

Liquid Objects, Solid Meanings

With designers and manufacturers focusing more on creating aspirational value rather than enhancing the utility of a product, what does it mean for us as consumers?

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When we buy a Mercedes, we are not buying just another car; when we buy a Gucci, we are not buying a mere bag; and when we decide to pursue an Ivy League education, we aren't acquiring just another degree. In other words, what we are buying is not so much the product, but its representation, or what it signifies. The essential function of a product—transportation in the case of the Mercedes or storage in the case of the Gucci—is no longer considered a significant factor influencing the purchase. Instead, the name associated with it is of paramount importance. The question therefore remains: When we buy expensive branded goods, what are we really buying? Does the performance of the essential function remain important? If not, then what happens to the product development processes that make a product do more? Do manufacturers stop offering value through the essential functions of a product? If creating sign value or brands were to be the prime objective, should manufacturers then focus on creating meaning rather than enhanced utility?

The massive proliferation in banking networks has made capital more easily accessible than before. Similarly, technology has no longer remained the preserve of select countries and corporations, and even advanced versions of it are now available through the cloud on demand in small units, thus obviating the need for expensive on-premises and installable

solutions. These developments have made it easy for all manufacturers to improve a product's utility value, thus taking away the edge that one manufacturer may enjoy over the other. The burgeoning middle class, in the meanwhile, has developed itself as the new leisure class that emphasises conspicuous consumption more than consumption of mere utility. The values that have higher social and cultural approval like style, luxury, prestige and power have therefore become more profitable than investing in improving the product's utility, which has almost ceased to make the manufacturer stand out in the crowd of competing products. This trend has encouraged manufacturers to focus more on creating sign value in products—a value that makes the consumer more esteemed in society.

French theorist Jean Baudrillard first spoke about this move towards manufacturing meaning instead of real product development, asserting that this trend arrests the possibility of technological advancement, as the focus shifts from a technical system to a cultural system to elicit a more passionate response from the consumers. He illustrated this with the example of a passenger car, which rings true even today. The car, conceptualised as a tool that encourages social intercourse by making travel easy and comfortable, was very soon dissociated from its primary task, cultivating associations of prestige, exclusivity and power—values that

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distance people from one another, quite the opposite of social intercourse.

Similarly, a house is a space for its inhabitants to live and grow with one another, to discover themselves by finding the concentrated essence of living—an integral space that should help develop rounded individuals, it is subjected to similar analytical processes. The spaces within are broken into comprising elements that individually heighten their desirability. For example, furniture that represents pure functionality and the culture of do-it-yourself, or a liberal use of glass, representing values of transparency, or recessed ceilings that hide the source of light representing humanity's movement away from the origins of things, or walls that come in varying colours and shades representing an aspirational or holiday-like environment. All of these emphasise a minimalist lifestyle that supports meaning creation of a type that makes people largely consumers of products that makes them a part of the ever-growing market. Here, the product sold is social standing, unremitting excitement and isolated existence—an existence that is eerily similar to everyone else's.

These developments are a sign of changing times. Nowhere is this more evident than in advertising, packaging, branding, window displays, shopping and fashion. Proliferating mass media, a culture based on consumption, and the liberal use of sexual symbols for the purpose of sales have made the manufacturing of signs a primary activity.

Conspicuous consumption, as introduced by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), has the consumption of signs at its core. His division of labour, as drudgery and exploits, performed by women and men, respectively, constructed the sign of invidious distinction between genders in society. Men became the agents of every activity that was worthwhile and heroic, while women became responsible for all that is menial, repetitive and, according to men, wasted effort. As consumers got comfortable living among signs emerging from such social structures, they distanced themselves from real objects and their true needs. And today, the threat of becoming a society of people who find it difficult to understand their needs, or imagine a way of life that is different from what exists looms large. A society lost among the signs, ever receding from reality and rooted in nothingness became an easy prey to intervening forces of capitalism that accentuated only one ideal, consumerism, and which propagated only one idea, control. Suddenly, "the end of transcendence," (a term used by Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* [1964] for man, who had shown the promise of apotheosis) seems near.

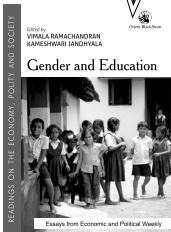
To extend this argument, what will happen when a person becomes a sign in themselves, when the human form acts as a camouflage for a sign? If the form is bare and is

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Education of women and girls in India has been widely debated and discussed since the mid-1900s. While the last century has seen a considerable shift in the status of women in Indian society, gender equality in education continues to be influenced by the economy, society, and culture, the accessibility and availability of formal education, and gender norms. A continued preference for sons across the country plays an important role in determining whether girls are given access to both primary and higher education.

This volume brings together wide-ranging debates that took place in the *Economic & Political Weekly* from 2000 to 2017 on the social, political and economic realities affecting the education of women across the country. It analyses the different axes of inequality; the political, economic and social context of education; and pedagogy and curriculum, through a study of textbooks.

The volume will be critical for students, scholars and researchers of sociology, education, women's studies and development studies, and for NGOs and organisations working in the development sector.

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extracted from the whole to be just the part, it represents a vulgar functionality and impoverished content. This is beautifully illustrated in the opening scene of Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Mépris* (Contempt). The protagonist Camille (Brigitte Bardot) inventories her body parts in the mirror as images and, in a series of questions, asks her husband if he loves her feet, her ankles, her knees, her thighs, and in the end, her whole body as a part like all other parts. Such a slicing of her body, part by part, at the level of a sign, not only disfigures desire but also makes each part available for commercial exploitation. As each part becomes independent of the rest, it becomes amenable to managerial treatment and attains the status of an object to which meaning can be attributed—a meaning that fetishises body parts in the beginning and objects of consumption in the end. Here, too, a singular focus on maximising the potential of the mutilated image wins, and the possibility to build the integrative and reflective capability of humans is lost. The objective of realising

the dream of the one-dimensional man achieves a two-way consummation, both from within and from without.

Objects were solid once upon a time but are now becoming liquid by assimilating technology and managerial interventions. Meanings contained in the object were multiple and liquid but are now becoming solid and unidimensional under the pressure of capitalist purposes. Meanings that have the power to inspire new thoughts and feelings and build creative capacity within humans are suffering from an unprecedented onslaught that threatens to wipe out their variegated existence. The personalities that were to construct and lend vitality to them are becoming one-dimensional and devoid of all vigour. The end of transcendence is here, and human beings have lost sight of their greater purpose and their immense potential, and of what it means to be human in a world of plurality.

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