even the most contradictory, can coexist as signs within the idealist logic of consumption. Revolution is signified, then, in a combinatorial terminology, in a lexicon of immediate terms, where it is presented as fulfilled, where it is “consumed.”

In the same way, objects of consumption constitute an idealist lexicon of signs, an elusive materiality to which the project of lived existence is referred. This can also be read in Perec:

It sometimes seemed to them that a whole life could go harmoniously by between these book-lined walls, among these objects so perfectly domesticated that the two of them would end up believing that they had been forever created for their own use alone . . . But they would not feel themselves tied down by them; on certain days they would go looking for adventure. Nothing they planned would be impossible.

But it is precisely announced in the conditional, and the book renounces it: there are no longer any projects; there are only objects. Or rather, the project has not disappeared: it is satisfied in its realization as a sign located in the object. The object of consumption quite precisely is that in which the project is “re-signed.”

This suggests that there are no limits to consumption. If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is
not the case: we want to consume more and more. This compulsion
to consume is not the consequence of some psychological determinant
("qui a bu boira?") etc., nor is it simply the power of emulation. If
consumption appears to be irrepressible, this is precisely because it
is a total idealist practice which has no longer anything to do (beyond
a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality
principle; it becomes energized in the project that is always dissatisfied
[deçu] and implicit in the object. The project, made immediate in
the sign, transfers its essential dynamics onto the systematic and
indefinite possession of object-signs of consumption. Consequently,
it must transcend itself, or continuously reiterate itself in order to
remain what it is: a reason for living. The very project of life,
segmented, dissatisfied, and signified, is reclaimed and annulled in
successive objects. Hence, the desire to “moderate” consumption or
to establish a normalizing network of needs is naive and absurd
morality.

At the heart of the project from which emerges the systematic and
indefinite process of consumption is a frustrated desire for totality.
Object-signs are equivalent to each other in their ideality and can
proliferate indefinitely: and they must do so in order continuously
to ful-fill the absence of reality. It is ultimately because consumption
is founded on a lack that it is irrepressible.

Notes

1 In this tautological system of recognition, each advertising sign is already
testimony in itself, since it always refers to itself at the same time as an
advertisement.

2 Is this not to some extent the function of the totemic system according
to Lévi-Strauss? The social order offers itself the vision of its own lasting
immanence in the arbitrary totemic sign. Advertising would thus be the
result of a cultural system which has reverted (in the gamut of “brand
names”) to a poverty of sign codes and archaic systems.

3 The term competition (concurrence) is ambiguous: that which “com-
petes” (concour) at the same time rivals and converges. It is through
relentless rivalry that one “concurs” (concourt) most assuredly towards
the same point. At a certain level of technological development
(particularly in the United States) all objects of one category become
equivalent. The imposition of creating distinctions only forces them
every year to change as a group, and according to the same norms. In
addition, the extreme freedom of choice imposes on everyone the ritual
constraint of owning the same things.
In the United States, the essentials — automobiles, refrigerators — have a tendency to last a predictable and mandatory period of one year (three for the TV, a little longer for the apartment). The norms of social standing eventually metabolize the object. They impose a metabolism of an increasingly rapid cycle, which is far from nature’s cycles, and yet at times curiously coincides with ancient seasonal ones. It is this new cycle, and the need to observe it, which today establishes the genuine morality of the American citizen.

The phrase, “une involution dans le sens bienheureux de la masse consomatrice,” has a dynamics created by the imagery of the word “involution” (movement from heterogeneity to homogeneity) and by the duality of the word “sens” (both “meaning” and “direction”). [Trans.]

Original in English.

This is perfectly summarized in the ambiguity of the word “you” (vous) in advertising, for example in: “Guinness is good for you.” Is this a particular form of politeness (hence personalizing) or an address to the collectivity? “You” singular or “you” plural? Both. It is each individual to the extent that he or she resembles all others: in fact, the gnomic you (vous) = they (on). (Cf. Leo Spitzer, *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, 1964, p. 961).

When it was fashionable to wear one’s hair à la Bardot, each girl in style was unique in her own eyes, since she never compared herself to the thousand other similar girls, but each to Bardot herself, the sublime archetype from whom originality flowed. To a certain extent, this is not stranger than having four or five Napoleons in the same asylum. Consciousness here is qualified, not in the Real relation, but in the Imaginary.

Ernest Dichter is the author of *The Strategy of Desire* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960). Pierre Martineau is the author of *Motivation in Advertising: Motives that make People Buy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1957). Baudrillard is not consistent or logical in his supply of references. Since we demand this of him in an English translation I have imposed coherence by inserting and extracting the reference from the text. [Trans.]

The quotation appears to be from the French edition. Unless otherwise noted quotations from original English texts or existing translations of French texts have been used. [Trans.]


Taking up the Marxian schema of “On the Jewish Question,” the individual in consumer society is free as consumer and is only free as such — this is only a formal emancipation.

Dichter’s English version reads as follows:

Whenever a person in one socioeconomic category aspires to a different category, a ‘tension differential’ is developed within him and this leads to
frustration and action. Where a product promises to help a group overcome this tension, achieve its level of aspiration in whatever area it may fall, that product has a chance of success. (The Strategy of Desire, p. 84) [Trans.]

14 Martineau, Motivation in Advertising, p. 73.

15 Other more archaic methods exist which personalize the purchase: bartering, buying second-hand, [shopping] (patience and play), etc. These are archaic for they assume a passive product and an active consumer. In our day the whole initiative of personalization is transferred to advertising.


18 The tri-logy parole/langue/langage finds no unmediated (immediate) articulation in English: Parole as speech/word; langue as specific language (e.g. Serbo-Croatian); and langage as language (e.g. the structure of language). I have translated langue in this sentence (“Mais langue n'est pas langage”) as “set of expressions” to keep in line with Baudrillard’s argumentation. [Trans.]

19 Motivation in Advertising, p. 75.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid, p. 50.

22 Ibid, p. 100.

23 In fact, we are giving too much credit to advertising by comparing it with magic: the nominalist lexicon of alchemy has already in itself something of an actual language, structured by a research and interpretive (déchiffrement) praxis. The nominalism of the “brand name,” however, is purely immanent and fixated (figé) by an economic imperative.

24 The word consommer means consumed (therefore annulled) and consummated (therefore fulfilled) as Baudrillard is pointing out. I was tempted to present it hyphenated, consume-consume, to maintain the duality but found it awkward. In the argument that follows the reader will supplement a reading with this in memory/mind. [Trans.]

25 Thus, in the United States couples are encouraged to exchange wedding rings every year [sic], and to “signify” their relation through gifts and purchases made “together.”


27 Original in English. [Trans.]

28 In G. Perec’s description of the “interior,” the objects are, through fashion, transcendent, and not objects of a “series.” A total cultural constraint, a cultural terrorism, dominates this interior. But this has little effect on the system of consumption itself.

29 The etymology is rather illuminating: “Everything is consumed” = “everything is accomplished” and of course “everything is destroyed.”
The Revolution is consumed in the idea of Revolution means that the Revolution is (formally) accomplished and abolished: what is given as realized is, henceforth, immediately consumable.