From:

Putting the magic back into design: from object fetishism to product semantics and beyond

Rafael Cardoso

Fetishism and its objects

[acknowledging challengers]
Fetishism is something of a dirty word. Beyond the obvious and overriding connotations of sexual deviance, it is also generally employed in a pejorative sense in academic circles and learned discourse. This is particularly true when the topic is 'commodity fetishism', a term originally coined by Karl Marx and still widely used in economics, anthropology and cultural studies. To cite an example, in his discussion of the relationship between material culture and mass consumption, Daniel Miller states that, 'The mundane artefact is not merely problematic but inevitably embarrassing as the focused topic of analysis, a practice which always appears fetishistic.' Further on, he makes reference to 'the kind of fetishism to which material culture studies are always prone, when people are superseded as the subject of investigation by objects.' [giving full credit to challengers] Miller here touches on the crux of the fetishism issue: the very real danger that objects might take the place of people in a society increasingly prone to substitute material consumption for other forms of human interaction. Clearly, no one wishes to aggravate a state of things in which many human beings are considered less valuable than some commodities, as is already unfortunately the case. [responding to challengers] Nonetheless, the phrasing of Miller's objections is curious. His use of fetishism as a term of depreciation is vague and imprecise. What lies behind the knee-jerk reflex that leads us to reject fetishism outright, to flee from it as something shameful and threatening? I wish to contend here that fetishism is the expression of a particularly relevant analytical concept bearing upon the way in which subjects relate to objects, and abstract to concrete. Bordering on reification and alienation as philosophical categories, fetishism is perhaps the key to understanding how and why objects acquire meaning. A fuller discussion

of the origins and meanings of the term may help shed light on this contention.

[responding in full]
[begins with a definition of the key term; purpose of historicizing “fetish” with its etymology is to lift it from current sexual connotations]
Fetishism is a curious word. The first use of the terms *fétiche* in French and *fetish* in English dates from the seventeenth century, originating directly from an appropriation of the Portuguese word *feitiço*, meaning a magical charm or sorcerer’s spell. As the first Europeans to traverse oceans and encounter little known peoples in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese were also first to witness the cult Of inanimate objects to which supernatural powers are attributed, a practice common in various West African cultures, then and now. Lacking a more appropriate understanding of religions other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam, those Portuguese explorers naturally established a link between such phenomena and their own cultural experience of witchcraft (a witch, in Portuguese, is *feiticeira*), tempered by the deep-seated fears of popular superstition in the late mediaeval period. When French and English writers began to devote attention to the same phenomena of attributing magical powers to idols and amulets, they made use of the existing Portuguese term, adapting it to its modern form. At the outset, then, the term fetish is related to two distinct but interrelated sets of discourses: firstly, the cult of fetishes, ie, idolatry or the adoration of material objects as expressions of supernatural power; and, secondly, the discursive structures establishing a difference between the colonising self and the colonised other on the grounds of deviance from accepted religious practice.

The term continued in sporadic use in French and English from its inception during the latter half of the seventeenth century until its definitive appearance in print in 1760 in a treatise by ethnologist Charles de Brosses. By 1835, *fétichisme* appears as an entry in the dictionary of the French academy. Auguste Comte made use of the term to refer generically to so-called primitive religious practices, a usage eventually dropped in favour of the term animism, preferred by British anthropologist EB Tylor in his writings

of the later nineteenth century. Tylor restricted the term fetishism to the specific doctrine linking spiritual powers to certain material objects, the oldest meaning still current today. From the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, therefore, fetishism was used to describe the attribution of magical qualities to a class of objects produced by cultures other than those of Europe. It is possible to imagine a natural scientist or *savant* of the Enlightenment age holding up an amulet or idol, to him curious and grotesque, and explaining to his audience that this is what savages called a fetish. The enraptured audience might burst into nervous laughter, but certainly no European of the time was so divorced from religious belief as to avoid feeling a strange mingling of awe and fear in the face of the inexplicable.

[link from religious context to economic one]
It is precisely this sense of eerie mystery that led Marx to resort to the term in defining a crucial aspect of his theory of the circulation of commodities and money. The fourth section of the first chapter of Part One of Volume One of *Capital* (1867) is entitled, with purposeful obscurity: 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof'. This

in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.'[9] **Attempting to elucidate this seemingly superstitious statement, Marx goes on to explain that objects take on a transcendent value upon being turned into commodities, a quality he describes as their 'mystical character'.**

What is of particular interest for the present discussion is the fact **that Marx transposes fetishism from its then prevalent anthropological meaning to a new social and economic one.**

Marx is thus responsible for shifting the application of fetishism from the realm of the supernatural to the worldly arena of commodities and consumption.

Thus set out, it is clear that a common thread unites all three senses: in all of them, *fetishism is the action of investing objects with meanings not inherent to their nature*. The different types of fetishism each attribute a symbolic value – respectively spiritual, ideological and psychological – to the concrete existence of material artefacts. Simply put, they bring things to life. This is to say, in other words, that fetishism as a concept describes the way in which we human beings attempt to include non-human things in our humanity while, at the same time, connecting ourselves to their essential nature and to what we sometimes suppose to be their divine essence.

Taking fetishism in a broader sense than any of the three existing denotations of the word, it becomes a useful tool for thinking about the way in which people endow things with meaning. It is worth noting that, although all three senses of the term remain in current usage, none of them has ever managed to attain a positive connotation. Fetishism of any sort is still perceived as something taboo, if not explicitly blameworthy and pejorative. Is this not perhaps because the fetishistic attitude is much more common than we would care to admit?

In light of the previous section's discussion of inherent meanings, more attentive readers will not have failed to notice the obvious parallel between fetishism, as broadly defined above, and the design field. Design is, after all, also a process of investing objects with meanings not inherent to their nature. When someone designs a computer keyboard, for instance, he/she might introduce a number of possible meanings much more complex than what is often disingenuously described as function. Such meanings may range from something as simple as a warning of 'pay attention' by placing a red key in the middle of a black keyboard to something as subtle as conveying concepts such as 'easy to use' or 'modern' through the product's appearance. In the same vein, the design of any book or magazine expresses meanings infinitely more complex than 'open from left to right' or 'this caption goes with that photo'. Modern graphic design disposes of a veritable arsenal of techniques and instruments intended to evoke a given emotional response, and its success or failure

depends to a great extent on its ability to carry out extraordinarily subtle tasks such as establishing user identification or transmitting recognisable identities. Thus, in examining any designed object, we are justified in asking ourselves how and why it has acquired the status or significance it may possess. Assuming that an object is capable of transmitting a given psychic charge or emotional content, how and when was this level of signification invested in it?

The parallel between design and fetishism may perhaps raise a few eyebrows, particularly in light of the negative connotations usually associated with the latter term.

A further incursion into etymology may help clarify my position. Seeing as fetishism derives indirectly from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, it is worth considering that word more attentively. *Feitiço* is related to the past participle *feito* (done) of the verb *fazer* (to do). Ordinarily used as a noun, *feitiço* means magical charm or spell, as mentioned above. In this sense, it derives from the conception, common in Portuguese usage, that a sorcerer's spell is 'done to' (in the sense of 'cast upon') someone. In some Afro-Brazilian religions, it is still usual to describe a hex as 'work done' (*trabalho feito*) against someone. In a more rare and almost forgotten sense, *feitiço* appears in dictionaries as an adjective, meaning artificial, fake or false – in a related word, factitious. This latter meaning points clearly in the direction of the word's etymological origin, namely: the Latin adjective *factitius*, meaning artificial. Underlying all these words is the idea that an object is made with artifice, that it possesses the power to do (L *facere*) something that fools people into thinking it is something other than what it is. The word *factitius* is defined in Latin as *generatum est manu et arte factus*. In other words, that which is 'artificial' has been 'made with art', in the sense of cunning. The Latin *arte factus* is, of course, the root of another group of words including the term artefact, which has been much used in the present essay. This is a different, and more positive, idea of something 'made with art', no longer in the sense of cunning but of displaying great skill and ability, a sense more akin to the modern conception of artistry.

It is perhaps not surprising that fetish and artefact are related by a very few intermediate links in the etymological arena.

Schematically represented, the relationship

is as follows:
fetish < *feitiço* (Port) < *factitius* (L) < *facere* (L) > *arte factus* (L) > artefact
Not surprising, because the idea of an ancient relationship between magic and art is certainly not new. The classic formulation by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979) suggests that art has evolved historically from magical rituals; and the idea of the artist as someone endowed with the ability to evoke, almost by magic, wonderful things out of nothing is still cogent enough. Art and magic both partake of a process strictly describable as objectification, ie, the evocation of abstract ideas and their transformation into a concrete and palpable form. As part of their historical effort to distance themselves from the traditional arts and crafts, designers have often lost sight of this magical – literally, factitious – aspect of what they do, choosing instead to think of their activities as a species of engineering, guided not by anything as imprecise as creativity and artifice but rather by rigorous methodologies and protocols of a scientific and technological bent. This was particularly true of the various currents of design thinking emerging out of Functionalism between the 1930s and 1960s, some of which remain influential in design education to this day. To a great extent, the result of such thinking has been disastrous, imposing a stranglehold on designers that has only really begun to be broken in the past few decades.
Many, if not most, formally trained designers are still irked by the idea of meddling with the appearance of an object without altering its essential structure. This is especially the case if the object is of a type in which the separation between structure and appearance is extreme, such as an electrical appliance, an automobile or any other product in which the operational mechanism is capable of functioning to a large degree independently of its surface appearance or outer shell. The Modernist dictum against styling continues to hold a powerful sway among designers, stigmatising this type of interference as superficial, misleading and essentially wasteful. It is easy to take such a puritanical rejection of formal values as a positive guideline in this age of increasing

environmental degradation and crisis.
Historically speaking, design has often been used as an instrument to increase consumer demand for novelty and thereby accelerate cycles of product obsolescence, generating over-consumption and waste. This empirical objection based on past experience does not, however, constitute much of a case for the opposite viewpoint. Modernist design and Functionalist design, as much as any other kind, can be subjected to the same perverse logic of consumerism that dominates the marketplace in the era of late capitalism. Superficiality and waste are not restricted to any one style of design or even to an emphasis on style over substance or form over function. Even the sturdiest, plainest and most 'functional' objects exist within a broader system of production, distribution and consumption of goods that determines how and when they will be sold, used and discarded without much regard for the formal preoccupations so dear to the archaic ideology of 'good design'.
All of which finally brings us back to the issues of the attribution of meanings to objects and of inherent versus adherent meanings. As has been argued above, artefacts possess few, if any, fixed meanings. In the case of a glass bottle, for instance, the only meanings capable of passing the man from Mars test would probably be related to the physical nature of the object: eg, smooth, hard, cool, portable, breakable and so on. Moving on to those meanings termed inherent, the range of signification is still limited. The complex of ideas traditionally associated with the term 'function' comes to mind: eg, the purpose of the bottle is to contain liquids,

the bottle can be corked shut, the bottle is big or small, and so on. Certain meanings relating to the bottle's desirability, fashionableness or style as an object (reception) might also be thought of as inherent, as shall be seen further on. Any other meanings the bottle may possess would tend to fall into the category I have labelled adherent; and, of these, there is an almost infinite number. Three random examples, chosen to help establish a range of possible adherent meanings: this is the bottle granddad used to keep his favourite brandy (personal context); this bottle is of sixteenth century Venetian coloured glass (historical context); this is a

Coca-Cola bottle (social context). Where do such meanings come from? At what point in the object's existence do they arise? Presumably, different types of meanings come about in different ways.

Meanings are given to objects by their makers, sellers, buyers, users or any combination of these groupings. It is safe to say that virtually all meanings an object may convey derive ultimately from subjective intention, since even those meanings described here as fixed are the result of human activity bearing upon the raw materials of nature. An object in its natural state, such as a stone, only acquires meaning if human beings somehow interact with it. Meaning (as opposed to function or purpose) is essentially a quality of human self-awareness, possessing only an indirect relation to the natural organisation of matter.[11] How, then, are different meanings imputed to different objects at different times? I would suggest that there are two basic mechanisms for investing artefacts with meaning – *attribution* and *appropriation* – and, furthermore, that these correspond roughly to different phases in the object's existence, namely: *production/distribution* and *consumption/use*, respectively. The dividing line is the point at which an artefact effectively changes hands between maker and user; in modern society, this is the point of sale, the point at which a product becomes a commodity.

Attribution encompasses the various meanings invested in an object during the process of its genesis.[12] Said process begins with the original insight or abstract idea of what the object might be like and culminates in its production, distribution and exchange or sale. Attribution is mainly responsible for what has thus far been termed inherent meanings. The entire design process is evidently included in this category. It is perhaps less evident, though, that marketing and advertising also play a huge role in attributing inherent meanings to artefacts in our society today.

Regardless of so-called functional concerns, manufactured products sold as commodities arrive at the point of sale loaded with meanings related to status, style, fashion and performance that are so deeply enmeshed with their structure and appearance that they can be considered inherent, for all practical intents and purposes. Thus, it is possible for a cell phone or a pair of trainers/sneakers 'to look' efficient, modern, sophisticated or even

sexy based simply on principles of brand recognition, market segmentation and so on. At first sight, such meanings might appear to fall into the category I have labelled adherent, but they differ insofar as they are capable of being universally recognised across a broad social spectrum independently of the use people make of them. In other words, at the point of their immediate reception, such meanings are perceived as being a part of the object's identity. The fact that a Mont Blanc pen or a Mercedes-Benz automobile are considered elegant and dependable is not solely attributable to their structure and engineering, but also to their appearance, price and the mystique surrounding the brand name. To separate such aspects of their ability to signify meaning from the physical aspects of the artefact itself would be an exercise of extreme artificiality.

Appropriation, on the other hand, encompasses the virtually infinite range of adherent meanings that may be tacked on to an object

once it has entered into use. In contrast to the inherent meanings deriving from attribution, appropriation includes all meanings not universally recognised at the artefact's immediate point of reception. These tend to come about on a case-by-case basis, arising from the experience, use and history of a given object. As previously suggested, even the most mundane artefact can acquire a privileged status by association to an important person or event (eg, the bullet that killed Martin Luther King.) A visit to any museum will demonstrate that artefacts are eminently and continuously subject to appropriation, interpretation, reinvention and subversion. Activities as different as using a knife as a letter opener or revising critical opinion regarding a work of art are examples of appropriation, of the way we wrench objects from their context of genesis and force them to conform to whatever purpose may suit us at any given moment. Appropriation is a continuous process of construction and deconstruction of meaning, comparable to the way words are transformed in linguistic usage over time through the delicate give and take between denotation and connotation, slang, colloquialism and erudite discourse. Like certain words (eg, gay), a given artefact may eventually come to mean something entirely different than what it was

intended to mean at its initial point of immediate reception. Many artefacts originally produced for purposes of work, sport or warfare and used today as decoration for the home provide fitting examples of the extremes achieved by such changes of signification. No one is shocked to find an antique sewing machine, a duck decoy or a samurai sword adorning someone's sitting room; yet such a practice would be frankly nonsensical to the object's maker.

It may, perhaps, be useful to consider how closely the act of appropriation of an object conforms to the logic of the psychoanalytical concept known as cathexis. This awful word is used in English-language translations of Freudian theory to describe the process of concentrating and investing psychic energy in a person, thing or idea. Falling in love is a classic example of cathexis, since it involves devoting a large amount of desire and attention to the one beloved, even to the point of attributing imagined or imaginary qualities to that person. The term originally used by Freud is *Besetzung*, meaning 'occupation', especially in the sense of a military occupation of a territory. I find it useful to think of cathexis as a sort of colonisation of an object by the subject. The subject takes interest in an object and invests it with a range of personal meanings, desires, care and attention, expecting to reap the benefits of this effort by eventually taking possession of the said object. The motivation behind cathexis, as far as I am able to understand the concept, is to appropriate the object and absorb it into the ego of the subject, with all its perceived qualities.

This is not so different from the logic of consumerism. The consumption of any commodity begins with desire (I'd like to have that) and ends up, budget permitting, with the acquisition of the product, along with all its perceived benefits. (Such a conception adds new depth to formulations like, 'I saw a dress I fell in love with today'.)

In the psychoanalytic sense, fetishism differs from cathexis insofar as the fetishist subject does not necessarily expect to appropriate his/her object of desire. The simple act of investing psychic energy (desire, meaning) in the fetish object is sufficient to gratify the fetishist subject. Once again, this points to a parallel between design and fetishism. As opposed to the consumer, who cathects the commodity and appropriates it

to his/her very personal set of meanings, the designer fetishises the product and attributes to it meanings that may survive to a greater or lesser degree over time. Here, we come to the profoundly intriguing question, raised at the start of this essay, of how and why certain meanings endure and others do not.

What makes an inherent meaning more or less capable of resisting the adherent meanings subsequently tacked on to the object through its continued use? Clearly enough, there are different types of inherent meanings. Those invested by advertising and marketing, for instance, may tend to be shorter lived than those invested by design, though we still lack historical distance to gauge this empirically. Even if we restrict ourselves to those inherent meanings arising directly from the processes of design and production, important differences are noticeable from product to product. How can these best be understood and, possibly even, anticipated? This is where the debate on product semantics works into our discussion.