

Material Culture in Theory: A case study

Art is an intriguing aspect of material culture, for on the surface its purpose is aesthetic and decorative, however there is often a plethora of significance and meaning embedded within it. Art can be reflective of social and cultural customs, values, and beliefs. Examining art through a structuralist lens can be beneficial in exploring and understanding the meaning within it. Therefore in this discussion, the fundamental elements of structuralism are explained to provide a theoretical framework with which to examine and explore art as an aspect of material culture. Art objects created by the Kwakiutl, a group of North American indigenous people from an area now known as British Columbia (Jacknis, 2002, P.06), provide a case study to illustrate the concepts and ideas addressed in this discussion.

The study of materiality and objects is one which traverses into numerous different disciplines. Analyses of artifacts are typically associated with archaeology and history. Buildings are designed by architects. Anthropologists and sociologists often look to objects to gain insight into different cultures and societies. Human beings produce and possess an enormous variety of things, from clothes to art, to tools and furniture and buildings. Natural objects which are used and manipulated by humans are also examined in material culture, such as stones. In short, almost anything physical is relevant to the study of material culture. It is a study which serves to merge the various fields which explore materials and things, providing a confluence of various theories, ideas, and concepts from individual yet related fields to establish an understanding of the relationship between humans and materiality (Tilley *et al.*, 2013).

Structuralism is a theory which derives from linguistics, which when applied to culture views it as a structured system, and examines things in relation to each other rather than in isolation. One way to understand the structuralist perspective is to apply it to language. Structuralists do not view words as having intrinsic meaning, however it is their place within the structure of a language that gives them meaning and significance. Swiss linguist Saussure differentiated between the “signified” (the concept of something) and the “signifier” (the sound, image, or word which is attributed to the concept) (Layton. R, 2013, P.30). For example, in English, the word “house” is usually attributed to a type of building people inhabit. This is an example of a signifier. However, those whose mother tongue is French will know it as “une maison”, whilst Spanish speakers will refer to it as “una casa”. Saussure argues that the variation of signifiers in other languages supports his assertion that signifiers are arbitrary and have no intrinsic meaning. However, to attribute a signifier to a concept gives it social and cultural meaning.

In viewing culture this way, one can gain valuable insight into the meaning of cultural elements. For example, a needle used for sewing by itself is merely a small piece of metal. Its function and meaning is obscured by ambiguity until it is combined with not only fabric and thread, but with centuries of refining a skill and trade. When we place a needle within a historical and cultural context, its meaning and value is amplified. Applying a structuralist approach requires us to consider this context. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the key thinkers with regards to

structuralism as it relates to society. He suggested that the structure of human cognition is reflected in social relationships, and proposed the concept of binary opposition (Layton. R, 2013, P.35). This concept suggests that all aspects of human culture can only be understood in relation to each other and in examining their place within a wider structure. An example of this with regards to material culture is that of spoons. A teaspoon is only a teaspoon in relation to a tablespoon or a soup spoon. It is the existence of many different types of spoons that gives each individual spoon a more precise meaning and function.

In other words, one of the central ideas of structuralism is that we should not regard things in isolation (Miller, 2010, p.51). To set an example of this, let's say one has a chair in their bedroom. A chair, many would agree, has an almost universal function of serving as a place to sit. However, let's say this individual seldom sits in this chair, instead, they use it as a convenient spot to throw their worn clothes when getting changed at the end of the day. Does this render the chair a certain kind of laundry hamper? The chair could also serve as a kind of table, somewhere convenient for everyday items in need of a home during a liminal phase of their use. The function of a chair is not always clear cut. It is beneficial to examine it in its relation to other things in order to fully comprehend its significance and to establish a more authentic understanding of what it is.

This point is illustrated in "Van Gogh's Chair", an 1888 painting by artist Van Gogh (Gogh, 1888), which depicts a chair with a few choice items placed on its seat. At first

glance, it is simply a painting of a chair, however, some consider it to be an type of self-portrait, as the painting features a pipe and tobacco placed on the seat, two objects which were personal to Van Gogh as smoking was considered one of his pleasures (Bailey, 2020). This highlights how, when applied within the context of the life of Van Gogh, a painting of a simple chair and a few other objects can be indicative of a deeper personal meaning. Within this context, what seems to be an image of a chair could in fact be considered a self portrait, and is thus a signifier for a more profound meaning.

This idea can also be demonstrated in a painting by Belgian artist René Magritte's 1929 painting "La Trahison des Images", which depicts a smoking pipe with the text "Ceci n'est pas une pipe", which translates to "This is not a pipe" (Magritte, 1929). The painting highlights the distinction between the concept of something and the words or images which represent that concept. A physical smoking pipe is the signified, whilst the painting is the signifier. In that way, the exclamation that it isn't a pipe is entirely accurate, and perfectly illustrates Saussure's concept of the signified and the signifier.

These key structuralist concepts are also illustrated in Kwakiutl art objects, which are reflective of a unique and culturally rich perception of the year. The Kwakiutl's perception of the seasons is divided into two distinct periods, known as "baxus" and "tsetsequa". The former of which is attributed to summertime, whilst the latter is attributed to the winter months. These two periods have their own set of rituals and ceremonies as well as social structure. For example, "baxus" is the period during which economic activities and potlatches take place. "Tsetsequa", however, is a time during

which supernatural spirits are present. These two periods could be distinguished as secular and sacred respectively (Rosman and Rubel, 1990). Reid (1976) forms of a different yet not entirely separate distinction of “baxus” being the time to hunt and “tsetsequa” being to time to be hunted, as many of Kwakiutl myths and spiritual entities relate to themes of cannibalism. Their prayers and rituals express their divided will to consume and live off of animals and to coexist at peace with them. It is believed that in offering oneself during the period of “tsetsequa”, this acts as suitable retribution for hunting and killing animals during the “baxus” period, thus maintaining an equilibrium.

This binary division of these two periods is reflected in Kwakiutl art and objects.

Rosman and Rubel (1990) suggest that this distinction is reflected in the art in three ways. The first, is that the art objects can be classified into two sets, which are used in their respective set of ceremonies. Secondly, there are stylistic differences between the art objects in both sets. Finally, stylistic elements of both sets can be paired with those with which they correspond, so that elements characteristic of “baxus” objects can be paired with corresponding elements of “tsetsequa” objects, and vice versa. In establishing these correspondences a structuralist perspective can be applied to examine the patterns which link seemingly distinct cultural elements, revealing the structures of Kwakiutl culture which influence their art.

The use of sound is a prominent element in Kwakiutl rituals, as it’s used to denote the presence of supernatural spirits during “tsetsequa”. Whistles are a signifier to represent the voices of the spirits, the volume of which indicates their approach and the beginning

of the ceremonial period. Objects such as batons and clappers used in “tsetsequa” are not used in “baxus” (Rosman and Rubel, 1990, p.630). More than mere crafted objects, pieces designed to cause sound are an important signifier and element of ceremonial rituals.

One of the binary opposites represented in “baxus” and “tsetsequa” is that of order and disorder respectively. “Tsetsequa” denotes the supernatural world in an exaggerated and contorted fashion. This is reflected in the art used during this time, such as with masks depicting animals with distorted features (Rosman and Rubel, 1990, p.632). For example, an eagle mask used in “tsetsequa” features an exaggerated and crooked beak, whilst one used in “baxus” features a straighter beak. These stylistic features are not simply a result of creative expression, but rather representative of an opposing perspective of the world, which is only made apparent when compared with the art of the opposing season. A comparison of this within our own culture is that of seasonal jumpers. We recognize Christmas jumpers due to specific motifs associated with that period, such as a reindeer, a Christmas tree, or snowflakes. Similarly, we would recognize that a jumper featuring pumpkins or a black cat is to be worn during Halloween. It’s only when we compare these two different styles and aesthetics that their individuality is apparent. Similarly, if we were to compare a seasonal jumper with a plain jumper intended to be worn all year round, only then does it highlight that the seasonal jumper is decorated with a certain significance.

Art is an invaluable aspect of material culture, as it is often reflective of the beliefs, values, and customs within a culture or society. Kwakiutl art is a pertinent example of this. In applying a structuralist perspective, we can examine the wider context of the art in order to establish its deeper meaning. Lévi-Strauss's concept of binary opposition states that cultural elements can only be understood in relation to each other, and in how they function within a system. Examining pieces of Kwakiutl art in relation to each other reflects a dichotomous perception of the year, separating the seasons into either "baxus" or "tsetsequa". More than simply periods of the year, these two periods are reflective of the profane and the sacred, the hunter and the hunted, order and disorder. Kwakiutl art objects used in their respective periods are physical signifiers which are reflective of a system of beliefs, norms, and values.

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