



The Italian Academy Wednesday Seminar, 19 November 2003

Style, difference and uniqueness

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“Sitting on a work of art,
working with a work of art, using a
work of art for the needs of
practise – that is cannibalism ”
(Georg Simmel).

1. The power of style

With the term *stylization of daily life* I refer to that process by which a particular experience, one formerly limited to the sphere of art, invades the wider context of life. By virtue of stylization, any object, including the most banal objects of use, can gain an additional aesthetic value and be approached as a work of art. An interesting case is Design, with its capacity to transform even a coffee maker into a unique piece, and auratic (as we shall see more closely in the part 5 of this paper).



Sometimes, this phenomenon is also called the *aestheticization* of quotidian life, but this definition seems to me rather misleading. Stylization of life does not mean that everything has become art, or that art spreads its own alternative potential into the world of life, but, more to the point, that the peculiarities of every individual and of every culture can be *translated* into and communicated as *differences in style*. The “aesthetic experience” does not simply overflow into the quotidian but also intertwines itself with the lifestyles and the *construction of the identity* of individuals or groups of individuals. In the wake of Simmel, I therefore prefer to speak of “stylization” understanding by my use of this term not only the aestheticization of commodities but also the fact that individuals are often induced to communicate their own identity through their clothes, comportment, gestures, as happens with designer label fashions, street styles, and also with the so-called “subcultures”, from punk to drag queens. Furthermore, I believe that stylization should be considered in relation to a new form of power that in Western modern societies regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise - a power that, as writes Foucault, “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday life”¹.

2. Styling and Re-Styling

Let us begin with the most obvious example: the stylization of commodities.

Between the late twenties and early thirties American industry—perhaps seeking to recover from the Depression—discovered the decisive role of styling in the commercial

¹ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 39 .



success of a product². Producers and advertisers began to theorize about the necessity of giving objects design, color, and beauty, as a sort of “added aesthetic value”³. One of the most widespread styles of those years was streamlining—that is, aerodynamic design, with its tear shapes, wings, and speed stripes that were meant to suggest motion. It was used in the design of all types of objects, from automobiles to toasters. In its reference to the magic of speed, this style was loosely inspired by Futurist poetics.

From that point the process was consolidated. But what is important for me to note is that this added value does not simply make objects more beautiful, and hence more seductive. It is also capable of making the consumer dissatisfied with the automobile he already owns, or with his old kitchen appliances, pushing him to replace them with newer and more attractive ones, just as a new trend in art makes preceding artistic forms seem pale and antiquated. This virtue of styling was immediately clear to manufacturers and advertisers. So-called “planned obsolescence” was a natural result of styling, almost a corollary.

Thus we find the appearance not simply of an aesthetic value, but of a particular sort of, which is peculiar to modernity, and which I shall call a *differential value*. Charged with an aesthetic value, objects of use suddenly became subject to the same “demon” impulse that, according to Baudelaire, drives both modern art and fashion to continually change their forms. Goods were also infused with the fascination of the ephemeral and the transitory. Products acquired, that is, that peculiar capacity for seduction that belongs to

² See Arthur J. Pulos, *American design ethic : a history of industrial design to 1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), and *The American design adventure, 1940-1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).



what is of the present, and stands out in its difference from what is of the past. The value of this *temporal difference* (and not simply the value of the beauty of the product) was, at least at the beginning, the most important aspect of the stylization of things. This process thus drew on daily life much more than the forms and contents of modern art. It also took from there its peculiar artistic logic, based on what Shklovsky called “differential sensations,” destined inevitably to become, sooner or later, zero.

Whenever we experience anything as a *deviation* from the ordinary, from the normal, from a certain guiding canon, we feel within us an emotion of a special nature, which is not distinguished in its kind from the emotions aroused in us by sensuous forms⁴.

Thus, the new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has now lost its *differential value*, because, conforming to the expectations of users, it has gradually become ordinary. This “perverse” logic, typical of modern art, was immediately extended to things. Industry, too, was driven to continually replace worn and faded forms, supplanting them with others that, if for a limited time, would again be capable of surprising. Obsolescence was not, therefore, purely an invention of the market. It was present in modern art from the beginning, and industry—similar in this way to the poetics of the avant-garde that kill off old ways of painting, of making poetry or writing novels—learned to use it for its own purposes and program.

This artistic logic, based on the transgression and replacement of the old, in the second half of the twentieth century more or less collapsed from saturation, both in art and

³ "The appeal of efficiency alone is nearly ended. Beauty is the natural and logical next step", Ernest Elmo Calkins (of Calkins-Holden Advertising) wrote in 1927, in an article entitled “Beauty, the New Business Tool” (in *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1927).



in stylized goods. Up to a certain point, we can recognize, even in industrial products, “generations,” or, one might almost say, “poetics,” following one another according to rhythms not unlike those of artistic movements. In automobile production, for example, the aerodynamic shapes were soon supplanted by others. And if one considers all of these shapes together, a sort of history of “substitutions” emerges, similar to what Shklovsky described in literary evolution. But, finally, here, too, replacement has yielded to “return,” to the very type of return toward which postmodern artistic sensibility tends, with its ironic retrieval or nostalgic quotation of passed-over forms—as one can see, for example, in the “historical” models of the Maggolino and the 600 Multiple, revisited and revived in, respectively, the Volkswagen Beetle and Fiat’s new Multipla.

Industrial design and styling are therefore appropriated not only by the modernist impulse toward the new but also by the mode of irony and quotation with which postmodern art has confronted the exhaustion of artistic logic based on the transgressive effect of innovation.

3. End of fashion, timeless differences

“It’s difficult to produce something new today,” an Italian designer said, introducing her new collection. “I prefer to get inspiration from the clothes of the past, to revisit styles of the past, reinterpret them using new materials.” The impossibility of the new—the postmodern credo—has thus become a commonplace even in the sphere of the production of goods.

⁴ Victor Shklovsky, *The Theory of Prose* (Dalkey Elmwood Park: Archive Press, 1990). pp. 20-21. Shklovsky says he is picking up from Khristiansen, *The Philosophy of Art* (Sankt Petersburg, 1911).



The *differential value* is in fact not necessarily produced by new, never before seen forms. Thanks to the revival, which is more an aesthetic than a market phenomenon, even what has been passed by can be a bearer of difference and reused again, as fashion—or, rather, as a style, a sort of timeless fashion frozen in a stylistic difference.

Revival, return, remake, retrieval, revisiting, reproposal, recycling, restyling, repackaging.... In the late eighties and most of the nineties, the strongest trend was that of reviving—by quoting, wearing, and consuming—signs that come from the past. In an epoch in which many things change and are consumed with extreme velocity, it may appear strange that we are so eager to return to the past, to the traces of our own history, in order to quote them, represent them, hybridize them. But it is precisely in this way that modernity, through that grand, melancholy elaboration that was the postmodern, has tried to react to its own “exhaustion”: an exhaustion that in art has lasted for almost a century by now, and has taken the form of a blockage, a sort of double bind in the face of history and tradition.

The same weariness is felt in industrial design and fashion: if culture is saturated, so is the market, and so we reuse forms and styles of the past, reinterpret them, revive the fifties, sixties, seventies... nothing really grows old, everything returns; nothing dies, and thus—one could also say—nothing is born.

Modern art and fashion have much in common. “Fashion [moda]” and “modern” have the same root in Romance languages. For Baudelaire fashion entered fully into modern art precisely as something ephemeral and relative to the age. Indeed, he considered the transitory, the fleeting to be “the second element” of beauty, whose first element is the



“eternal, invariable element”, and “without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation”⁵

But fashion today doesn't know any longer these rapid evolutions. It is, rather, fixed on interchangeable, relatively stable styles. Many stylists prefer a style of clothing that doesn't evolve, or evolves very little, as in Camper shoes, which are the same from one season to the next; in compensation the brand spreads, crosses into other sectors: perfumes, eyeglasses, household objects. “My dream,” Armani declared, “was to open a mall like the one in Milan, with a restaurant, a bookstore, a sushi bar, where, from jacket to teacup, you find the Armani style.” Thus fashion is transformed into a timeless fashion, and that is into style. As if through an implosion of history, styles are there, always different and always the same, with the infinite little alterations that are produced through repetition (as in remakes of movies). In synchrony with the postmodernist taste for quotation and the ironic reuse of obsolete forms and styles, styling has also begun to hunt in the storehouse of its own history—and openly becomes restyling. As has happened to literature and art in the late modern period, that have begun to be perceived as a fundamentally self-referential process (writing that goes back for difference to earlier writing, style that goes back through difference to other styles, etc.), so also styling has begun to be perceived as something that serves only to produce a differential value, and no longer conceals that it is, fundamentally, a restyling. Thus not only do the styles of the past return but restyling itself has gained in aesthetic dignity. No longer looked at disdainfully by designers and

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863. In *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London : Phaidon Press, 1995).



architects, it achieves a sort of relegitimatization: it no longer seems an operation of simple aesthetic repackaging (after the stylistic novelty of the object is worn out), but a way of *producing differences*, even at the cost of seeking them in the past—and not only our past but also that which is represented by “other” cultures.

4. The differential value of cultures

If in fact modern Western history appears blocked in its diachronic progress, cultures remain to be treated synchronously as differences. One may note in design, and also in fashion (what has already happened in the art of the avant-garde of the last century), a tendency to admit into the creative circle “other” traditions, made docilely present, inserted into the circle of a *coexistence without conflict*. If the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century were attracted by primitive art, if African sculpture influenced Cubist poetics—in an analogous but weakened manner, forms and techniques from non-Western cultures today offer impulses to design.

A bar in Chicago, designed by a Moroccan architect, reinterprets a Moroccan bar. An Italian designer in New York signs silk scarves and purses made in India using traditional techniques and materials (in addition to taking advantage of low-cost manual labor) but rethought with Western creativity. Or antique Chinese and Thai furniture is imported to Europe to be resold according to an exotic idea of the antique trade. It is easy to recognize how diffuse the tendency is today to place cultural differences into the marketplace. An example being the collection Fibre Tibet, created by Zanone, that proposed a pullover in natural Yak wool made by Tibetan nomads as an “ethical



acquisition” for the winter of 2001. Within this particular object for sale there shines forth the differential, and auratic value of another tradition, far from modernity. The firm Alessi has opened a study center that organizes workshops in various parts of the world, with the declared intention of designing objects for the home based on the encounter between diverse cultures. Goods thus become “cultural subjects,” containers of memories”—to use the language of their publicity⁶—given value precisely by virtue of the experience that is assumed to be deposited in them. As what is being sold is above all the experience of a difference, among which the experience of a cultural difference.)

This trafficking with foreign cultures is also a part of restyling. “Other” objects or techniques enjoy, so to speak, a difference of origin. And this is introduced in communication, with all its differential value. Cultural difference is aestheticized but at the same time—one might say—anaestheticized. The market offers for sale cultural differences. Thus cultures reenter the general stylization: the economic undertaking becomes a real cultural industry not in Adorno’s sense of but in a more pregnant, anthropological sense.

5. The uniqueness of design

Many Italians, when they want to give a “special” gift, one that not only makes a good impression but also serves as a testimony to their own good taste, give something from Alessi. Alessi is a worldwide leader in the production of tableware, kitchen and home

⁶ As Alberto Alessi writes (*La fabbrica dei sogni. Alessi dal 1921*. Milano: Electa/Alessi, 1999, p. 102), the company’s program, called “Memory Containers,” arose from the following questions: “How does an object become a cultural subject? Typological exploration referred to the archetypes of presentation and the offering of food tied to the memory of a culture or a personal experience. This ‘Creole’ plan is an in-vitro clone of



products designed by the most renowned international architects and designers, such as Richard Meier, Michael Graves, Frank Gehry, Philippe Stark, Alighiero Boetti, Enzo Mari and so on. Here are a few items from its catalogue: “Mia” and “Tua” carafes by Mario Botta, service trays by Jasper Morrison; “dry cutlery” by Achille Castiglioni; “La cupola” espresso maker by Aldo Rossi; “sapper whistling kettle” by Richard Sapper.

Founded in 1921, the Alessi company was originally a laboratory of artisans for the production of articles for consumers’ homes. Then, from the 1950’s onward it slowly transformed itself into a “factory of Italian design” or a “Dream factory” as it preferred to describe itself in the catalogue for a show put on in diverse Italian museums. Titled *La fabbrica dei sogni* by Alberto Alessi, this book might be read as a sort of avant-garde *manifesto* that declares the program and the artistic intentions of the company. Here are some of its statements:

Alessi has “a utopic vision of multiple art”. It intends to give life to “a new commercial civilization that offers the mass consumer real artistic objects at a reasonable price”. Alessi’s objects are “art multiples” and at the same time very expressive “objects of affection” that one acquires as *style symbols*. And finally, it boasts to have introduced, since the 1950’s, “the concept of the author into the horizon of household articles”⁷. On these pronouncements alone one can already make a few observations. Let us take them under consideration one by one.

1. “Art multiples”, which is to say the objects of Alessi are replicas, they are mechanically reproduced, yet they are art.

what, in the course of real time, happens much more slowly as a result of the encounter between diverse cultures”.



2. “To offer to the mass consumer real artistic objects...”, which is to say these works of art, when compared to traditional ones, are able to meet the beholder in his own particular situation. Here, as Benjamin would say, “the accent is on the exhibitiv value of the work”⁸, whereas for traditional works of art the accent falls upon its cult value..

3. “Objects of affection”, which is to say endowed with a cult value. This claim of Alessi is perhaps the most remarkable. According to Benjamin, with mechanical reproduction exhibitiv value displaces the cult value of the work, i.e. it destroys its aura. But this does not seem to happen for the object of design. Notwithstanding the fact that it is industrially reproduced, it is also an object of affection that is not only bought, but acquired in the same way in which a *collector* acquires a work of art. He who acquires the work of design is in short, not only a consumer, but also a figure that, as Benjamin writes, “always retains some traces of the fetishist and who, by owing the work of art, shares in its ritual power”⁹. This, I believe, is one of the most important aspect of the stylization of daily life: not so much the fact that objects of everyday use, including commodities, can be considered as works of art, but rather the modification that follows in the relation between the consumer and the product. The former is not only transformed into a connoisseur, and capable as such to appreciate the aesthetic value of an object, but, more to the point, also into a particular kind of connoisseur, which is to say a collector. He is not simply expected

⁷ *La fabbrica dei sogni*, p.19 and 53.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936. English translation in *Illuminations.*, with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1988) p. 224.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.



to sense the artistic value of the merchandise, but to acquire it exactly as a fetishist would who, by owning the product, shares in its ritual power.

But how is it possible that the objects of design conserve a cult value, i.e. an “aura”, notwithstanding the fact that they are nothing more than replicas approachable by the mass? According to more common versions of Benjamin’s thought, this should be a contradiction.

In the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin defines aura as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be”¹⁰, in the very same pages in which he also describes the decay of aura because of the new techniques of reproduction. The most remarkable aspect of this essay, written in 1936, is in effect that the concept of aura was highlighted by Benjamin in order to be liquidated. It was coined to indicate “the eliminated element”, to name that “which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction”. The phenomenon of design would appear however to work against him: mechanical reproduction does not seem to have decayed that particular sensation of unrepeatable singularity which he called, and which we keep calling “aura” (we could also use another word, but that would only elude the problem).

Today, when one uses the word “aura” it is usually to say one of the following:

- 1.) The aura of the work of art was withered by mechanical reproduction.
- 2.) The aura survives as the fetish of commodities.

But if one looks a little deeper, these two statements are not in agreement with one another. If the aura survives in the commodity, it is evident that mechanical reproduction is



not enough to make it disappear. Is there anything which is more reproducible than Nike gym shoes, to give a very simple example of a commodity-fetish? One can assert that Benjamin was incorrect, as many did, starting with Adorno¹¹. But the point is not to correct Benjamin, but rather to succeed in explaining how objects that are nothing more than replicas can still have the same capacity to fascinate today as did those cult objects that were “imbedded in the fabric of tradition”. The argument of Marx (the fetishism of commodities¹²), as valid as it is when taken in very general terms, which are applicable to any sort of commodity, does not penetrate into the peculiar phenomenon of the stylization of daily life.

In the years in which Benjamin wrote, design was a long way from possessing the present dimensions of an art for the masses. Perhaps for this reason he concentrated upon photography and cinema, that had that dimension since their birth. However, design has many things in common with them. Even the objects of design are works meant for reproducibility. Here, mechanical reproduction is not, as it is with painting or sculpture, an external condition for mass distribution, but is inherent to the very technique of industrial design as with film production. If a painting is reproduced, there always remains the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 222.

¹¹ According to Adorno, “the culture industry is defined by the fact that it does not strictly counterpose another principle to that of aura, but rather by the fact that it conserves the decaying aura as a foggy mist. (“*Culture industry reconsidered*”, 1963. English translation in Adorno, *The Culture Industry : Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London : Routledge, 1991) pp. 101-102). To him, the products of the spirit stylized by the culture industry were no longer merely mass-produced commodities, something which would later become even more obvious in the estheticized commodities of the post-Fordist era.

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume one, Part I, Section 4: “ The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof”.



difference between the original and the copy. But in design, as with cinema and photography, there are neither originals nor copies.

The famous chaise-longue by Le Corbusier, designed in 1928, and still in production today, does not have a *hic et nunc* as do traditional works of art; on the contrary, it was made to be put into circulation in many copies and as such “meet the beholder”. You can see it in a museum of contemporary art as well as a furniture catalogue, in a house in Madrid as well as a store in Stockholm: you can even buy it and bring it home. As a result, even here the exhibitiv value has supplanted the cult value to which aura was tied in archaic and traditional societies. Yet, one cannot say that this object does not have any aura. Rather, one could even reverse the phrase and say that if there was not something unique in that object, something like a “unique phenomenon of a distance”, it would not have been reproduced for so many years, with almost philological precision.

But how is it possible that this uniqueness coexists with mechanical reproduction? Evidently, there exist different declinations of aura and thus more than one mode of being unique. Benjamin himself distinguishes at least two.

In fact, Benjamin distinguished many more things than have successive theoreticians of art. As he writes, originally the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult: “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind”¹³. And it was precisely this cult value, founded upon a ritual, that rendered the object unique. The cult value does not disappear then, but it is emancipated from the magic and from the religion to become a “secular cult of beauty”. With this profane form of cult, developed during the Renaissance



and prevailing for three centuries, the uniqueness of a work bases itself upon its “authenticity”.

Therefore, unique, above all, is the *ceremonial object* handed down for generations within a single community, used from time immemorial for the carrying out of a specific ritual, and inseparable from it. This is the *first form of aura*.

In second place there is the unique painting *Las meninas* by Velasquez conserved in the Prado Museum. This is the *second form of aura*¹⁴.

Third, there is the *uniqueness of design*. According to my hypothesis, the chaise-longue of Le Corbusier is unique in another way, that is to say in the design formed in the mind of Le Corbusier, and from which there have descended its innumerable multiples. This is the *third form of aura*, not foreseen by Benjamin, that continues to exist even in the era of mechanical reproduction.

For me the first two kinds of aura are very important as well, above all because they show us that aura is the stratification of an archaic phenomenon under a modern one (something important to note, because – as we will see – a hybridization between different types of aura is always possible, even in the era of mechanical reproduction and the stylization of commodities). They are also very important because they distinguish two forms of uniqueness, which serve as a point of departure for ulterior distinctions. If, in fact, we only base our observations upon the first two forms of aura, we will never succeed in understanding the peculiar glamour and fascination that emanate from the objects of design.

¹³ *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 224.

¹⁴ Usually, when one speaks of aura it is of the second form, based upon authenticity, and referred to as if it was the only possible declination. Thus, for example, Mario Perniola, in *L'arte e la sua ombra* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), makes the auratic regime coincide with the traditional cult of the work of art, without



Instead, if we understand aura in the more general sense of a perception of an elusive uniqueness (Benjamin's "unique apparition of a distance"), and recognize that it may assume many a form, then we can begin to inquire into the type of uniqueness which is in play in objects of design, even if they are entirely predisposed to reproducibility.

That which is unique in the chaise-longue of Le Corbusier is not the object in and of itself, but the design or project of the chair that is at the origin of its many "incarnations". In Japan, the temple of Ise-Jingu is destroyed and reconstructed exactly as it was every seventy years. Every one of these "multiples" or replicas of the temple is no less sacred or less unique than the prototype. Something analogous happens for objects of design, even if in a non-sacred dimension. If one continues to construct the Le Corbusier seat it is because his design is perceived as unique. In it, one supposes, there still resides the fantasy, the culture, the creativity, the planning capacity and the technical knowledge of an individual. And this *uniqueness of the design*, one that finds its origin in the personality of its inventor, remains perceptible in each of the industrially-reproduced objects – not only in the prototype.

The prototype of an object of design, admitted that it is preserved (that of the chaise-longue of Le Corbusier is actually conserved at the Centre Pompidou in Paris) will admittedly have greater value for a collector of art or for a museum than that of any of its replicas. But this does not contradict that which I am now asserting. The auratic value of the chaise-longue, inasmuch as it is a work of design, lies in all of its many "incarnations". Within the prototype there certainly lies also an aura of the original similar to that of

considering that in modernity there are new forms of "auratic regimes", different from the traditional ones (precisely those which we are now investigating).



traditional works of art (and in fact you can only meet it in the museum), but as something external to the work's original intent and something not contemplated by Le Corbusier who planned the object for industrial fabrication and not as a single exemplar against which all others are merely copies.

We can therefore fix the distinction between this third type of uniqueness and the others in this manner: the traditional cult objects, the fetishes, the relics, the classical works of art like paintings and sculptures and the prototypes of objects of design, derive their authority from the fact of being *unique by exemplarity*. Instead, the objects of design derive it from the fact of being *unique by design*, which is to say in the project that subtends them.

6. *D'auteur*

This third form of uniqueness, not foreseen by Benjamin, only becomes fully manifest in modern Western culture with the art of mechanical reproduction. Nevertheless, it would not have developed if there had not already existed in modern culture a long-experimented form of valorization unknown to archaic and traditional cultures: that which we can call *uniqueness through*, or *by means of the author*.

If traditional cult objects do not tolerate being reproduced, it is because their uniqueness is guaranteed by the fact that they are tied to a ritual, one that is often sacred. This particular "use value" envelops cult objects like an invisible sheath (like a shell - writes Benjamin) by making them appear as is from a distance, however close they may be. Therefore a ceremonial object cannot but be unique in the concrete original, "worn" by use and tied to the site in which the ritual takes place. And for this kind of uniqueness even a



scratch or a mark upon a piece of wood can be relevant, or the place in which the tree grew and from which the wood was taken to sculpt an object, but certainly not the individuality of the person who sculpted it. The unrepeatable personality of the “creator” did not count for anything towards the formation of that kind of uniqueness. Instead, it is very important for the modern work of art, just as it is for objects of design.

Alessi, as we will recall - and we are now commenting upon the last statement in his book - proclaims to have “introduced the concept of the author into the horizon of household goods”.

The author is a historic notion. Once works circulated anonymously, then – as Foucault writes- anonymity became intolerable to us: “we accept it only as a riddle”. Concerning the genesis of the notion of the author, which has been the object of diverse studies, Foucault's hypothesis, which places the factor " punishment" prior to that of "appropriation of a benefit", seems convincing to me in a general way: “Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgressive”¹⁵. But specifically regarding works of art, I believe that another factor must be placed first: the need to signal the uniqueness of a work.

As we have seen, for Benjamin the uniqueness of a work was originally the expression of a cult founded upon a ritual, and inseparable from it; but when the cult value was detached from its ritual function and became a profane cult of beauty, concepts of uniqueness lost distinctness and from this moment on, one that Benjamin ties to the

¹⁵ M. Foucault, "What is an Author?", 1969. English translation in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 124).



Renaissance, “in the imagination of the beholder the uniqueness of the phenomena that hold sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of his creative achievement”.¹⁶

It is in effect with Humanism that the modern notion of the artist is born, elevated by Marsilio Ficino to the rank of “creator” and whose spirit is fully revealed in the work of art¹⁷. As Jean Gimpel has noted in his historical-sociological reconstruction of the birth of the “religion of art” that he too, like Benjamin, links to the Florence of the Medici and the humanists, at the beginning of the Cinquecento the patron no longer requested a “Madonna” or a “Deposizione”, but a Leonardo da Vinci, a Michelangelo or a Bellini¹⁸. (The author-commodity, one could say, begins in the sixteenth century: indeed, any auratic value, as every other value, lend itself to being commercialized).

It is also during this period that the painter begins to depict himself in the work; and in certain cases this signifies much more than a simple claim of paternity (it was painted by me). For example, in *Saint Peter Enthroned* by Masaccio the painter shows himself next to Brunelleschi, Alberti, and Masolino, the three points of reference for his style of painting, for his “poetics”. It is not only a “signature” but also a sort of *manifesto avant la lettre*, a true and proper statement of a poetics whereby the author emerges as the subject of an artistic intention. From here there arises the possibility, one that in the sixteenth century remains in an embryonic state, yet one that would eventually become fully developed in the twentieth century, to separate the uniqueness of a work of art from the uniqueness of the

¹⁶ *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 224 and p. 244, n. 6.

¹⁷ “Nei quadri e nelle costruzioni splendono il sapere e la destrezza dell'artista; possiamo vedervi quasi la disposizione e quasi l'immagine del suo spirito, perché lo spirito vi si esprime e riflette allo stesso modo che uno specchio riflette il viso di colui che vi si guarda” (Marsilio Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, XIII, 3)

exemplar, and tie it to the artistic intention that subtends it, its project, its design - or its very concept as will happen with conceptual art.

There exists, therefore, a very strong connection between the authorial regime that eventually established itself in modern art¹⁹ and the second form of aura founded upon the “authenticity” of the work. In fact, according to my hypothesis, with the secularization of art not only “authenticity displaces the cult value of the work”²⁰, but the artistic value also becomes ever more dependent upon the notion of the author. This artistic valorization, from my perspective, always implies the production of aura, which is to say the possibility of perceiving the uniqueness of the object. In the measure in which a painting or a sculpture is considered art, it will also be perceived as unique, unrepeatable, and therefore worthy of being handed down, conserved, cared for, interpreted, commented upon. All of these operations also unfold around literary texts (the care, in the philological sense of scholarly editorial preparation) and testify to the fact that the object is considered unique. But it is no longer the uniqueness founded on the cult value, as happened before modernity or in traditional cultures. *L’unicum* is now guaranteed by the individuality of the author, by means of its attribution to an author.

Traditional cultures in which Benjamin individuates the origin of the cult value of works of art did not possess our concept of individuality. Instead, in so-called modern culture, another kind of uniqueness also arises, one based upon the individuality of the creator: first it coexisted alongside the uniqueness of the exemplar and then slowly

¹⁸ Jean Gimpel, *Against art and artists* (Edinburgh : Polygon, 1991).

¹⁹ On the author in modernity and its problematization in late modernity see Carla Benedetti, *L’ombra lunga dell’autore. Indagine su una figura cancellata* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999).

²⁰ *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 244.



substituted it. In the fresco of Masaccio, for example, there shines forth both the aura of the authentic exemplar that does not tolerate copies, as well as the uniqueness of the author, which, a few centuries later would have also carried the possibility of tolerating replicas. Only in the twentieth century could that new principle have in fact begun to act in autonomy from the other, exactly as one notes in the industrial design. But already, in more traditional forms of art like painting and sculpture that same possibility was clear, albeit in a less explicit form, as occurs with conceptual art, for example, where the concept of a work takes the place of the work itself, whose “factuality” has almost become unnecessary.

In synthesis, with the process of individualization, a new auratic principle makes its appearance alongside the authorial status of art. In modernity this new principle becomes one of the main mechanisms of artistic valorization; and it is probable that without it no replica, no mechanically reproduced object, no object of use and no commodity could have ever shone forth as a “unique phenomenon of a distance”, nor provoke the desire to “make it closer”, to acquire it, or to wear it. If in certain cases modern culture can do without that more archaic form of authority that is the uniqueness of the exemplar, it is because it disposes of the uniqueness of the author, which can take two forms: the individuality of the person who has *materially fabricated* the object (as happens in traditional works of art, paintings, sculptures, etc.), or the individuality of the person who *conceived* it (as occurs in conceptual art, with objects of design, clothing, design label fashion and commodities, etc.). The uniqueness of the design therefore is only one ulterior



development of the uniqueness of the author, already present, if only in a spurious manner, in the concept of authenticity that has dominated modern art up to the present day.

With this I do not intend to say that it is a famous name (the fact that they are signed by someone well-known) to give auratic value to the objects of design. This would still be a superficial description of the phenomenon. A famous name by itself can account for very little. The truly essential point is that the object of design is intrinsically “d’auteur”, even when the user does not know the name, exactly as if he supposes that a painting exhibited in a gallery has an author, before knowing (or recognizing) the signature of the artist. So too when you see Alessi’s coffee maker you may not know that it was designed by Aldo Rossi, but if you recognize it as an object of design you find that it shines with its own aura, thus making it unique, unmistakable.

In Italy there is even a specific expression to indicate this type of object: for example one could say “caffettiera d’autore” (auteur coffee-maker) in the same way as one can speak of “film d’autore” (auteur film), only with the addition of a slightly ironic tone. The expression *d’autore* (in French *d’auteur*) has in fact in Italian become a current equivalent to "endowed with artistic value".

The uniqueness of the author does not signify moreover a single author. The author can also be a collective figure, like an avant-garde group, an *équipe* of design, or a staff composed of a director, scriptwriter and producer – or even a logo, as commonly occurs in today’s stylized commodities.

7. Mediators and logos



Among the forms of auratization based upon the author one must also comprehend another type: that which results from a particular individual, defined, recognizable, who serves as the *mediator* between the audience and the products, stamping them with his personal seal. This form of valorization is perhaps the most utilized at the present by both the art market and by the market *tout court*. It is above all the case of the critic, of the curator, active in the field of visual arts. For example, the curator of a show, or a critic or defines the poetic of some artists, thereby becoming, in a certain sense, an author, as occurs with Achille Bonito Oliva inventor of the “Transavanguardia”, or, in literature, with Larry McCaffery creator of “Avant Pop”. The definition of poetics creates something like a second-grade authorial mark, a second artistic intentionality that is added, from the outside, to the original and real author of the work. This second-grade author “creates” a value only by means of defining the object created by others, or rather, more simply, by selecting it within a vast spectrum of similar products. Thus we find the appearance of a new figure, one which we might call the vendor, or pusher of poetics. It is not so much the artistic who are doing the pushing as it is the critics and theoreticians. They are selling a particular product that serves to valorize and to promote artistic products.

Something similar occurs in the valorization of commodities. Also here the ‘personality’ of the mediator is more and more important. And it is not only the case of the testimonial. Let us take for example the advertising style created by the photographer Oliviero Toscani (recognizable for his tendency to load the promotional message with “social” content). This style probably did not serve to add to the sale of Benetton clothing. Certainly, however, it succeeded in giving an identity to the company. And this is today the



biggest requisite for a company: to construct its own identity, in order that its own trademark be recognizable amongst a thousand others. The producers care to construct a style for themselves, a sign that makes them different from all the others. And in this they do not act differently from an avant-garde group. The logo is their poetics. The style of Toscani (the unusual photos of the advertising campaigns, from children of the now ex-Yugoslavia to the Americans condemned to death-row) was a sort of poetics for Benetton. Indeed, it has not been impressed upon the form of the clothing, the style of which, uniform and tested, is by now shared by other clothing companies. It was impressed directly on the logo. And in this the function of the logo further reveals its similarity to the avant-garde *manifestos*. The poetics declared in the manifestos not only signals a difference (“our art is different from that of the others”), but also makes it easy to communicate in a direct manner, without the need to pass through the experience of the work. The modern artistic logic contemplates the fact, unknown in other ages, that a certain way of creating art can be recognized and appreciated not only through the works, but also directly, through the programmatic statement of their project. The concreteness of the work, its factuality, its sensuous beauty, all those things from which aesthetic pleasure was traditionally derived (as even the word "aesthetic" reveals in its etymology), may remain inactive. In their place there is a sort of intellectualized extract of the work that, in certain cases, can even take the place of the work, substituting it, precisely as the advertising style of Benetton's campaigns does in respect to the clothing publicized. Today it is above all through the mediator (critic, curator, creator of events, or logos) that the uniqueness of the author is increasingly exploited in the stylization of life.

8. *Auras*

In summarizing, we can say that the *uniqueness of the object* reveals itself in a pure manner in the cult value of the objects destined for a ritual (it is the first form of aura). From its hybridization with the *uniqueness of the author* results the principle of *authenticity* (the second form of aura according to Benjamin): here, the work in fact continues to be unique as an object, however its cult value is perceived through the uniqueness of its creator. The uniqueness of the author that I propose to consider as the third form of aura functions in a pure form, one completely disconnected from the uniqueness of the object, only in design, photography, cinema, fashion and numerous other stylized commodities upon which there is stamped the auratic sign of a logo.

Indeed, the uniqueness of the author could invest everything that is reproducible, including the cinema. Benjamin could not see it, but not long after his death, at the end of the forties, the cinema continued to affirm its own status as art through the notion of “film d’auteur” [in English “art film”, but also “auteur film”]. Above all, the “*Cahiers du cinéma*” with its so-called *politique des auteurs* chose to emphasize the “personal” in film creation, i.e. the personal stamp of the *auteur*, as a standard point of reference. For example, Astruc’s image of the motion-picture camera as a stylographic pen (la “*caméra stylo*”: as *stylus* and style)²¹ was really a way to claim for cinema the prerogative of every art: that of expressing the “individuality” of the artist, in this case that of the director, with

²¹ Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La caméra-stylo.” 1948. English translation in *The New Wave*, edited by James Monaco (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 5.



his unique and unrepeatable obsessions, recurring themes, and his particular view of the world.

Thus, one of the arts that according to Benjamin would have liquidated the aura underwent a process of auraticization based upon the author. And it does not deal with that false cult value, already made ridiculous by Benjamin, that some pioneers have attempted to attribute to the cinema to elevate it to the rank of art (Abel Gance for example who compared the cinema to hieroglyphs); rather, it simply deals with perceiving the cinema through that form of aura, typically modern, based upon the uniqueness of the author.

But the new auratic principle that makes its appearance alongside the authorial status of art, does not sweep away the cult value. As I have already mentioned, the secularized cult of beauty, as profane as it is, always remains a cult, giving birth to that singular hybridization of archaic and modern that is the principle of authenticity; with all its religious aspects that are implied in the operations that govern the construction of an author, and even survive, as Foucault noted, in the post-structuralist notion of writing (*écriture*)²². I do not at all believe that the uniqueness of the author is the only form of production of auratic value in the modern Western world. Each of the diverse forms of uniqueness do not correspond to a phase surpassing that which preceded. On the contrary, no regime truly ever cancels out the other. The archaic is conserved within the modern, with which it can interweave itself and hybridize. We find numerous examples of a similar re-flowering of the archaic, both in the age of the profane cult of beauty, as well as in that of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin himself indicates some of them, while others go beyond his predictions.



If an antique statue of Venus was recovered from the land in an age in which the cult of Venus no longer exists, it is not said that one can no longer perceive its ancient value: as Benjamin notes, it is probable that to medieval monks those pagan statues would have appeared as blasphemous idols. But even modern eyes, educated in the profane cult of beauty, could, in certain cases, perceive them in the same way – as is recounted for example in the *Venus d' Île* by Prosper Mérimée. The ancient cult object, discovered by a dilettante archeologist, is not observed by the inhabitants of the place as an object of Greek sculpture to be admired for its beauty. On the contrary it generates an unexplainable superstitious terror that ends in contaminating even the refined amateur of art coming from Paris, who is both the witness and the narrator of the story.

But an even more interesting phenomenon for our investigation, and that to which I cannot but hint at, is the re-flowering of archaic forms of aura within the arts of mechanical reproduction that do not have any rapport with the uniqueness of the author. Benjamin observed that photography succeeds at times in imprisoning the experience of a uniqueness, conferring to the images a “magic value” that no painting possesses for us today. The uniqueness is in this case tied to an experience: but the concept of aura in Benjamin is intimately intertwined with that of *Erfahrung*, or experience; so much so, in fact, that for him the decay of aura also signifies a weakening of the experience. And as the cult value has found a kind of surrogate in the authenticity of the work, so the *Erfahrung* was replaced by its modern surrogate *Erlebniss* : an experience that belongs to an individual as a “dead possession”.

²² What is an Author?", p. 127 and 120.



Another phenomenon is to take into account is that of today's *cult objects*. One interesting example are B films that become, for reasons not always predictable, cult-movies. Many commodities become today cult objects simply in virtue of their diffusion. And sometimes, to enjoy reading a best-seller can also be like entering in a kind of empathetic chain that ties you to millions of other readers. Similarly, the objects of use often become auratic without the need to make recourse neither to the cult of beauty, nor to the authorial principle. It is the same exhibitiv value that here becomes, paradoxically, the instrument of a cult value.

The aestheticization of commodities can use all of these kinds of auras: not only the modern authorial, but also the archaic one, combining them with the exhibitiv value, each of which is then always translatable into a market value. But certainly it appears to me that the form of aura that is most commonly employed in the stylization of life is that based upon the uniqueness of the author, producing objects that are "individually designed, by definite personalities with the unmistakable cachet of such", as wrote Simmel ²³.

9. Stylization of identities

The phenomenon of the objects of use endowed with artistic value, already visible at the beginning of the last century in so-called "applied art" (*Kunstgewerbe*), did not escape Simmel who comments upon it when he writes: "Sitting on a work of art, working with a work of art, using a work of art for the needs of practise – that is cannibalism" ²⁴. With this comment Simmel underlines the contradictions inherent in "objects of artistic

²³ Georg Simmel, "The problem of style". *Theory, culture and Society*, 8 (1991), pp. 66-67.



use”: whether they are produced by the artisan in a single exemplar or industrially in an unlimited number of copies, it is precisely the fact that they are objects of use that brings them into conflict with the traditional notion of a work of art²⁵. But rather than dismiss these phenomena as “culture industry,” as Adorno later did, Simmel tried to understand their meaning within the general transformation of social behavior brought about by the metropolis and nascent mass society. We owe to Simmel, in fact, the first intuition of the process of stylization that has invested daily life.

The objects of use endowed with an artistic value are not simply beautiful, but, as Simmel notes, “individually designed, by definite personalities with the unmistakable cachet of such”. Such a characteristic is evidently foreign to traditional craft objects, which, by definition, derive from an anonymous tradition of stratified technical knowledge. The object of design is instead born from a project which is supposed to be elaborated by some technical-artistic mind (individual or group). This feature is that which truly separates the object of design from craft objects (which can be equally beautiful and be looked at with an aesthetic disposition as well).

What is important to underline is the borrowing of identity that the stylized objects of use, with their personal “cachet”, offer the consumer. They do not simply say: “This product is beautiful”, but also and above all: “This product is *for you!* By possessing it you can distinguish yourself from everyone else”. As I have already said, the stylization of

²⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁵ Eighteenth-century aesthetics had defined a criterion for the delimitation of artistic phenomena by anchoring them upon the concept of the beautiful, understood by Kant as “finality without an end”, thereby giving rise to the definition of a specific sphere of human experience, that in which aesthetic judgements are formed, both in regards of the objects of art and those of nature. The specificity of the aesthetic sphere is therefore based upon its distinction from other spheres of human experience or activity, such as morals, knowledge and praxis.



commodities transforms today's consumer into a sort of collector, in which there reemerges the archaic traits of the "fetishist", which is to say he who "by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power". But it is precisely the uniqueness of the design, with its incorporated differential value, that gives whoever acquires it both the sense of a distinction from others and at the same time a sense of belonging to a group: that community of possessors who own the same object. And in this one can measure the social significance of stylization, its power to produce individual differences and identities. Through the enjoyment of a particular commodity the individuals communicates their particular difference and *stylizes* themselves within an easily communicable form.

10. The notion of style

In order to study these phenomena it will be necessary to bring into the discussion the notion of style that is widespread in modernity. Unlike the ancient world, modernity has conceived of style as a synonym for individual expression, for irreducible idiosyncrasy. In the stylization of everyday life, however, style would seem to take on a more complex, one might almost say double, function: to both distinguish and connect, and thus to express the particular while enabling it to be perceived and communicated in a general plan.

Simmel offers an interesting definition of style, which contrasts with the modernist, individualizing meaning: for him style, even when it is individual, and even when it has to do with Art (High Art), always implies a "principle of generality." It is the "general form of the particular"²⁶ or, rather, that which permits the generalization of individuality in the form of a difference. Therefore, in modernity style is also the point of friction, or, if you



like, of conflict, between two contrasting necessities: on the one hand the need for individual distinction, and on the other the need for fusion with the group.

With this definition, however, Simmel does not return to the ancient notion of style. The individual “cachet” is not cancelled to return to a rhetorical-normative idea of style. On the contrary, he underscores that differentiation through style is a necessity of modern individualism. But it is precisely this means of differentiation that also contains characteristics of generality like that of a coin by which the particular also becomes expendable.

Style certainly has the capacity to refer back to the individual (according to the saying “the style makes the man”), but it also abstracts him from the heterogeneity of his living particulars, of his “colors”, of which it becomes a sort of a representative, a symbol. Style is the *medium* through which the particular becomes legible in communication.

11. Style and discipline

To create a style, or even simply to adhere to one, some sort of discipline is required. Fashion (which is merely the stylization of certain behaviors, such as ways of dressing or speaking) is an eloquent example: to dress according to certain dictates rigidifies movement. The individual enters into the chosen style just as one enters into a role, discarding what doesn't fit or making it conform. Other processes of stylization are similar. Even in literature style has sometimes had this oppressive connotation, of forced self-reference, as this passage of Calvino illustrates:

²⁶ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900. London: Routledge, 1990), p.



Sitting down to write each time presupposes the choice of a psychological attitude, a relationship with the world, a pitching of the voice, a homogeneous gathering of linguistic methods and experiential data and figments of the imagination, in short, a style. The author is author in so far as he assumes a part, like an actor, and identifies himself with that projection of himself in the moment in which he writes²⁷.

“The first of the great operations of discipline - Foucault writes - is the constitution of 'tableaux vivants,' which transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities”²⁸. This is also, according to my hypothesis, the function of stylization.

Certainly, Foucault’s definition of the “disciplinary power” cannot be applied without modification to the phenomena about which we are speaking. But it points us in the direction in which we should look: that is precisely that of the transformation of the confused multitudes into ordered multiplicities, or, better, to put it into our own terms, into *individuals made visible through their differences*.

In the process of stylization of daily life, what is in play is the individual, who can be classified, viewed, identified through the stylization of his identity.

Once, it was the sovereign, or the possessor of power, that had to be visible, made memorable and surrounded by aura. The individual was instead invisible. But the form of power that developed in modernity, that which began with the seventeenth century, regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise. Today, it is the individual who must assert his difference. The stylization of one’s identity allows for an immediate visibility of the individual, subtracting him from anonymity, thereby transforming the heterogeneity of his own time, the opacity of his *vécus*, and the hazard of everyday life into

²⁷ Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 111.



readily communicable differences. It is not the domination imagined by Adorno. This form of power is not oppressive in the traditional sense. It does not force the masses to form a single, uniform, totalised figure. Rather it “separates, analyzes, differentiates”, it “trains” the moving, confused multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements²⁹. It is a network of micropowers that branch out into procedures that model the particulars of each individual. They impose upon him a sort of self discipline that leads him to stylize his own identity, in order to reduce his personal zone of obscurity, and the secret and intimate aspects of his life, making them penetrable by social communication.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 148.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training”, in Rabinows, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 188.



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