

Question 5: From the series of Thinking Making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500 – word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

***Written in American English**

Name: Samantha McGrath

Student Number: 2247313

Module Course: Research in Context ADAD5003

Course: BA Surface Pattern & Textiles

Word Count: 2,347

Lecture: Julia Lockheart

The role of designers within society has been observed throughout history. Whether the design includes advertisements, clothing, or other everyday products, the designer holds a responsibility to mindfully produce products that will be bought with intention behind them. Within modern society, the ever-present growth of overconsumption must be kept at the forefront of the mind when creating. In the hope that the designer is purposeful with their objects, they must also be aware of their own consumption with design. The design is a reflection of what the designer believes the world is lacking in. The creator must make it with intention, allowing the product to be symbolic and a visual representation of its owner.

Visual imagery and symbolism have historically allowed humanity to transcend the traditional means of language. Language is typically thought to consist exclusively of writing and speech, though the unspoken language of semiotics has allowed for intended messages to be implied without direct writing. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, identified that semiotics signifies a certain idea only when there is a common conceptualization of what the image was intended to mean. De Saussure explains in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) how the “linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (De Saussure, 1916, p.66), emphasizing how the signifier leads one psychologically to the conclusion of the signified. If there is an agreement of the intrinsic link between a semiotic - the signifier, and the intended message - the signified, then this allows for society to adapt this semiotic into reality. Utilizing semiotics as a means of control can be observed through signs, for instance, a hand. While there is no inherent message behind a hand on a sign, society has a general consensus

that it means stop. The implied message is purely psychological, as there is no physical force stopping someone. Only a mental concept overtaking the individual's subconscious and one's fear of societal rejection if there was deviation from the norm.

Semiotics have been used throughout history to entice the public towards certain behaviors. The meaning of certain semiotics has influenced the actions of society, which today can most commonly be observed through advertisements. While marketing in modern day times has become overwhelmingly semiotic, it is not necessarily a new concept. French theorist Roland Barthes discusses semiotics and their importance, especially in advertising, in his book *Mythologies* (1957), using detergents as an example of how the associated images create an imaginary sense of desire for the product. Barthes explains how companies have advertised their detergents as foamy, which has an inherent association with qualities such as soft, airy, and luxurious. He determines that these businesses "hav[e] disguised the abrasive function of the detergent under the delicious image of a substance at once deep and airy " (Barthes, 1957, p.37). Appearances of a product prove to hold just as much, if not more, influence over consumers than the product's actual function. Others' perception of each other has overtaken the practicality of consuming, which has now been replaced by presentation with a belief that this will establish one's place in the world.

The attraction towards others' approval ultimately stems from a longing sense of belonging, which is contradictory to society's push for individuality. This introduces the concept of desire and how there is no market is there is no demand. In order to create demand, companies have pushed the narrative that there is something missing in your life,

something that they can provide. These businesses utilize envy as a marketing tool, informing the consumer that without this product they will be ostracized from society. This forms the association that certain aspects of a person: their appearance, smell, cadence, and more can be bought. Erving Goffman, a Canadian American sociologist investigates the notion that these details of a person determine their treatment by others. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman states that “society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way” (Goffman, 1956, p.6). The expectation that if one possesses certain characteristics then they are to receive treatment from others that is associated with said characteristics. This introduces the notion of how our experiences shape our identity, and in turn affect others’ perceptions of us. Experiences that typically derive from our settings, which are in turn also linked to our socioeconomic status.

The settings shaping the experiences of an individual relate that person’s cultural capital, and how cultural capital can be utilized as a means of social mobility. While cultural capital is technically a form of capital on its own, yielding a high cultural capital is typically synonymous to a high economic capital. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, researched how cultural capital can be observed within society, and how it is often passed down through generations. He uses higher education as an example, stating that “the educational system tends to reproduce... the structure of relations between the structure of the distributions of cultural capital and the structure of the distribution of economic capital among the sections both in and by the relations of opposition and complementarity

which define the systems of higher education” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 64). While one might believe cultural capital can be a tangible replacement for economic capital, they would find that it is in fact interlinked. Unspoken advantages of the wealthier classes include hidden knowledge of how to achieve higher success, information that is typically learned from generations past. This cannot only be observed in education, but in other aspects of life, such as clothing.

Dress can control how people perceive one another, allowing for an individual to express themselves. It may also, however, allow someone to control peoples’ perception of them, in turn controlling their opinions of them. Clothing can be seen as a status symbol through the style, material, and even color. The tuxedo for example, exudes a sense of luxury, while clothing made with thin polyester may look inexpensive, signaling to the observer that they are of a lower economic class. Knowing how to properly dress for a corporate interview is an example of cultural capital that may be passed down through generations, emphasizing how our appearance affects other aspects of life. If one was to appear what is considered sloppy or unkept, then the likelihood of increasing their social or economic capital is unlikely. While clothing may affect how others see each other, it can also be used as a form of self-expression. The possession of true self-expression through clothing, or what is considered personal style, is rare in modern day society. Companies today have pushed micro trends onto the public, encouraging consumers to purchase their clothing which they claim will make the buyer more socially desirable. Rather than looking inward for clothing choices, society has begun looking outward towards external sources of approval. In contrast, there is also a growing support for hyper individuality. Individuals

claim to be "different" among the majority, without realizing that they are still a contributing member to the societal pressures of conformity. Despite the individual believing they are alone in their uniqueness, they are in fact a part of the masses also chasing uniqueness, thus transforming "normality" into the new uniqueness. To discover a true sense of personal self, one that exudes authenticity, the individual must become negligent of society's pressuring opinions. For instance, one might claim to have personal style, but the influence of current trend cycles has infiltrated their closet, leaving the consumer without a sense of individuality. The "personal style" in question is simply the individual's lack of identity being replaced by what they believe is socially acceptable.

What is truly lacking within our pursuit of personal style is an emotional connection to our clothing. This connection creates a sense of authenticity that contributes to our personal self and therefore is exuded outwards to others. This signifies a sense of identity that grounds the individual and relieves them from pressures to conform. The relationship between a person and their clothing is one of reciprocity. In his book *Emotionally Durable Design* (2005), Johnathan Chapman describes how true character within our clothing cannot be replicated at a commercial level – there is no replacement for genuine experiences. He details how "the current model of industrialism has practically built itself around this ideal, delivering endless streams of faster, lighter, smarter, and newer things" but in contrast hopes the future of design will be "enabling users to sculpt rich and individually crafted narratives that map subject-object relationships as they evolve over time" (Chapman, 2005, p.111). While current trends have proven to be focused on selling as many new products as possible, all of which packaged in an expensive and sparkling

exterior to make up for the lack of durability or value, Chapman hopes designing will turn towards appreciation of the craftsmanship, and how the item's wear and tear will tell the story of its life, as well as the owner's. This includes repairing damages, trying one's best to take care of the item, and to be mindful when originally purchasing a new product what the likely lifespan will be. It also includes purchasing limited single-use items and instead looking towards a continuous circle of life for our products, rather than allowing them to end their life cycle in a landfill. Our products are a reflection of ourselves, our experiences, and our priorities, which also are in connection with our morals and beliefs.

Originally the famous Birkin bag was created in response to actress Jane Birkin, whom the bag is named after, claiming she could not find a leather bag she liked that was suitable enough to carry all her belongings. The bag was initially used by Jane as a pragmatic choice to carry the large number of possessions she kept in her bags. Once popularized though, this changed. Today, they have become overly priced, and unoriginal. Seen more as a symbol of status, the Birkin bag is not actually used in a practical sense, but rather used as a display of wealth, one that is supposed to be subtle. Once identified with the owner, though, the class status becomes apparent. The economic capital of the Birkin bag is obvious, given its cost is tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars for a leather bag. The cultural capital that comes with this, however, is knowing that those who can identify the symbolic message of wealth adorning the wearer will view them with a different perception now, knowing of their wealth. This also affects how one will treat the Birkin owner, seeing as typically the wealthy seek out interactions with other wealthy individuals. There is even cultural capital within being able to identify a Birkin bag.

One who grew up in a low-income area may have never heard of it before and may never become aware that the bag that appears to be just like any other bag is instead synonymous with extreme wealth. Like other designers, through personal design there will be limited focus on the profits that can be made with designing, but rather the appreciation of the craft as a whole, as well as admiration for the outcome and how it will enhance the consumer's life.

It has appeared in the design world today that we have gone so far right we have ended up back on the left. When designers were hyper focused on efficiency during the industrial revolution, the aesthetics were put aside. Today, however, in attempts to “beautify” the world, companies have lost sight of the need for actual durability and practicality within products. The misconception that an object's appearance determines its effectiveness has blinded society to the point that planned obsolescence has become widely accepted without question, as long as there is something newer, more visually appealing to replace their prematurely dying object. In order to prevent this, the designer must turn to creating a product that people are interested in enough to want to maintain it, which will push them towards developing a relationship with the object and form a connection through every repair. Chapman discusses this in another book called *Meaningful Stuff: Design that Lasts* (2021), where he states “direct correlation exists between the practice of maintenance and how attached someone is to the object in question”, also adding that “consumers develop a deeper sense of connection to objects they have played some part producing” (Chapman, 2021, p. 50). Seeing a piece of oneself within their possessions proves not only a more sustainable way of life, but also a deeper

sense of personal identity and genuine uniqueness. Knowing that the product they have had for many years is unlike anyone else's, put a sense of worth to the object that makes it even more likely for the individual to do their best to preserve it.

The imagery and symbolism of objects have proven to hold social importance throughout human history and can be seen in different ways today. Language as a whole, with semiotics as an addition are influential within consumerism, and therefore within design. The cultural capital that comes intertwined with consumerism as a whole is observed through displays of wealth through clothing, and the presentation of oneself. Without consumers, the designer has limited opportunities for any production. While the consumer should be mindful of their purchases, they should be just as conscious of the state of their current possessions. Rather than buying into a false sense of uniqueness, they can produce it in a genuinely authentic way through preservation of mindfully purchased products that were designed with the intention to last and the practicality of efficient use. Just as the consumer is encouraged to be mindful, so is the designer. Within personal practice, it can be observed that there is and will continue to be intentional creation. The intention will be a sense of connection and attachment to the design, a personal relationship that will be seen through the outcome of the product.

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). 'The Forms of Capital' in Richardson, J. (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Chapman, J. (2005) *Emotionally Durable Design*. London: Earthscan.

Chapman, J. (2021) *Meaningful Stuff: Design that Lasts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press

De Saussure, F. (1916). *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Bally, C. and Sechehaye, A. Translated by Baskin, W. New York City: Philosophical Library, Inc.

Goffman, E. (1956) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: Doubleday.