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What a Beautiful Ring!: The Meaning of Clothes and Objects

I believe in the total depravity of inanimate things, the elusiveness of soap, the knottiness of strings, the transitory nature of buttons, the inclination of suspenders to twist and of hooks to forsake their lawful eyes, and cleave only unto the hairs of their hapless owner's head.
—Katharine Walker (1840–1916)

Martha's video has still much more to offer the semiotician. For example, we can see Cheryl wearing an enticing red skirt and matching black lace blouse, Ted an elegant dark-blue suit, white shirt, and matching blue tie. Also, something that Ted said at one point is worthy of our attention: "Oh, what a beautiful ring, Cheryl! Who gave it to you?" "It's a friendship ring," Cheryl replies. "I've worn it since I was 14." Why is it, a semiotician would ask, that we are so attached to, and meticulous about, our clothes and our trinkets of jewelry? More generally, why is it that people find so much significance in the objects they make (as discussed briefly in Chap. 3)? What role do objects play in human life? Do clothes *make* the person, as the expression goes? Why do we associate clothing with ritual behaviors, such as the courtship display unfolding between Cheryl and Ted?

"Things" have special value in many consumerist societies, becoming fetishes as Karl Marx once claimed. A fad is an object, a fashion style, or some trend that becomes extremely popular relatively quickly, but tends to lose popularity just as quickly. Some fads may come back if a subsequent generation finds out about them through media retrospectives and nostalgic portrayals. For instance, the fad of karate lessons in the 1980s was due in large part

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to the popularity of the Bruce Lee movies and, later, of the set of *Karate Kid* movies. Blue jeans and T-shirts became clothing fads for young people in the mid-1950s because they were worn by actors such as James Dean and Marlon Brando. The T-shirt as fad made its debut in the 1951 movie, *A Streetcar Named Desire* that featured Marlon Brando wearing a T-shirt in highly erotic scenes that finally catapulted the T-shirt into the realm of pop culture. A similar story can be told about any major fad. In the 1950s, Hula Hoops became truly popular after Georgia Gibbs sang *The Hula Hoop Song* in a 1958 episode of the *Ed Sullivan Show* on CBS, associating the hoop with the emerging youth culture. The fad of black clothing, hair, and cosmetics, popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, came from several sources, including vampire movies and goth culture.

Clothes and Dress

Suppose you have a twenty-something-year-old brother who has an important job interview at the head office of a bank. During his adolescent years, your brother had become accustomed to dressing like a rap musician. Aware that he must present a vastly different persona at the interview, he decides to ask you to help him get dressed appropriately for the occasion. To put it in semiotic terms, your task is to acquaint him with the *dress code* that will allow him to put together an appropriate *clothing text* through which he can present an acceptable persona to his potential employer. As you know, the code suggests that he must be well-groomed; that he should wear a white or blue, long-sleeved shirt, with no designs on it, with a suitable tie. It also suggests that he should wear a gray or blue jacket with matching pants, and, finally, that he should wear black shoes, preferably with shoelaces. Of course, he should remove all traces of his previous lifestyle clothing. Like any code, there is some latitude in the choices and combinations of signifiers (clothing items) your brother has in constructing his apparel text, but not very much. He certainly cannot ignore the basic structure of the dress code, for if he does—if he decides to wear a tuque, or if he decides to put on sneakers, for instance—the chances are that he would not even get past the door of the job interviewer. Deploying the appropriate dress code will not guarantee him a job, but it will at least get him past that door. Dressing for the occasion is a semiotic social act.

Now, let's switch the situation from the standpoint of gender. Suppose that this time your sister is the one with an important job interview at the head office of a bank. Once again, as an adolescent she had become accustomed to dressing in a youthful style with nose rings, ripped jeans, and so on. Like your

brother, she comes to you for help. In her case, the code suggests that she also set her hair in an appropriate way, avoiding her neo-punk hairstyle; that she wear a blouse with soft colors, preferably white; that she wear a gray or blue jacket with a matching skirt or pants; and that she put on shoes, preferably, with high or semi-high heels. Although there are some paradigmatic (selectional) differences in the female dress code with respect to the male one, there are also many similarities. This suggests that the type of job both are seeking cuts across gender categories. In such cases, dress codes tend to be more flexible or "unisexual."

Clothes supplement the body's biological resources (bodily hair, skin thickness) for counteracting environmental fluctuations, such as weather changes. At this rudimentary denotative level, they are specific kinds of amplifications of these resources, as clothing variation in relation to different climates testifies. However, in the system of everyday social life clothing items also function as signs, and therefore are organized conceptually and metaphorically into the various dress codes (from Old French *dresser* "to arrange, set up") that are interconnected with the other codes of this system.

At the connotative level, clothes convey persona (identity, gender, age, status, ideology, and so on) and regulate social interaction. To someone who knows nothing about Amish culture, the blue or charcoal *Mutze* of the Amish male is just a jacket, but within the Amish community the blue one indicates that the wearer is between sixteen and thirty-five years of age, and the charcoal one that he is older than thirty-five. Similarly, to an outsider the Russian *kalbak* appears to be a brimless red hat; to a Russian living in rural areas, it once meant that the wearer is a medical doctor.

Dress codes have an enormous range of historically based meanings. In ancient Rome, for instance, only aristocrats were allowed to wear purple-colored clothes; in religiously oriented cultures, differentiated dress codes for males and females are regularly enforced to ensure modesty; and the list could go on and on. When people put clothes on their bodies, they are not only engaged in making images of themselves to suit their own eyes, but also to conform to cultural models, such as gender codes. Before the middle part of the twentieth century, females in Western culture did not wear pants. The one who *wore the pants* in a family meant, denotatively and connotatively, that the wearer was a male. With the change in social-role structures during the 1960s, women too began to wear pants regularly in acknowledgment of the change. The reverse situation has not transpired. Except in special ritualistic circumstances—for example, the wearing of a Scottish kilt—men have not openly worn skirts in America. If they do, then we label it an act of transvestitism. Today, with our expansion of the notion of gender to include LGBTQ

individuals, our perceptions of clothing are also changing. In effect, as the clothes change so too do other sign systems associated with them.

The identification of gender through clothes is characteristic of cultures across the world. As children develop a sense of gender, they often want to experiment with the dress code of the other gender. In doing so, children are trying to cull from such cross-dressing episodes a better understanding of their own sexual persona; by assuming the gender of the other sex *through* the dress code, children are attempting to unravel what it is like *to be* the other sex, contrasting it with their own sense of sexual identity, and thus coming to a better grasp of its meaning. In transgender individuals, who identify with a gender other than their biological one, clothing experiments are more than simple gender role experiments; they are vital activities that help them understand themselves semiotically.

The power of dress as conveyor of persona becomes particularly noticeable at puberty. In tribal cultures, the clothes that individuals are expected to wear when they come of age are dictated by the elders or leaders of the collectivity. In modern industrialized cultures, pubescent youth are left alone to develop their own dress codes. Indeed, the history of youth dress styles since the mid-1920s is the history of contemporary adolescence and even of contemporary society. In that era, the so-called flappers were distinguished by the hat they wore as well as by their short dresses and stylish shoes, introducing a new kind of sexy fashion that was unthinkable in the Victorian era. In the 1950s, young people imitated the clothing and hairstyles that characterized early rock-and-roll culture (with pompadour hairstyles for males, poodle skirts and pony tails for females). In the 1960s, the fashion trends came out of the hippie culture, epitomized by long hair for both males and females and the wearing of blue jeans for both, in a unisex fashion style. Like all fads, fashion styles tell side stories of a culture and of social trends generally. Flapper hats defined the era of the Roaring Twenties, representing an emerging women's liberation movement; blue jeans symbolized the beginnings of gender and class equality.

Often, clothing is ideological, social, or political statement. The dress codes adopted by totalitarian regimes, with their dull uniformity, is a case in point. On the other side, a dress code such as the hipster one, exudes individualism. Hipsters are associated with indie or alternative music styles, and are often compared to the hippies and Beat writers (who were the first to be called hipsters in the 1950s). Hipsters are all about a flight from conformity, a way to put oneself in contrast to it, to stand out, to look and be different.

The Beat writers of the 1950s who broke from literary and moral traditions, emphasizing freedom of lifestyle and expression, also broke away from clothing fashions, introducing minimalist clothing that was later adopted by the hippies.

They were concentrated in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and in Greenwich Village in New York City. They held "happenings," which included a reading of their works combined with jazz, drugs, and sexuality. The best-known writers were Allen Ginsberg, especially famous for his poem *Howl* (1956), and Jack Kerouac, for his novel *On the Road* (1957). Other writers included William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder. Critics accused the writers of promoting anarchy and obscenity for their own sake. But the movement captured the post-war generation's dissatisfaction with dull conformity and what they called the false values of "square" society. The beatniks, as they came to be called, also advocated peace and civil rights, which set the stage for the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Nudity

The human being is the only animal that does not "go nude," so to speak, without social repercussions (unless, of course, the social ambiance is a nudist camp or perhaps a sexual locale such as a striptease joint). Nudity is the semiotic counterpart of clothing. What is considered "exposable" of the body will vary significantly from culture to culture, even though the covering of genitalia for modesty seems, for the most part, to cross cultural boundaries. As anthropologist Helen Fisher aptly observes, even among Yanomamo tribal members, who live in the jungle of Amazonia, and wear very little clothing because of the climate, a woman would feel as much discomfort and agony at removing her vaginal string belt as would a North American woman if one were to ask her to remove her underwear; and a man would feel just as much embarrassment at his penis accidentally falling out of its encasement as would a North American male if he were to be caught literally "with his pants down."[1]

Clearly, nudity is imbued with meaning. Consider the performance art of strip-teasing. A semiotician would ask: Why do we attend (or desire to attend) performances whose sole purpose is the removal of clothing to reveal the naked body? The act of "suggestive clothing-removal" in an audience setting has, first and foremost, a profane ritualistic quality to it. The dark atmosphere, the routines leading up to the act, the predictability of the performance with its bodily gyrations imitating sexual activities, and the cathartic effects that it has on spectators are all suggestive of a rite worshipping carnality and fertility. There is no motive for being at such performances other than to indulge in a fascination with the nude body. Of course, sexual perversions can also be realized at such locales, but this is rarer than one would think. The Internet now offers much more opportunity to engage in sexual perversion.

This semiotic take on nudity would explain, arguably, why visual artists have always had a fascination for the nude figure and for erotic representation generally. The ancient Greek and Roman nude statues of male warriors, Michelangelo's powerful *David* sculpture (1501–4), Rodin's *The Thinker* (c. 1886), are all suggestive of the brutal power of the nude male body. On the other side of this paradigm, the female body has historically been portrayed as soft, sumptuous, and submissive, as can be seen in the famous ancient Greek statue known as the Venus de Milo, which represents Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty (Venus in Roman mythology). However, there has always been some ambiguity with regard to the female body. Feral and powerful women have always existed, as can be seen in the sculptures of Diana of Greek mythology.

The modern-day fascination with erotic materials is a contemporary testament to our fascination with nudity as a semiotic code in our system of everyday life. Those who see exploitation in such materials, and seem prepared to censor them, are probably more overwhelmed by the connotative power of this code than are most people. Depicting the human body in sexual poses or activities reveals, to the semiotician, a fascination with nudity as a signifying text that blends sexuality with historical meanings. Only when such depictions are repressed does this fascination become perilous.

The Sacred and the Profane

The topic of nudity brings us to one of the more important themes in the semiotic study of culture today—the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane across cultures, usually interpreted concretely as a distinction between the body and the soul. This distinction manifests itself in rituals and symbolism.[2] In many religious traditions, for instance, there are periods of fasting (such as Lent in Catholicism) preceded by periods of indulgence into all kinds of carnal pleasure (the Carnival celebration that precedes Lent). This dual dimension is intrinsic to understanding the role of many spectacles and ceremonies in contemporary cultures.

The concept of the carnival is especially relevant, as elaborated by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.[3] The festivities associated with carnivals are tribal and popular; in them the sacred is "profaned," and the carnality of all things is proclaimed. At the time of carnival, everything authoritative, rigid, or serious is subverted, loosened, and mocked. Bakhtin's carnival theory would assert that acts of transgression or mockery against social norms are instinctual, paradoxically validating them. In effect, we come to understand

the role of those norms through a mockery of them. This would explain why vulgar forms of pop culture, such as erotic movies and strip-teasing, do not pose (and never have posed) any serious subversive challenge to the moral status quo. They are not really transgressive in a true political subversive sense; they just appear to be. Flappers, punks, goths, gangsta rappers, Alice Cooper, Kiss, Eminem, Marilyn Manson, strippers, porn stars, and all the other "usual transgression suspects" are, according to this theory, modern-day carnival mockers who take it upon themselves to deride, confuse, and parody authority figures and sacred symbols, bringing everything down to an earthy, crude level of theatrical performance.

Carnival theory asserts that mockery actually institutes a vital dialogue between those who feel that expressing the sacred in human life is the only lofty goal to pursue, and those who want to mock it. Through this form of "polyphonic" dialogue we come to understand the meaning of social life intuitively. It is an oppositional dialogue, pitting the sacred against the profane in a systematic gridlock, and it is polyphonic because in it there are no voices of authority, but all voices. It makes it obvious that this kind of dialogue goes on all the time in human life. It is so instinctive and common that we hardly ever realize consciously what it entails in philosophical and psychological terms. It even manifests itself in conversations, chats, and even internally within ourselves. It manifests itself as well in the theatrical and narrative arts, from drama and comedy to rock concerts and social networking websites. Carnival displays are part of popular and folkloristic traditions that aim to critique traditional mores and idealized social rituals, bringing out the crude, unmediated links between domains of behavior that are normally kept separate. Carnivalesque genres satirize the lofty words of poets, scholars, and others. They are intended to fly in the face of the official, sacred world—the world of judges, lawyers, politicians, churchmen, and the like. Another main tenet of carnival theory regards the role of occultism in culture. Occultism was rampant throughout the ancient world and the Middle Ages. Even eminent scholars such as thirteenth-century Italian theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) believed in the powers of occult symbolism. Carvings of animals on roofs and walls, along with sculptures of mysterious animals and female figures, go back tens of thousands of years. According to some estimates, the earliest known visual-symbolic artifact might even be 135,000 years old. By and large, the belief in literal occultism has disappeared from contemporary secular societies, even though it has left some notable residues in practices and artifacts, such as the popularity of daily horoscopes, the widespread wearing of lucky charms and amulets, and the omission of thirteenth floors on high-rise buildings (or more accurately, the intentional misidentification of thirteenth floors as fourteenth floors). The embracing of

occultism (or occult symbolism) by specific groups and cults comes as little surprise to carnival theorists. It is essentially part of carnivalesque or "profane theater" complete with appropriate costume (dark clothes and cosmetics) and sacrilegious activities and rituals (such as the devil-worshipping rituals).

Bakhtin introduced his concept of the carnival around 1929. People attending a carnival, he claimed, do not merely make up an anonymous crowd. Rather, they feel part of a communal body, sharing a unique sense of time and space. Through costumes and masks, individuals take on a new identity and, as a consequence, renew themselves spiritually in the process. It is through this carnivalesque identity that the "grotesque" within humans can seek expression through overindulgent eating and laughter, and through unbridled sexual acting. In such behaviors, people discover who they really are. The dark clothes and cosmetics worn by goths are steeped in carnival traditions. The color constitutes a pictography of danger, mystery, the unexplained, and other occult meanings. The outlook of the goths is more than a simple lifestyle choice, but a more fundamental reactive carnivalesque one. The goths of the recent past were engaged in a kind of shadow culture that implied an acceptance of the dark side of the human soul, not its concealment. In a way, goth culture was (and still is) an attempt to obliterate distinctions between life and death, between the sacred and the profane. Moreover, the gender distinctions that society has imposed on all of us are deleted through the dark masks that goths wear. The blending of masculine and feminine symbols is actually an ancient occult practice—expressed in myths and belief systems throughout the world.

A particularly interesting modern-day play on occultism and its carnivalesque nature is the so-called Rocky Horror Picture Show, which was at one level a parody of 1950s rock-and-roll culture and bourgeois America wrapped into one, utilizing occult symbolism in an ironic way. As Greenwald remarks, it was an attempt "to shock by departing from the tradition of rock and roll machismo established by Elvis," vaunting a new form of sexual theater that favored "makeup, cross dressing, and an overall smearing of the lines between the sexes."[4] The show debuted in 1975 in Britain. It continues as a tradition in many areas of the world at midnight on Halloween, when patrons show up dressed in drag and lingerie. Like the ancient and medieval carnivals, the audience is not only part of the show, it is the show. Audiences dance and sing, shout lewd comments at the screen, and throw objects at certain points in the film, such as toast, toilet paper, water, or rice. The master of ceremonies, called sardonically Dr. Frank-N-Furter, instructs and exhorts the audience, saying, "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure. Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh—erotic nightmares beyond any measure, and sensual daydreams to treasure forever. Can't you just see it? Don't dream it, be it."

To his entreaty, audience members start to indulge themselves in "absolute pleasure" by drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes (among other things). The show never made it into mainstream movie theaters at first because its carnivalesque elements were so weird and transgressive at the time that, as the movie itself warns, in parodic imitation of censorship ratings: "Society must be protected. You're lifestyle is too extreme." The use of the word horror in the spectacle is significant. Horror movies have the same psychological function as the freak shows of the carnivals. Like P. T. Barnum's sideshows, with its displays of Siamese twins, bearded ladies, eight-foot wrestlers, and eight-hundred-pound individuals, the horror genre taps into our fascination with, and fear of, the grotesque and the possibility that there is nothing beyond extinction. As British film critic Robin Wood aptly observes, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses and oppresses," including our inability to face our "nothingness and probable purposelessness."[5]

Fashion

Why are fashion shows popular in many modern societies? Until relatively recently, fashion trends were primarily the concern of the aristocracy, while the dress codes of ordinary people changed far less regularly and radically. Even among the upper classes of Medieval and Renaissance Europe, clothing was costly enough to be cared for, altered, reused, and passed from one generation to the next, more so than it is today. Indeed, radical changes to this pattern occurred infrequently until the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century made the production of both cloth and clothing far easier and less expensive.

Let us return briefly to the dress code with which we started this chapter—the business suit—to see how fashion trends are formed and institutionalized. The message underlying this apparel text is, of course, *dress for success*. How did this message crystallize in our culture? As you might know by now, the semiotician would look at the history of the business suit to seek an answer.

In seventeenth-century England there existed a bitter conflict to gain political, religious, and cultural control of society between the Royalist Cavaliers, who were faithful to King Charles I, and the Puritans, who were followers of Oliver Cromwell and controlled the House of Commons in Parliament. The Cavaliers were aristocrats who only superficially followed the teachings of the Anglican Church. Their main penchant was for flair and the good life. They dressed flamboyantly and ornately, donning colorful clothes, feathered hats,

and long flowing hair. The romantic figure of the cavalier aristocrat has been immortalized by novels such as *The Three Musketeers* (Alexandre Dumas, 1844) and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Edmond Rostand, 1897). The Puritans, on the other hand, frowned on ostentation and pomp. Known as the Roundheads, Cromwell's followers cropped their hair very closely, forbade all carnal pleasures, and prohibited the wearing of frivolous clothing. They wore dark suits and dresses with white shirts and collars. Through their clothes they hoped to convey sobriety, plainness, and rigid moral values.

The Cavaliers were in power throughout the 1620s and the 1630s. During this period the Puritans fled from England and emigrated to America, bringing with them their lifestyle and rigid codes of conduct and dress. Then in 1649, the Puritans, led by Cromwell, defeated the Royalist forces and executed the king. The king's son, Charles II, escaped to France to set up a court in exile. For a decade, England was ruled by the Puritans. Frowning upon all sorts of pleasure and frivolous recreation, they closed down theaters, censored books, and stringently enforced moralistic laws. Unable to tolerate such a strict way of life, many Cavaliers emigrated to America. The Puritans had set up colonies in the northeast; the Cavaliers settled in the south. With Cromwell's death in 1658, the Puritans were eventually thrown out of power and England welcomed Charles II back. Known as the Restoration, the subsequent twenty-five-year period saw a return to the adoption of a general cavalier lifestyle. For two centuries the Puritans had to bide their time once again. They were excluded from political office, from attending university, and from engaging in any official social enterprise. Throughout those years, however, they never strayed from their severe moral philosophy and lifestyle.

By the time of the Industrial Revolution, the Puritans had their final revenge. Their thrift, diligence, temperance, and industriousness—character traits that define the "Protestant work ethic"—allowed Cromwell's descendants to become rich and thus take over the economic reins of power. Ever since, Anglo-American culture has been influenced by Puritan ethics in the work force. The origins of modern corporate capitalism are to be found in those ethics. The belief that hard work, clean living, and economic prosperity are intrinsically interrelated became widespread by the turn of the twentieth century, and continues to undergird American social worldview.

The business suit is a contemporary version of the Puritan dress code. The toned-down colors (blues, browns, grays) that the business world demands are the contemporary reflexes of the Puritan's fear and dislike of color and ornament. The wearing of neckties, jackets, and short hair are all signifiers of solemnity and self-denial. During the hippie era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the office scene came briefly under the influence of a new form of cavalierism. Colorful suits, turtle-neck sweaters, longer hair, sideburns, Nehru jackets, medallions, and

beards constituted, for a time, a transgressive dress code that threatened to radically change the ethos of corporate capitalism. However, this fashion experiment failed, as the cavalier 1960s were overtaken by neo-puritanical forces in the late 1970s and 1980s. The Puritan dress code became once again prevalent in the business world, with only minor variations in detail. Today, "geek computer capitalists" have revived the informal dress code, donning jeans and other signifiers of "cool dress" to work. However, the workplace is much too much grounded in the Puritan ethic to allow a broad deviation from this ethic. It remains to be seen if the traditional business suit will indeed disappear from the workplace because of lifestyle changes brought about by technology.

The story of the business suit makes it obvious that fashion is a product of semiotic forces at work and, thus, like any other code, can be used for a host of connotative reasons. Military dress, for instance, connotes patriotism and communal values; but outside the military world it can convey a countercultural statement, a parody of nationalistic tendencies. Consider the case of blue jeans. In the 1930s and 1940s, blue jeans were cheap, strong, and mass-produced blue-collar working clothes. High-fashion articles, on the other hand, were manufactured with expensive fancy materials and fabrics. As early as the mid-1950s, the youth culture of the era adopted blue jeans as part of its thematic dress code. By the 1960s and 1970s, blue jeans were worn by the new generation of young people to proclaim equality between the sexes and among social classes. By the 1980s, this subversive meaning was forgotten, and the same clothing item became fashion statement. Blue jeans became much more expensive, much more exclusive, often personalized, and available at chic boutiques. Today, jeans are just jeans—comfortable clothing worn by people of all ages in informal settings. Clearly, the hippie view that they connote equality of all kinds has finally prevailed, at least semiotically speaking.

Objects

Recall Cheryl's friendship ring. It is indeed remarkable that a simple object can have such meaning. To the semiotician, however, this comes as no surprise. Any human-made object is perceived as a sign and is thus imbued with meaning. Marshall McLuhan claimed that objects are extensions of the human body and mind that evolve by themselves and, in turn, influence the evolution of the species.[6] From the invention of basic tools to the invention of computers, human evolution has indeed been shaped by the objects people make. The rapidity of social change is due to the nature of the technology itself. As Donald Norman puts it: "Human biology and psychology do not change much with time. High technology changes rapidly."[7]

From the dawn of civilization, objects have had great personal and cultural significance for no apparent reason other than they appeal to people. Archeologists reconstruct ancient cultures on the basis of the artifacts they uncover at a site. The reason why they are able to do this is because they reveal personal and social meanings and, thus, social organization by extension. Archeologists can imagine the role that any object they find played in the society by stacking it up against the other objects at the site. This helps them reconstruct the system of everyday life of the ancient culture.

To see how intrinsic objects are to this system, consider the case of toys. Denotatively, toys are objects made for children to play with; but toys connote much more than this. At no other time in North America did this become more apparent than during the 1983 Christmas shopping season. That season is now often described by cultural historians as the Christmas of the Cabbage Patch doll. Hordes of parents were prepared to pay almost anything to get one of these dolls for their daughters. Scalpers offered the suddenly and unexplainably out-of-stock dolls for hundreds (and even thousands) of dollars through classified ads. Adults fought each other in line-ups to get one of the few remaining dolls left in some toy store. How could a simple doll have caused such mass hysteria? Only something with great connotative power, the semiotician would reply. What is that connotative power? The Cabbage Patch dolls came with "adoption papers." Each doll was given a name, taken at random from 1938 state of Georgia birth records. Like any act of naming, this conferred upon the doll a human personality (Chap. 2). Thanks to computerization, no two dolls were manufactured alike, emphasizing their "human meaning" even more. The doll became alive in the child's mind, as do generally objects with names. The dolls were "people signs." No wonder they caused such hysteria. The children had adopted a real child (in the imagination at least). And this adoption was sanctioned and acknowledged by the doll makers and givers. What more could the child, and especially the parents, ask for?

The Cabbage Patch incident is a case of the power of latent animism, the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects. North Americans are not unique in animating dolls. In some societies, as mentioned previously, people believe that harm can be inflicted on a person by damaging a doll constructed to resemble that person. The Cabbage Patch doll craze was, really, a modern version of animism, or the view that objects have an inner being. In 1871, the British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) described the origin of religion in terms of animism.[8] According to Tylor, primitive peoples believed that spirits or souls are the cause of life in both human beings and objects. The difference between a living body and an object, to such peoples, was one of degree of animism, not lack thereof.

Before the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most people lived in agricultural communities. Children barely out of infancy were expected to share the workload associated with tending to the farm. There was, consequently, little distinction between childhood and adult roles. Society perceived children to be adults with smaller and weaker bodies. Indeed, in the medieval and Renaissance periods, the "babes" and "children" that appear in portraits look more like little adults than they do children. During the Industrial Revolution the center of economic activity shifted from the farm to the city. This led to a new social order in which children were left with few of their previous responsibilities, and a new conceptualization, or more accurately mythology, emerged, proclaiming children as vastly different from adults, needing time for school and play. Child labor laws were passed and the public education of children became compulsory. Protected from the harsh reality of industrial work, children came to have much more time at their disposal. As a result, toys were manufactured on a massive scale so that children could play constructively in the absence of parental tutelage.

Since then, toys have become inseparable from childhood, and thus reveal how adults relate to children and what kinds of values they want to instill in them. Toys, as the logo for a major toy chain once stated, "are us" *(Toys 'R Us)*. Aware of the signifying power of toys, manufacturers make them primarily with parents in mind. Toys symbolize what the parent wishes to impart to the child: educational toy makers cater to parents who emphasize learning, musical toy makers to those who stress music, doll makers to those who give emphasis to nurturing values, and so on. Children, on the other hand, often seem to prefer playing with objects they find around the house than with the toys that are bought for them. The adult fascination with toys is also a clear sign that the distinction between *young* and *old* is being blurred more and more in our culture. Toys are being designed with layers of meanings aimed at adults. Today, grown-ups enjoy children's music, comic books, and motion picture heroes such as Batman and Superman—all once considered strictly kid stuff. Toys are still for children, but childhood isn't as childish as it used to be, and adulthood tends to be a lot less adultish than it once was.

Video Games

In contemporary society, where electronic technologies can turn objects into beings through digital animism, the semiotics of objects is expanding its purview. Take the case of video games. Video games (VGs) played on a video console started out as arcade games, as far back as the 1920s. A modern computer

VG is really an arcade game with expanded technical capabilities. In the early 1970s, an electronic tennis game named *Pong* introduced the video-game industry to the United States. After this industry nearly collapsed in the mid-1980s, Japanese companies, such as the Nintendo Corporation, assumed leadership, improving game technology and introducing popular adventure games such as *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros*. Since then a VG culture has crystallized that is blossoming into one of the most profitable of all media ventures. As a result, concern over the effects of VGs on the mind and on behavior have cropped up across the social landscape.

The term *video game* is now used to refer to any electronic game, whether it is played on a computer with appropriate software, on a console, on some portable device (such as a cellphone, an iPhone, and so on), or through some Internet venue. There are now genres of VGs, and various formats in which they can be played. One of the most significant ones, for the purposes of the present discussion, is the so-called role-playing game (RPG), which gained popularity with the *Dungeons and Dragons* game in the 1980s. Players pretend to be in a situation or environment, such as a battle or newly discovered place; each simulated situation has its own rules and each participant is expected to play a specific role or character in the scenario. Occult and horror themes, along with related fantasy themes, are also common. The increase in the popularity of online gaming has resulted in subgenres appearing, such as multiplayer online role-playing games.

In a typical RPG, participants create a character, known as an avatar, by inputting descriptions of appearance and behavior into a communal online space for the game. Other characters have no way of knowing if the avatar's appearance is the real physical appearance of the player, or not. In this way, reality and fantasy overlap. The simulacrum effect seems to be occurring constantly in VG worlds. As Gary Fine observed already in the early 1980s, for many players such games constitute the main reality. For the game to work as an aesthetic experience, the "players must be willing to bracket their natural selves and enact a fantasy self."[9] Thus, VGs provide "a structure for making friends and finding a sense of community."[10] When players enter into the RPG world they assume a fantasy identity, abandoning the real-life one. It allows players to "endow themselves with attributes that in reality they do not possess: strength, social poise, rugged good looks, wisdom, and chivalric skills."[11]

Video gaming has a broad appeal because it is simulated reality and thus a means of creating imaginary worlds autonomously. For many it is replacing the traditional media and genres—adventure, spy, war, sports, and so on—making the escapism provided by the traditional media even more powerful by taking the make-believe element from the author and putting it directly

into the hands of the player. In RPGs, the player(s) is the scriptwriter, actor, and director at once. It is virtual cinema, and now has its own culture, with attendant websites, blogs, magazines, and the like. VGs give players the feeling of being immersed in a simulated world that resembles the real world. Today, VGs also record and send the speech and movements of the participant to the simulation program. This feature, which relays the sense of touch and other sensations in the virtual world, is making the VG world virtually indistinguishable from real life. Baudrillard's simulacrum, as mentioned several times, is revealing itself to be more of a description of the modern mind rather than a theory of it.

Steven Johnson has argued that VGs are not just a play on fantasy, but may actually be producing new forms of consciousness and increasing intelligence, since they provide a channel for the same kind of rigorous mental workout that mathematical theorems and puzzles do.[12] As a consequence, they improve the problem-solving skills of players. The complex plots and intricacies of video games are making people sharper today because of a "Sleeper Curve." Johnson took the term from Woody Allen's 1973 movie *Sleeper*, in which a granola-eating New Yorker falls asleep, waking up in the future, where junk and rich foods actually prolong life rather than shorten it. According to Johnson, the most apparently debasing forms of mass culture, such as VGs, are turning out to be nutritional after all. This may or may not be true. Will our next scientists, artists, and geniuses be addicted VG players? It is quite a stretch of the imagination to say that VGs enhance problem-solving skills and that these are helping our species evolve.

Technology

The methods and techniques that a society employs to make its objects are known cumulatively as technology. The term is derived from the Greek words *tekhne*, which refers to an "art" or "craft," and *logia* "a system of logic." Although it is a product of culture, technology eventually becomes itself a contributing factor to the culture's development, transforming traditional signifying systems, frequently with unexpected social consequences. The earliest known human artifacts are hand-ax flints found in Africa, western Asia, and Europe. They date from approximately 250,000 BCE, signaling the beginning of the Stone Age. The first toolmakers were nomadic groups of hunters who used the sharp edges of stone to cut their food and to make their clothing and shelters. By about 100,000 BCE the graves of hominids show pear-shaped axes, scrapers, knives, and other stone instruments, indicating that the original

hand ax had become a tool for making tools. The use of tools is not specific to the human species; it can be observed in other animal species. However, the capacity for creating tools to make other tools distinguishes human technology from that of all other animals.

Perhaps the biggest step forward in the history of technology was the control of fire. By striking flint against pyrites to produce sparks, early people could kindle fires at will, thereby freeing themselves from the necessity of perpetuating fires obtained from natural sources. Besides the obvious benefits of light and heat, fire was also used to bake clay pots, producing heat-resistant vessels that were then used for cooking, brewing, and fermenting. Fired pottery later provided the crucibles in which metals could be refined. No wonder then that the Prometheus myth is about the discovery of fire. As the story starts, the god Zeus plotted to destroy humanity by depriving the earth of fire. Prometheus, a member of the Titans (an early race of gigantic gods), stole fire and gave it to human beings. Zeus punished him by ordering him bound to a remote peak in the Caucasus Mountains. An eagle came to devour Prometheus' liver every day, and the liver grew back each night. After Prometheus had suffered for many centuries, the hero Hercules killed the eagle, setting Prometheus (and by implication technology) free.

Early technologies were not centered only on practical tools. Colorful minerals were pulverized to make pigments that were then applied to the human body as cosmetics, and to other objects as decoration. Early people also learned that if certain materials were repeatedly hammered and put into a fire, they would not split or crack. The discovery of how to relieve metal stress eventually brought human societies out of the Stone Age. About 3000 BCE, people also found that alloying tin with copper produced bronze. Bronze is not only more malleable than copper but also holds a better edge, a quality necessary for making such objects as swords and sickles. Although copper deposits existed in the foothills of Syria and Turkey, at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the largest deposits of copper in the ancient world were found on the island of Crete. With the development of ships that could reach this extremely valuable resource, Knossos on Crete became a wealthy mining center during the Bronze Age. Humans had embarked on a major cultural revolution—a shift from a nomadic hunting culture to a more settled one based on agriculture. Farming communities had actually emerged near the end of the most recent Ice Age, about 10,000 BCE. Their traces can be found in widely scattered areas, from southeastern Asia to Mexico. The most famous ones emerged in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) near the temperate and fertile river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. The loose soil in this fertile crescent was easily scratched for planting, and an abundance of trees was available for firewood.

The purpose of the foregoing schematic historical excursus has been to emphasize the theory that technology shapes cultural evolution and worldview. Take as a simple example of this theory the invention of the clock in 1286. The invention meant that, from that moment on, people would no longer have to live in a world based primarily on reference to the daily course of the sun and the yearly change of the seasons. The precise measurement of time made it possible for people to plan their day and their lives much more exactly. The repercussions of this event are being felt to this day. We plan our entire day, week, and even life around precise "time signifiers," that would have been unthinkable before the invention of the clock. "Meet you at 8:30" would have had no meaning in, say, the year 868. In that era, the more likely expression night have been "Meet you at sunset." Today, everything from class times and movie times to wedding dates are planned exactly on the basis of clock time.

Such nineteenth- and twentieth-century inventions as the telephone, the phonograph, the wireless radio, motion pictures, the automobile, television, the airplane, and the computer have added to the nearly universal respect that society in general has come to feel for technology. With the advent of mass-production technology, not only has the availability of objects for mass consumption become a fact of everyday life, but mass consumption has itself become a way of life. Not everyone thinks that this social outcome is a blessing. Since the middle part of the twentieth century, many people have reacted against the very consumerist lifestyle and worldview that it has engendered, believing that it threatens the quality of life. Supporters of this viewpoint propose a value system in which all people must come to recognize that the earth's resources are limited and that human life must be structured around a commitment to control the growth of industry, the size of cities, and the use of energy.

"Babbage's Galaxy"

No other invention since the printing press has changed society more radically than the computer. The computer has transferred the human archive of knowledge from paper to electronic storage. Today, information storage is measured not in page numbers but in gigabytes. Common computers and digital devices can now store the equivalent of millions of books. They can retrieve information from the Internet within seconds. The Web 2.0 world in which we live has literally connected all knowledge into one huge database of information. In effect, we no longer live in "Gutenberg's Galaxy," as McLuhan called the age of print, but in "Babbage's Galaxy," to coin a parallel phrase in reference to the nineteenth-century British mathematician who worked out the principles of the modern digital computer, Charles Babbage (1791–1871).

Living in Babbage's Galaxy, the modern human being is now more inclined to learn from the screen than from the book or from any other source. The mystique associated with the author of a published work is starting to fade as the world's texts become available literally at one's fingertips. The whole notion of authorship is being drastically transformed as a consequence. Journalists, students, instructors, and many more professionals can now compose their verbal texts electronically and communicate them to others from remote locations. Many people work at home (or anywhere else for that matter) and communicate with fellow workers with their digital devices.

The computer has also introduced a new form of text-making and text-usage known as hypertextuality. Reading a printed page is, at the level of the signifier (that is, of deciphering the actual physical signs on the page), a linear process, since it consists in decoding the individual words and their combinations in sentences in the framework of a specific signification system (a novel, a dictionary, and so on). Information on any specific sign in the printed text must be sought out physically: for example, if one wants to follow up on a reference in the text, one has to do it by consulting other printed texts or by asking people. This is also what must be done when one wants to determine the meaning of a word found in a text. Dictionaries serve this very purpose. The computer screen has greatly facilitated such tasks by introducing a hypertextual dimension. The term *hypertext* was coined in 1965 to describe an interlinked system of texts in which a user can jump from one to another. This was made possible with the invention of *hyperlinks*—portions of a document that can be linked to other related documents. By clicking on the hyperlink, the user is immediately connected to the document specified by the link. Web pages are designed in this way, being written in a simple computer language called HTML (Hypertext Markup Language). A series of instruction tags are inserted into pieces of ordinary text to control the way the page looks and these can be manipulated when viewed with a Web browser. Tags determine the typeface or act as instructions to display images, and they can be used to link up with other Web pages.

As opposed to the linear structure of printed paper texts, hypertextuality permits the user to browse through related topics, regardless of the presented order of the topics. The links are often established both by the author of a hypertext document and by the user, depending on the intent of the document. For example, navigating among the links to the word *language* in an article contained on a website might lead the user to the *International Phonetic Alphabet*, the science of *linguistics*, samples of languages, and so on. Hypertextuality was introduced as a regular feature of computers in 1987 when Apple began distributing a new program called *Hypercard* with its new

machines. This was the first program to provide a linking function permitting navigation among files of computer print text and graphics by clicking keywords or icons. By 1988, compact disc players were built into computers.

Interpreting a text involves three types of cognitive processes. First, it entails the ability to access the actual contents of the text at the level of the signifier, that is, the ability to decode its signs paradigmatically as words, images, and so on. Only someone possessing knowledge of the codes (verbal and nonverbal) with which the text has been assembled can accomplish this. If it is in Finnish, then in order to derive an *interpretant* (a specific kind of meaning) from it, the decoder must know the Finnish language, the conceptual metaphors that characterize Finnish modes of speaking, and so on and so forth. The second process entails knowledge of how the semiotic organization unfolds in the specific text, that is, of how the text generates its meanings through a series of internal and external semiotic processes (denotation, connotation, and so on). This requires some knowledge on the part of the interpreter of cultural codes. This is, in fact, the level of the signified that is implicit in the question: *What does it mean?* Finally, various contextual factors enter into the entire process to constrain the meaning. Such things as the reason for accessing a text, the purpose of the text, and so on will determine what the individual interpreter will get from the text. When viewed globally, these processes suggest that text-interpretation is, de facto, hypertextual, because it involves being able to navigate among the three processes simultaneously. In effect, the physical structure of hypertextuality on the computer screen may constitute a kind of "mirror model" of how people process all kinds of texts.[13]

Technopoly

Living in the Internet age, one cannot but admire and take delight in the staggering achievements made possible by the computer revolution. However, our naive faith in the computer is really no different from other forms of animism. The computer is one of *Homo sapiens'* greatest technological achievements. As a maker of objects and artifacts, the human species has finally come up with an object that is felt more and more to have human-like qualities. This, too, reflects an ancient aspiration of our species. In Sumerian and Babylonian myths there were accounts of the creation of life through the animation of clay. The ancient Romans were fascinated by automata that could mimic human patterns. By the time Mary Shelley's grotesque and macabre novel, *Frankenstein*, was published in 1818, the idea that robots could be brought to life horrified the modern imagination. Since the first decades of the twentieth century the quest to animate machines has been relentless. It has captured the

imagination of many image-makers. Movie robots and humanoids have attributes of larger-than-life humans. Modern human beings are experiencing a feeling of astonishment at finding themselves for the first time ever at the center of everything, having recreated themselves in the form of robots. However, there is a risk here. It is easy to forget that we are much more than machines, possessing a consciousness imbued with *fantasia*, sensitivity, intuition, and pathos, which comes with having human flesh and blood.

This can be called a simulacrum illusion, to paraphrase Baudrillard. The human brain is a connective organ that comes to an understanding of things through amalgams of various kinds. Given the connective structure of the Internet it is easy to believe in a new mythology—the human brain can be easily reproduced through technology. As the world has become constantly more linked through new digital technologies, the linkage of people through electric circuitry has brought about a new depth and breadth of people's involvement in world events and has broken down the traditional boundaries that kept them apart. Interaction through technology is becoming more and more the default of daily life.

But all this could lead to what Neil Postman called, in 1962, the emergence of a technopoly.[14] Postman defined technopoly as a society that has become totally reliant on technology and seeks authorization in it, as well as deriving recreation from it, and even taking its orders from it. This is a coping strategy that results when technology saturates the world with information. In a way, technopoly theory is the counterpart of connected intelligence theory. Postman is, if course, aware of the principle that tool-using is a technology that has brought about paradigm shifts throughout human history, since it leads to amplifications of human skills and attributes, as discussed earlier. He identifies three shifts based on this principle:

1. *Tool-using cultures* invent and employ tools to solve physical problems of existence and to serve an emerging world of ritual symbolism and art. These cultures are theocratic and unified by a metaphysical view of the world.
2. *Technocratic cultures* invent and employ cognitive tools, such as the alphabet, for creating a particular worldview or "thought-world," as he called it. This serves to overthrow the previous metaphysical thought-world—for example, heliocentricity overthrew the belief in the Earth as the center of the universe. Technocracy impels people to invent, hence the rise of science and literacy. A technocratic society is still controlled "from above," that is by religious, educational, scientific, and other social institutions.
3. *Technopoly* is a "totalitarian technocracy," evolving on its own. It reduces humans to seeking meaning in machines and in computation.

Postman also saw negative consequences for education in a technopoly, viewing the world of mass communications as a system that would turn society into an amorphous mass of non-thinkers. He altered McLuhan's phrase of "the medium is the message" to "the medium is the metaphor," insisting that new media are mind-numbing tools. Postman was particularly concerned about children's upbringing in a technopoly. While children were once seen as little adults, the Enlightenment brought broader knowledge of childhood, leading gradually to the perception of childhood as an important period of development. Since children now have easy access to information intended for adults, the result is a diminishment of their developmental potential. He thus warned that those who do not see the downside of technology, constantly demanding more innovation and therefore more information, are in effect silent witnesses to a new cognitive form of mind control. The only way to improve the situation, as Postman saw it, would be to get students to use technology smartly by being educated in the history, social effects, and psychological biases of technology. The dangers of technology have arrived. But the semiotician would say that the human imagination has always been one that was immersed in its own objects—it especially believes as true what it itself makes. The implication is that as the technology changes, so too will our world-making ways.

Notes

1. Helen E. Fisher, *Anatomy of love* (New York: Norton, 1992), 253–4.
2. In *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), Mircea Eliade gives an in-depth analysis of how the sacred vs. profane dichotomy undergirds the constitution of cultures generally.
3. See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), and *Speech genres and other late essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
4. Ted Greenwald, *Rock & roll* (New York: Friedman, 1992), 53.
5. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 23.
6. Marshall McLuhan, *The mechanical bride: Folklore of industrial man* (New York: Vanguard, 1951).
7. Donald A. Norman, *The design of everyday things* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xiv.
8. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive culture* (London: Murray, 1871).
9. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5.

10. Ibid, p. 59.
11. Ibid, p. 60
12. Steven Johnson, *Everything bad is good for you: How today's popular culture is actually making us smarter* (New York: Riverside Books, 2005).
13. An analysis of hypertextuality is the one by George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical theory and new media in an era of globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
14. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

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