

Sign values in processes of distinction: The concept of luxury

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Abstract

What is luxury? The concept has never received proper attention in social theory. It seemed as if luxury was a highly economic concept that did not need any further investigation. Primary and secondary needs are considered to form the basis of the luxury concept. Luxury has been viewed as useless and superfluous because it belongs to the realm of desires instead of elementary needs. This definition has often been used to stigmatize the use and demonstration of luxury. The needs-wants dichotomy was severely criticized a few decades ago. Luxury touches more than the question of necessity in society. This article attempts to outline the formulation of a definition of luxury. We leave the classic concept of luxury in favor of a more socio-semiotic approach of the concept. The bounds between luxury and some specific product property will be cut through. There is no such thing as a luxury good comparable to categories like 'cars,' or 'clothes.' Luxury is defined as a specific kind of sign value, produced in specific narratives and used in processes of stratification. As a sign, it becomes apparent that luxury is a relative concept. Every social group can be said to have its own luxury. Every social group has in fact a different kind of luxury, which means that a Cartier is no luxury in some cases where a television is highly exclusive in other cases.

This article attempts to outline the formulation of a definition of luxury. The concept of luxury has never received proper attention in social theory. It seemed as if luxury was a highly economic concept that did not need any further investigation. The most comprehensive analysis in the social sciences was undertaken by Thorstein Veblen in 1899. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen describes the world of the late nineteenth century American upper class and their ways to show off their wealth. He considered luxury to be a status symbol belonging exclusively

to this upper class (the Veblenian leisure class): ‘industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their subsistence. In the nature of things, luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class.’ (Veblen 1965: 70). Veblen’s influential study seems to have silenced the luxury debate for almost a century.

Apart from Sombart (1983), the topic was not raised again until 1980.¹ The nineties showed a renewed interest in luxury products. A series of new studies resulted in new insights and theories. Allèrès (1990, 1992, 1995) published several books on luxury products and marketing strategies in the luxury sector. Furthermore, Berry (1994) developed a more philosophical framework of the concept using the needs-wants distinction. He illuminates the severe philosophical discussions being held around luxury.

Definitions of luxury products usually contain a rather narrow definition of luxury, encompassing the (economic) luxury sector. We think that besides these narrow definitions, there has to be a formulation of a luxury concept in a wider sense. Such a definition should describe the role of the use of luxury in contemporary late capitalist society. The purpose of this article is to situate the debate on the luxury concept and to use the socio-semiotic framework to give the concept a more socially-grounded conceptualization.

1. Three thousand years grasping the meaning of luxury

Even though ‘luxury’ has never been subject to some scientific or societal definition process, the concept has been widely debated in human history. The historical reconstruction of the many debates gives a first insight into the complex nature of what luxury and the luxurious is. In addition, it shows the striking fact that for centuries, societies were occupied with the appropriateness of luxury.

1.1. Luxury as weakness

Two main approaches towards luxury can be discerned in history. On the one hand, luxury is considered to be negative for a society because it erodes a society’s strength. On the other hand, luxury was blamed for its moral inappropriateness. The origin of the first approach can be traced back to the *Politeia* of Plato (Berry 1994: 45). Plato searches in this work for the origin of the polis. The Greek city-state comprises three basic necessities: food, shelter, and clothing. A human being cannot

provide these basic needs by himself. He needs others to help him. The collective that originates from this search for help is called the *polis*. In this polis, everybody is involved according to his abilities. Carpenters have a natural ability for woodcraft. Therefore, their contribution to society will lie in this domain. All three basic necessities are fulfilled and the members of the polis can survive. In the basic polis, all needs are limited to these three basic needs. However, Plato finds in his own time several needs that go further than this absolute minimum. Dresses do not only need to protect people against the elements. Above this primary function people want their clothes to be beautiful and fashionable. Food not only serves to be eaten; its presentation and cookery is equally important. The unnecessary demands make us go beyond the animal state. Human beings are culture-creating creatures. However, the longing for extended needs breaks the perfect harmony in the primitive polis. Christopher Berry (1994: 51) specifies that for the Ancient Greek the breaking of the harmony in the polis was considered unhealthy. The joint satisfaction of needs is replaced by an unending struggle for wealth and luxury. For this reason, luxury needs to be banned from society because it creates an unhealthy and weak state.

Plato's reasoning has been followed for ages. Luxury was considered to weaken a society. Aristotle extended the reasoning of Plato, stating that the struggle for luxury leads to an increased pressure on the polis to wage war to fulfill all these extended wants. After the fall of the Roman Empire the luxury-as-a-weakening-force hypothesis gained an enormous popularity. The luxurious lifestyle of the Romans was considered to be one of the main causes of the destruction of this huge empire. The medieval Church Fathers would further develop the weakness theory. They christianized the Platonian argument by framing the discussion in terms of sins. For example, St. Augustine condemned living in luxury as lust and vice. The concept of luxury was now an emotionally charged concept with a pejorative undertone.

1.2. *Luxury as economically harmful*

During the Renaissance, a renewed attention was aroused concerning the luxury concept. Without entering too deeply into the innumerable discussions of that period,² we situate a few main players in the second development of the luxury debate. Bernard Mandeville was the first to approach the concept of luxury from a positive side. In his *Fable of the Bees*, he substantiates the positive effects of luxury on the welfare of a society. The central idea of the fable is that people cannot enjoy both the

pleasures of life coming from the industrialized society while at the same time obeying the rigid moral prescriptions that condemn this enjoyment. The public interest is served better with the selfish characteristics of people living in luxury compared to the sober and honest ones. The richness and the comfort of life are generated in the fabrication and the trade of luxuries. With his fable, Mandeville tries to undermine the deeply rooted belief that an austere and honorable life will generate societal progress.

Mandeville was the first to defend the positive effects of luxury on society. The moral arguments of weaknesses disappear more and more, in favor of economic reasoning. This does not mean that Mandeville was widely followed in his defense of luxury. A strong opponent against the benefits of luxury was the French philosopher Jacques Rousseau. In his awarded work '*Le discours sur les sciences et les arts*,' he heavily criticizes the so-called benefits of luxury. In his eyes, luxury is linked to greed, which is a form of slavery of the human instincts. Not only the wealthy come off badly when they live in luxury. Also the poor are involved. Because the wealthy organize copious meals, the poor do not have medicines. Because the wealthy want to perfume their wigs, the poor starve to death. According to Rousseau, luxury is responsible for the poverty of a country. Consuming luxury is only possible for the wealthy. Their wealth originates in the inequality of society (many are working for some). This argument does not lead to a plea for an egalitarian society. Rousseau pleads for a society that is based on public desires instead of the slavery desires of his time (Williams 1982: 44).

Mandeville and Rousseau indicate two new positions in the luxury discussion. Both theorists abandon the ancient moral arguments. The discussion shifts towards a more economic approach. The pros and cons of luxury for economic development are weighed against each other. This discussion was gradually coupled with a social discussion on the effects of poverty and the so-called democratization of luxury. This last discussion was raised at the end of the nineteenth century with theorists like the French economist George D'Avenel. D'Avenel was an early researcher of consumer behavior. Using a sort of consumer panel data, he analyses shifts in income and spending behavior at the end of the nineteenth century (Williams 1982: 99). D'Avenel concludes that the highest classes saw their income multiplied by six or even by eight while the lower classes only doubled their income. According to D'Avenel, this trend is not a problem. The richest classes have always wasted their money on expensive and scarce products. The real progress lies in the fact that the ordinary people finally can reap the rewards of industrialization. D'Avenel thought all injustice would disappear with the pleasures of this new consumer society available to all layers of society. This kind of reasoning

reveals a kind of optimistic belief in the accomplishments of the industrialization and the hope to resolve the problem of luxury. If everybody would gain access to luxury products there would be a perfect democratization of luxury which would mean the end of the phenomenon. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is obvious that luxury has not died nor did social injustice or poverty.

1.3. Luxury as unproductiveness

The earliest critique on the concept of luxury can be traced back to the anthropological fear of famine (Hunt 1995: 354). Before the twentieth century, mankind always had to struggle with acute shortages in the supply of basic needs. The apparent waste of economic resources for the production of luxury goods was heavily criticized from this perspective. If a society cannot provide these bare necessities, the devotion to a life of luxury is judged morally unacceptable.

Nevertheless, a society needed to deal with the tension between economic efficiency and luxurious waste, since luxury fulfilled a central function in the stratification of a society. As Veblen indicated at the end of the nineteenth century, being rich and having money does not guarantee having prestige or power. Only the showing of one's wealth will ensure a certain position in society. Despite famines and dire poverty, all societies have known a lot of luxury. For the ruling classes, luxury was almost a necessity. Luxuries stuck, as it were, to their position. Being powerful required consuming luxuries. The most visible example of this principle can be found in the court of Louis XIV. Williams (1982) describes him as 'the consumer king' whose sole historical realization is the construction of a luxurious world for himself and his court (e.g., Versailles). The most striking fact of this court is the fact that this extravagant way of life was not established to please the Sun King. The court was a well thought out system with one goal: to increase the political power of the king of France. The presentation of luxury, the waste of an immense amount of money was a state matter: the greater the exhibited wealth, the greater the observed power of the king.

The French Revolution was not only a radical break in the French power relations but it also meant a symbolic turn in the uses of luxury products. For centuries, the rise of capitalism meant a change in the character of luxury (Hilton 2004). This silent revolution became apparent with the French Revolution. Capitalism undermines the symbolic bundling of positions and consumption behaviors. The increasing commercial relations created a petty bourgeoisie that became increasingly wealthy.

Financially, they could afford the consumption patterns of the nobility but the bundling of position and consumption pattern prevented them to raise their position. The French Revolution put an end to the link between power, position, and luxury. Luxury became more than ever a consumer product being sold at the market to those who can afford it. To put it in the language of Talcott Parsons: luxury loses its ascribed role and gets an achieved role.³ This could be termed the democratization of luxury: the access to luxury is no longer restrictively based on position.

After the removal of the concept from the sphere of morality, the discussion hardly changed. Luxury is still looked upon as inefficient or useless for a society. In economics, luxury was discussed in terms of price elasticities.⁴ In philosophy, luxury was placed in a so-called need-wants distinction. Starting from this distinction, we want to argue why the changed status of luxury products demands for a broader approach. We start with two different approaches of the need-wants distinction. On the one hand, naturalists defend the opposition between need and wants while on the other hand they are challenged by some idealists who criticize this distinction.

Naturalists consider needs as nothing more than some fundamental reflex or instinct of the human species to survive. This self-preservation comprehends the need to feed and dress, to breathe, to sleep, etc. These primary and fundamental needs are innate. It transforms them into ahistorical and acultural features of mankind. Unlike a particular human culture, man needs to feed himself in order to survive. The human self-preservation instinct makes him search for food, no matter which cultural rituals or customs he has acquired. It is a universal law that nobody can disobey. The naturalistic school defines luxury as a supplemental category. Everything not immediately serving in satisfying these essential needs is defined as a desire or a relative need. This view is incorporated largely in the classical economic theory. For example, in his 'Essays of persuasion' Keynes states: 'Now it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes — those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still they are. But this is not true of the absolute needs' (cited in Raiklin and Bülent 1996: 55). Although some needs remain unrealizable and develop continuously, there is a series of basic needs that are equal for all people. These needs should be primarily satisfied by the economic system.

Against this naturalistic division of primary and secondary needs, a second, idealistic extreme becomes visible. The utmost representative of this intellectual position is found in the works of Jean Baudrillard. He considers primary needs as an ideological construction being invented by the production machinery. The need for food is as unattainable and culturally defined as the so-called secondary needs: 'The quantitative intake of food is limited, the digestive system is limited, but the cultural system of food is, for its part, indefinite' (Baudrillard 1998: 64). Several products were invented to meet people's wants or to make life more comfortable. As the consumer society developed, these products were still produced since there was a newly created market that should not be lost. Once washing machines have swept the market, the producer had to preserve this segment to prevent his disappearance as a producer: '*no more hand-washing, you entered now the era of the washing machine.*' Such a transformation took place, according to Baudrillard, at the level of the economic system itself. Needs and wants are instruments to convince the consumer to consume: 'there are only needs because the system needs them' (Baudrillard 1981: 82). The ultimate means of legitimization of the postulate that people need products is the (naturalistic) idea of the 'vital anthropological minimum' (primary needs). Idealists reject this idea because there is no objective determinable minimum. In each culture and in each phase in the development of a certain culture, this minimum is defined differently. That is why primary needs are nothing more than a cultural construction of a society indicating a minimal consumption level to live a normal life. 'The vital minimum today, the minimum of imposed consumption, is the standard package. Beneath this level, you are an outcast' (Baudrillard 1981: 81). As a society develops, the standard of primary needs shifts along. This is a radical idealistic position. Wants are nothing more than culturally developed concepts encouraging people to consume. These consuming individuals are totally alienated because, in their opinion, they are creating their personality. The only thing they really do is obey the production apparatus that needs their wants to keep itself alive.

Both extremes have their disadvantages. One can question the naturalistic idea of wants being independent from each historical or cultural anchorage. Each culture has its own historical conception of the minimum that a person should have to function normally in society. This minimal consumption level could be described as wants that are considered so essential that every individual from this society needs a minimal possession of them. This package is heavily dependent upon the cultural environment and historical period. Recently, the Belgian government, for example, decided to guarantee every citizen a minimum supply of energy. Such

a decision indicates the importance of electricity and water in our society. On the other hand, the idealistic concept of cultural determination is too elaborate. Whatever a production apparatus dictates, there is a biological reality we cannot escape from: a human being needs to eat, sleep, and breathe. As a material being there are several elementary needs that need some regular satisfaction to survive.

An answer to this question consisted in separating the definition of biological needs and the minimal consumption package. Biological needs are oriented towards the biological survival of man while the minimal consumption package relates to the survival of man as a social individual. Biological needs are therefore abstract, theoretical constructions that indicate the material constitution of man. As soon as these needs are translated, we end up in culturally defined categories (e.g. we all know we need to eat to survive, but it is our culture that distinguishes the edible from the indigestible)⁵, that define the construction of a meal, and that present the content of a breakfast or a dinner. This dichotomy results in a double solution to the problem. On the one hand, needs are no longer an objective category, while on the other hand a radical idealistic position is avoided because a biological binding is not renounced.

This notion of need and wants is helpful in analyzing the consumer society but it cannot be the basis of a definition of luxury products. If a fixed series of basic needs is taken for granted, there is a lower limit. What does not belong to this absolute minimum can be defined as a luxury product. As soon as this absolute lower limit is questioned, the definitional ground of luxury is lost.

2. Defining luxury within a consumer society

The historical debates on the concept of luxury show that defining luxury in an absolute way is not possible. There are plenty of surpassed luxury products: pepper and salt, for example, were imported once as scarce and exclusive spices.⁶ We do not even have to go back that long to find examples. After the Second World War, a television in Belgium was considered a luxury product, as were the first VCRs. Luxury may be present in all times and in all cultures, its appearance differs all the time. Therefore we will look at the concept in a more relative way. We will look at the place products have in social relations and the contexts in which objects are transformed into luxuries. Our starting point is that every product can be turned into a luxury product, as soon as some conditions are met. This position will lead us to a narrow definition of luxury. This definition lies close to the economic (marketing) understanding of the

phenomenon. The shortcomings of the approach will lead us further to broaden the concept of luxury.

2.1. *Luxury in a narrow sense*

Producers of so-called luxury products demarcate their economic territory. They pretend to form a well-defined territory in the marketplace known as 'the luxury universe.' Brands such as Rolls Royce, Cartier, and Armani are automatically associated with this particular economic niche. Companies operating in this domain even celebrate this particular production in organizing themselves around it. In France the trade organization 'Comité Colbert' represents about 70 luxury houses. They cross every product boundary, uniting only those enterprises that produce luxury products. These companies have a very specific view on the form of a luxury product (Gardyn 2002; Taittinger 1988). We can summarize this view with three essential characteristics: scarcity, extra value, and high quality.

Luxury products are scarce, i.e., they are limited in production and distributed highly selectively. Selling products on a large scale not only causes prices to drop but also affects the exclusive status of the brand. One cannot go to the clothes shop around the corner to buy a Delvaux bag. As soon as refrigerators or washing machines were produced on a large scale, they lost their scarcity and consequently their appearance of luxury.⁷

However, it is not sufficient that a product is not massively produced. It also needs to be subjectively rare. The target group has to believe that they belong to a quite selective group of people able to buy these products. Therefore, most luxury companies strictly guard over their distribution, setting up a sophisticated network of boutiques all over the world. It is their key in providing an atmosphere of subjective rarity. A Cacharel or Dior suit is not to be bought at any store around the corner. However, Lombard (1989: 88) remarks that it is not only the most exclusive store that sells the most. Take, for example, a stand in an airport. Tourists are forced to pass there while they do not have anything to do and they are easily tempted to buy some presents. These stands are spots with enormous sales of 'light' luxury products.

Scarcity as such is not the only luxury characteristic. As Berry points out '... rarity is not a sufficient condition. For example ... it is possible to purchase a first edition of Hobbes's *De Cive* for a couple of thousand pounds, but the bookseller, while declaring that the copy was "scarce" (*Blackwell's Rare Book Catalogue*, January 1989) did not proclaim it a "luxury"' (Berry 1994: 5).

The second characteristic of this narrow luxury concept is the extra value added to the product. Luxury products often have a unique design. Take, for example, the case of the luxury corkscrew. A good corkscrew usually works in two phases: first a spiral wire has to be turned into the cork, subsequently a sort of lever uncorks the bottle. The most common and widespread form of corkscrew is a T-shaped instrument. A luxury corkscrew on the other hand could look like a futuristic woman-robot. Her gaudy dress is to be put on the neck of the bottle after which one can rotate the head, turning a screw into the cork. This raises the arms of the 'robot' which are meant to serve as the lever to pull out the cork from the bottle. This example clearly describes the benefit of the luxury product. Every notion of functionality is reduced as far as possible. One uses a plastic science fiction robot to open a bottle of wine instead of the more effective (cheap) and handy T-shaped instrument. Sometimes the design is so predominant that the instrumentality of the product decreases. A true wine lover may prefer the T-shaped corkscrew instead of the luxury one for the actual opening of the bottle while having the robot-like one in his cabinet. The extra value will often be a kind of added esthetic value. High fashion, for example, acts in the same way by reducing (often in an absurd way) the wearability of the clothes in favor of the esthetic.

A high standard of quality is the last luxury essential. If luxury suffers from mediocrity, it is nothing else but a bad imitation, a cheap trick, a false luxury. In producing luxury products, severe quality control is essential. The wealthy do not put up with the fact that their expensive options-stuffed car breaks down after one week. If one buys a luxury car, one should be able to use it for a long period.⁸ If one buys a Delvaux handbag, it should have been made from excellent leather instead of some sort of imitation. Superior quality can be achieved in two ways. In the first place, the raw materials can be chosen carefully. If the product needs to be of a higher standard, the basis should not be neglected. Second, luxury products are characterized by a detailed workmanship. This is often obtained by specialized artisans making the luxury products perfect.

Many authors use pricing as another luxury characteristic. If one buys something expensive, one knows they are not going to get off cheap. In a well-known study on the French luxury market, McKinsey used price as a discriminating factor to distinguish different sorts of luxuries from each other. Allèrès (1990, 1991) also considers price to be one of the most significant factors of luxury products. High prices as such are not responsible for the luxurious character of some products. If there is nothing more than a mass-produced object with a high price, there is no real luxury. Nevertheless, all products in the so-called luxury niche are, without

exception, pricey. To a considerable extent, this is a consequence of the other three characteristics. A high quality product requires high quality raw materials. Those materials are more expensive than the normal ones. Scarce products, whether they are objectively or subjectively scarce, combined with a sufficient demand also increase the price. Finally, an extra value of any kind gives the product an extra touch of prestige, a certain magic and consequently a higher price. Higher prices are an essential feature of a luxury product, be it somewhat derived.

Companies producing luxury products do not need to fully meet these four requisites. Sometimes one of the characteristics is enough for a product to be luxurious. This happened with the introduction of the cellular phone. Originally, the quality of the telephone was less than the classic telephone. Mobile phones however were scarce and prices were high. Therefore, the first mobile phones were initially luxury products. In that initial phase, one could even discern an extra value because of the innovation on the market. A mobile telephone offered something extra compared to other telephones. It is apparent that this kind of telephone has not become a luxury product in the narrow sense; there are various reasons for this. First, it was never the intention of the telephone companies to turn mobile conversations into a luxury product. Its initial status as luxury was a welcome bonus but the main purpose was to sell as many telephones as possible. If a company wants to sell luxuries, it needs to work on its image. The different characteristics of a luxury product need to be strengthened. Neglecting a certain characteristic can give a certain brand a serious letdown. Sometimes the perception of the brand can be seriously and irreversible damaged (Lebas, Israel-Rousso, and de Gouyon 1990: 73). The narrow definition of luxury is therefore nothing more than a mix of features. If these features are sufficiently present it can turn a normal product into a luxury product.

In a narrow definition, we define luxury product as *those scarce products with an objective or symbolic extra value, with a higher standard of quality, and with a higher price than comparable products.*

2.2. *Luxury in a broader sense*

Rare, high value products with a certain plus-value are not exhaustive characteristics to describe luxury. They fit completely within the economic luxury sector created by companies like Dior or Cartier (Gardyn 2002; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Inside the sector, we find products that satisfy the requisites of the narrow definition. The narrow definition of luxury refers to a denoted idea of luxury for a certain period and a

certain culture. Today one can say that vehicles produced by Rolls Royce are luxury vehicles. It belongs to a cultural recognized group of products known as the luxury segment. However, this denoted meaning of luxury does not cover the whole range of possible luxury products. The definition does not explain, for example, why impoverished groups can enjoy products that can be viewed — in their social context — as luxury. TVs, VCRs, and commercial cable subscriptions are often found in families with serious income problems. Without entering too deeply into this subject, it gives an indication that the narrow definition is too narrow to grasp the entire signification of 'luxury.' It might be appropriate to demarcate a certain economical niche in the market but it does not cover all luxury in society.

In order to outline the place luxury takes in contemporary consumption society, we consider objects as 'envelopes of meaning' (Pels, Heatherington, and Vandenberghe 2002). In doing so, products become meaning-producing devices circulating in a specific cultural environment. Semiotic theory shows us that signs do get their meaning in the interrelated play of the signifier and the signified.

Objects can get different meanings according to the value people give to them in a specific context (Goffman 1974). In fact, one can even consider these objects as agencies or quasi-agencies (Douglas 1994; Pels Heatherington, and Vandenberghe 2002). They have a 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) in which meanings are assigned to and removed from objects. Mary Douglas compares this multiplicity of meanings with the problem of polysemy in language. Meanings assigned to objects can be classified in many possible ways. We follow the classification of Baudrillard, who distinguishes between four possible meanings or statuses (logics): 'Four logics would be concerned here: 1. A functional logic of use value; 2. An economic logic of exchange value; 3. A logic of symbolic exchange; 4. A logic of sign value. The first is a logic of practical operations, the second one of equivalence, the third, ambivalence, and the fourth, difference' (Baudrillard 1981: 66). This classification was recently updated by Benoit (2002). His approach of objects is more detailed and distinguishes seven values or logics. For our purpose, the original classification of Baudrillard is sufficient.

One can buy an object for the pure use-value of it. Bread is bought because of its nutritional value, a knife is bought to cut through things. It is the potential of the object to serve a particular use that lies at the heart of the decision to buy the object. Closely related to the use-value of an object is the second logic of exchange value. All goods sold on a market have an economic value. A certain knife 'equals' a certain amount of money. The exchange value in a capitalist organized economy is of

particular interest for the producer. As Marx specified, the producer does not value a product for its functional capacities but for its exchange value and the implications for investments and possible profit. Both logics form the basis of the classic economic thought: goods are bought and sold because there is a consumer demand for the use-value of certain objects on the one hand, and an offer of goods trying to meet the needs of the market on the other hand.

Besides this two-fold distinction between use-value and sign-value, there is a third possible logic with which an object can get invested: the symbolic one. The most explicit example of this logic is the gift (Mauss 1990). As a gift, an object loses its functional or monetary character while being invested with symbolic meaning. A giver invests symbolic value into an object in order to make the object an embodiment of the social relationship. With the gift, the receiver not only gets an object but also a symbol of their relationship.⁹ For this reason, the exchange-value is often used as a measure to determine the value of the social relationship. However, gifts are not the only possible way to invest objects with a symbolic value. The teddy bear of a child, for example, gives another clear view on the symbolic power of an object. A cherished toy like a teddy bear cannot be replaced by anything else. The child has invested too much in this object to replace it with an impersonal new one.

These three meanings could be termed as classic object transformations. For centuries, objects have been bought, sold or presented as gifts. However, the emergence of capitalism and the boom of the consumer society this century created — according to Baudrillard — a new logic, a logic of sign-values. He sees the emergence of this logic of sign value as a detachment of the object from a concrete social relationship. As we mentioned earlier, this is narrowing the semiotic sign concept. Use-value, exchange values or symbolic values are all cultural processes of signification that can be considered as signs in this respect. However, when we use sign-values as a fourth possible logic of signification, we will use the concept in a more specific meaning. In that respect, we even abandon Baudrillard's interpretation of the logic of sign-value. We think sign-value should be defined in the light of recent discussions of postmodern evolutions of signification. Sign-value adds indeterminacy to the logic of signification. Use-value and exchange values are relatively fixed meanings. Using semiotics, we could term them denoted meanings. The use-value of a knife is to cut through things. The relation between the signifier and the signified is relatively fixed. Sign-value as a fourth logic loosens this connection, creating a space for endless connotations. Without entering too deeply into the postmodern discussion, which is not at stake here, we could term the fourth logic as a polysemic logic of consumer goods.

Objects are no longer exclusively bought for their use value but also for their sign-value. The precise content of the sign-value is undetermined. One can buy objects for constructing a lifestyle, in order to belong to a particular group, etc. The essence of the sign-value of a consumer object lies in the fact that the object is detached from its denoted, literal logic. An obvious example is the purchase of a car, not for its performance, but for its status-providing capacities. The use-value of the car is the transport function, the sign-value is the connotation of a certain status. The most prominent institutions in the creation of sign-values are advertising and fashion (McCracken 1986: 74).

Luxury products are liable to this fourth logic. They are bought, neither for a certain use-value, nor for their symbolic role in some interpersonal relationship but for their additional meaning in the consumer society. According to Baudrillard, sign-value has everything to do with the striving for status. We think however that the motivation of a consumer to buy a certain product for its sign-value extends the mere status seeking motivation. In objects, one can pursue happiness, beauty, belonging, etc. The sign-value of an object is a catchall in which several diverse significations (beyond use-value, exchange value, and symbolic value) can be brought together. Sign-value accentuates the polysemic character of material culture without fixing the actual meaning of it.

We therefore define luxury products as *those products that have a sign-value on top of (or in substitution of) their functional or economical meaning.*

This definition takes into account the differential use and meaning of luxury by different social groups. Groups can accept the hegemonic denotation of luxury products and use them as distinctive signs of their social positions. Nevertheless, other groups can refuse to accept these signs as legitimate to distinct themselves, adopting other sorts of commodities to work in their social setting.

3. The sign-value of luxury: Emanation of social stratification

This broad definition of luxury extends the concept to an additional sign-value. This quality however is not intrinsic to the luxury product itself. Most objects do get an additional sign-value on top of their exchange value or their use value (Benoist 2002; Harré 2002). Therefore, we need to distinguish the nature of the luxury sign-value from other possible sign-values. We give objects different meanings in different contexts: 'The commodities, which he purchases, are for the most part means to the attainment of objectives, not the objectives themselves' (Hicks, cited

in Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 71). The coding and decoding process mentioned above and the attachment of sign-value needs to be considered with respect to the objectives individuals have with them. The particular kind of value that we find in use with luxury products has to do with distinction. Luxury sign-values are attached to objects only in moments of distinction. Therefore, we consider products to be luxury products only when they are used in contexts of distinction. In this process, objects will be used in a complex structure of meanings whereby the polysemic character of the luxury signs becomes very well visible.

It is not because some producer tries to sell certain products as exclusive luxury products that he will succeed. The consumer will play a decisive role whether or not the intentions of that producer to sell luxury will be followed. Coding an object as a luxury product is not a sufficient condition to give an object a social life as a luxury product. It is quite possible that certain objects will get a luxury sign value without even being promoted as a luxury,¹⁰ or the other way around, where heavily advertised objects fail in their luxurious capacity as a distinction maker. To situate the assignment of luxury sign-value more completely we focus on two signifying processes in which people give their objects a luxury signification. Successively, we will discuss the social use of luxury and the decoding of luxury objects in both vertical as horizontal processes of distinction.

3.1. *Vertical stratification: 'Some animals are more equal than others'*¹¹

If products extract their significance from processes of distinction, it is almost axiomatically a question of vertical distinction. In a stratified society, people are faced with both higher and lower positions. One lives in a certain stratum that draws boundaries above and below itself. The sign-value of luxury is constructed in the interaction of the different positions and roles in this layer. People's aim in using vertical distinction processes is their distinction from people judged to be lower than themselves.

Luxury products are context-bound products. The sign value of a luxury product only turns up at moments of actual distinction. This requires a communication process in which someone uses a product in a distinctive way while someone else is addressed with this use. If one buys a new Ferrari to distinguish oneself, one does not park the car in a garage, keeping one's acquisition out of view. The new car will be placed in front of the house so everybody can see what you bought. On top of that, one shall announce the purchase to one's surroundings. These social interactions will be the provinces of luxury. When driving alone on a freeway,

the use-value of the Ferrari (a means of transport) will prevail since the object is actually used as a transport vehicle. The communication process in which the luxury sign-value is transmitted does not need to be successful. There are several possible reasons why the distinction process might fail.

First, the communicative aspect of the distinction requires that those being lower than the user of the luxury product need to be informed about the codes being used in the interaction. Without any knowledge of the possible luxury sign-value of a certain object, no vertical distinction will take place. The negotiated luxury meaning of an object does not reside exclusively in one social layer or one particular group. The lower ranked receiver of the luxury sign is the significant other in this stratification process. If one buys a product being invested with some potential luxury sign-value, one desires to be it an effective sign. That is to say that the sign has the power to create a certain distance with someone situated on a lower rank of the social ladder. This makes the sharing of the codes on which the sign is founded an important feature in the successful construction of a luxury product.

Secondly, both sender and receiver of the luxury sign may be familiar with the signification of the object itself without any distinctive process taking place. In this case, the object is successfully recognized on both sides as a luxury product without any distinctive processes being present. As soon as the receiver (the lower one) recognizes the use of the object as a distinctive attempt, the object is turned into a luxury product. This does not guarantee the success of the object. Sometimes the owner of the luxury product may use the product clumsily (e.g. if one cries out loudly [in a bar, for example] that one has bought an exclusive watch from Cartier, the bystanders will probably think of this behavior as 'showing off'). On the other hand, if the same person would use his watch more wisely by slipping the watch from time to time from his sleeves, he will have more chances on a successful distinctive process. Even if both parties recognize the use of the object in a distinctive attempt, the outcome is not necessarily a successful vertical ranking vis-à-vis the other.¹²

This implies that luxury cannot exist 'in silence.' It needs to be activated in social processes. Nevertheless one can buy luxury merely for the pleasure of the object (i.e., so-called self-gifts) (Mick 1990). Therefore, we need to situate the formation of a luxury sign-value in a broader context. Usually one can distinguish three stages in which some meaning transfer takes place (Gottdiener 1995; McCracken 1986). First, a producer invests a product with some value. He can concentrate on the use-value of the good or he can try to invest the object with a particular sign-value. The producer has a wide spectrum of instruments at hand in order to complete this creation process successfully: the design of the product, its

colors, its advertising campaigns, its distributions channel, etc. All of these instruments invest the product with a certain sign-potential that he needs to pass through successfully to the consumer. If a producer tries to create luxury products, he will try to invest a certain object with those qualities he will expect consumers to adopt. The narrow definition of luxury sums up several of these qualities which are likely to invest an object with luxury sign value. If a consumer decides to purchase the presented object, he can adopt the intended signification of the producer on the one hand or he can buy the object for some different (e.g., personal) reasons. Of course, a purchase will be a mixture of both kinds of decisions. One can buy a car for its speed capacities or its luxury sign-value while at the same time choosing a green exemplar because of some personal taste. The purchase itself can be considered as the second stage of meaning transfer. The object will have a meaning for the consumer itself. If he bought the good for its use-value, he will judge the purchase on the performances of the object. If the consumer buys the car for its luxury sign-value, he will see the object as a luxury product. In the eyes of the consumer, the object has a potential of being successfully used as a luxury in processes of distinction. If he decides to consume this so-called object silently, it is not the luxury sign-value that was activated but the emotional pleasure potential of the object. Only when the sign-value of the object is brought into the third stage, that of communication with others, the luxury potential can be used extensively.

The permeability of the boundaries of codes makes luxury products furthermore extremely susceptible to change. If lower strata need to know the codes in order to grasp the distinction processes of higher classes and one assumes that there is some upward mobility tendency, luxury products will often be imitated. This results in a trickle-down effect of luxury meanings going from the top of the social ladder downwards. This trickle-down effect does not necessarily imply that a luxury meaning originates in the highest classes. It is equally possible that some middle class group adopts a certain object in their distinctive processes towards lower strata. At that moment, these lower strata can perfectly imitate this behavior without the highest classes ever having used the object. On the other hand some objects will remain too expensive to be imitated by the lowest classes. Then the trickle-down effect starts in the highest classes but halts somewhere in the middle. Even fashion can prevent the trickle-down effect from covering the whole societal ladder. Imitating an object usually means a broader spread of the product that shortens the social life of the fashionable object more quickly.¹³

Luxury sign-values originate in vertical communication processes between hierarchical ordered individuals.

3.2. *Horizontal differentiation: 'All animals are equal,'¹⁴ aren't they?*

Consumer products are not only used to draw vertical distinctions between individuals and groups but also to demarcate horizontal social boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. Inside these groups, luxury seems to have no role. We defined luxury products as sign-values being used in distinction processes. Members of the same social category are connected in a loose way. Their uniting qualities seem to make any processes of stratification useless and redundant. Groups use certain signs (e.g., objects) toward the outside world to underline their identity as a group. One wears a baseball cap, one follows the same soccer team on Sundays, one wears a gown on official academic gatherings. These signs function as distinctive markers between the group and the outside world. The sign-value of the objects used in this fashion is no luxury sign-value. We rather term them as in-group sign-values. *Inside* the group these objects are no luxury products, which does not imply that a group cannot use them in some distinctive processes towards other groups ranked lower than themselves.¹⁵ In a group, there prevails a negotiated code shared by all group members. This code implies a series of material objects that are significant signs for the membership of the group. They demarcate the belonging to and the borders of the group as a whole. The negotiating process has no vertical distinctive role here. One could term these borders as lifestyle borders rather than stratification borders. Up to this point there is no luxury in horizontal differentiation processes.

Nevertheless, the stratification aspect does not only play between groups but also within groups. Once a person is integrated in a group, this membership is not fixed. As soon as an individual fails to meet the silent requisites of the group, he will be criticized. If he still fails to comply, the dissident will be excluded. A drug addict, who is off the habit, will also leave the social environment of heavy drug addicts. Failing to follow the latest fashion trends will be ridiculed in many youth subcultures. Sometimes it even leads to exclusion of the outsider. The phenomenon known as 'keeping up with the Joneses' is active in the most heterogeneous groups in all layers of society. Belonging to a group implies following certain basic rules. If someone values the membership of a certain group highly, he will do everything to come up to these expectations. On the other hand, one can also try to go beyond these silent rules of group membership. One can play his ambition in the group, trying to excel in the membership of the group. This is revealed in a striving to be better than the rest, in the striving to be the first among equals. At that moment, an individual will fall back on luxury products to fulfill this position.

This is a very delicate process in a group. A group will tolerate the surpassing of some of its members but it will not accept excesses. As soon as the conventions of the group are carried too far, reactions are likely to appear. Either there will arise a new group in which new conventions and codes are adopted (the old membership will be terminated) or the excess is (slowly) accepted by the group. Consequently, the use of luxury products in groups has a lot in common with trampolining: one can jump above the group as long as one does not jump too high. Those group members who want to distinct themselves too much from the other group members will be faced with opposition. Descriptions of arrogance or snobbery will be used in those cases.¹⁶ Several informal processes will control the group such that members of the group are not too unfaithful on the one hand, but not too loyal on the other. Often there is a sort of *Pareto Optimum* in which one member of the group excels in this respect and another member in a second one. As such, the group as a whole will have no peaks being not tolerated. The meaning of luxury products in this group is much more complicated. Luxury behavior of members in a certain group is often a source of change or differentiation.

The use of luxury in processes of vertical distinction bears close resemblance to the dominant or denotative meaning of luxury: products to distinguish oneself. The luxury in groups has a more secret character. Outsiders not fully conscious of the ruling codes in a certain layer will not be able to distinguish the sometimes subtle differences between members of the same group. They will only notice the clear distinctive signs of differentiation between vertically ordered groups. Nevertheless, the products being used for distinction in groups have the same functionality as the products from vertical distinction processes. These objects help to place people on a higher or lower scale compared to each other. Since these objects have a sensitive status, the nature of the luxury will differ thoroughly. Take a tennis club in which the members try to outdo each other with the newest type of racket. Someone eager to prove his excellence in the club will buy a racket that is technically superior and more exclusive than the average racket. This racket will not contribute to the performances of the player. The true significance of the object lies in the sign-value of the racket being shown in every possible way to the other club members. The racket gets, on top of its utilitarian meaning, a luxury sign-value only comprehensible to the members of the tennis group. They are acquainted with the unique qualities of the product. This knowledge enables them to recognize the distinctive qualities of the object. In vertical processes of distinction, it is not the special qualities of the object that will make the object work as a luxury product. The tennis racket as such is a distinctive sign towards lower groups. At this moment, tennis

might be a little outdated as an exclusive sport but a few decades ago it was an elite sport only practiced by the higher classes in society. The group of tennis players will use their sport as a distinctive sign towards lower groups in order to distinct themselves from them. In the group, the tennis outfit will bear no luxury meaning.

In processes of horizontal distinction, luxury is being used as social indicator of excellent membership.

The relative character of luxury is extended quite far. The same object gets several different meanings according to the specific use of it in certain contexts. Depending on the context, the possible luxury meaning will be used by people in processes of horizontal or vertical distinction.

4. Conclusion

From the potlatch in primitive Indian societies to the pomp and circumstance of Louis XIV, one cannot imagine a society without luxury. The drive to differentiate and distinguish ourselves is deeply rooted in our opinions and our beliefs. This article concentrated on two aspects of the luxury phenomenon: the dominant cultural opinion of luxury on the one hand, and the cultural process of signification on the other hand.

The narrow definition of luxury as scarce products with an objective or symbolic value surplus and higher standard of quality, is an approach with a strong denotative, cultural embedment. It is the only solid ground for producers to attach some luxury value to an object. Strangely enough, this cultural reality is neglected today by the producers of luxury products. The so-called second democratization of luxury made several of these producers come apart at the seams. As a consequence, the sword of Damocles clearly hangs above their heads: 'The paradox of the strategy of luxury products lies in increasing the production and widening the distribution without exceeding the limit that rules out the product from the luxury sphere.' (Bechtold 1991: 41, my translation). The once unreachable luxury houses are becoming increasingly visible in the street scene: Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Armani. The enormous growth of the luxury industry in the eighties is concentrated mainly on the growing wealth of the middle and lower classes. The question is if the luxury industry is not digging its own grave: growing sales does not only mean a growing profit but also a drop in objective and subjective scarcity. It is perfectly possible that the magnificent fashion houses or jewelry producers will be defeated by new scarce and exclusive products with an extra value. Hans Magnus Enzensberger mentions six potential candidates: time, attention, space, rest, environment, and security (1996: 50–51). Enzensberger is

neglecting the power of material culture with his candidates. It is not because the current exclusive luxury houses could lose their luxury position in the future that it will go the same way with material culture as such. The extension of the possibilities to buy material objects will not disappear. Rather, it will change its guise. The democratization of luxury proves this: an increasing number of people gain access to material objects once called luxuries but luxury as a social phenomenon does not fade away.

Luxury is wider than the narrow definition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, luxury has become a sign-value in a world of signs with which people distinguish themselves from others. This is in contrast to the Veblenian view of demonstrative consumption. At the end of the nineteenth century when Veblen wrote about two powerful devices of social stratification (demonstrative leisure and demonstrative consumption) luxury had a solid ground. With the excessive purchase of expensive products, the higher classes ensured themselves of a place high above the lower social classes. As long as luxury is a clear separate category, these principles do work. When a logic of sign value prevails, the assignability of luxury is destroyed. Luxury becomes part of sign wars in which the negotiated meaning of the product comes to the fore. In the game of social distinction, luxury is constantly changing of appearance. The intangible character of the luxury meaning makes that the most common objects can turn in certain contexts into distinctive signs of taste and class. Thereby it is of no importance whether or not these objects are considered as luxury products by the dominant culture. Only the use of these products as signs of social standing makes them a luxury product. A middle class car stuffed with the newest devices is as powerful a distinctive luxury sign in certain classes as the longest Cadillac or the fastest Jaguar. As soon as an object plays a hierarchical role in intragroup or intergroup processes, this consumptive sign takes the meaning of a luxury product.

Luxury is a question of seeing and being seen. Seeing as a search for the latest distinctive signifiers that can be used to be seen in different distinctive group processes.

Notes

1. In 1980 the German economist Pöll (1980) published a highly economic dissertation on luxury.
2. John Sekora indicates the magnitude of the discussion:

1721–1971 — roughly the time between the enlarged edition of *the Fable of the Bees* and the *Wealth of Nations* — the British Museum and London School of

Economics possess more than 460 books and pamphlets that discuss luxury; for the whole century the number would nearly double. This estimate includes works, like Hume's *Political Discourses*, of which only part is devoted to luxury. But it does not include the vast number of comments in periodicals. If comments of all types during the century were counted, the number would be several thousand. (Sekora 1977: 66)

3. This evolution does not mean the end of the ascribed role of status goods. Several goods are still linked to certain social positions (e.g., uniforms give people a certain status and distinguish between social positions). A professor's gown has the same function: depending on the signs on the gown a higher or lower position is taken in the academic hierarchy. Nevertheless, uniforms and gowns stay out of the economic market. One can easily purchase a uniform, pay a price for it and wear it. In fact, one uses the symbolic value of the object in a fraudulent way (Goffman 1950). A uniform is not for sale like a Cartier watch. A uniform belongs to a social position while a vagabond winning the lottery can buy a Cartier watch. Luxury products need to have an economic aspect. It needs to be marketable. Luxury products are accessible to everyone, regardless of position. The only restrictive element is a monetary one.
4. Contemporary economics define luxury as 'those goods and services for which demand rises either in proportion with income or in greater proportion than income. Put in the economist's language the income elasticity of demand is ... equal or greater than one (elastic) for luxuries' (Scitovsky 1992: 107).
5. According to Sahlins, a culture defines the edible in two distinct ways: on the one hand it declares which animals can be eaten, on top of that it also distinguishes between the edible parts of these animals (Kline and Leiss 1978: 43).
6. 'Sugar, for example, was a luxury before the sixteenth century; pepper was still a luxury in the closing years of the seventeenth; so were alcohol and the first "aperitifs" at the time of Catherine de Medici.' (Braudel 1979: 153–154)
7. The same spectre seems to threaten the perfume industry at this moment. During the 1995 sales period in Belgium, store chain like Etos or Het Kruitvat caused a storm of indignation by selling some exclusive perfume brands at bulk-purchase prices. It is feared that these bulk-purchase practices will undermine in the long run the exclusive character of these brands. Perhaps the whole sector could be undermined (Van Der Heijden 1995).
8. This is of course a sort of objective durability. The subjective or social durability of products is much shorter. It is estimated that 80% of the current products will have disappeared in ten years (Allérès 1990: 34).
9. See also Vaughan (2004).
10. Some producers are eagerly searching for unknown uses of certain objects to integrate these in their own promotion campaigns. Some multinationals hire so-called 'coolspotters' to search in different urban regions for new trends and changes in fashions, especially youth fashions.
11. Orwell (1951: 114).
12. A different situation occurs when someone tries to use an object towards someone placed above him. There is no luxury sign-value implied here since there is no distinctive process at all. If one tries to realize some upward mobility by means of material signs, one does not use the luxury sign-value of a certain object but the in-group creating sign value of the object.
13. Important in this context is the notion of social groups in classes. It is possible that a certain group in London uses different luxury products as another group (with the

- same social prestige) situated in New York. Each of these groups will use their luxury products downwards, although the actual objects may differ between these two groups.
14. Orwell (1951: 23).
 15. An outfit of Chanel for example can make the difference between the upper-class older elite and the younger part preferring Gaultier. Between these two elite groups the choice of an outfit will probably have no distinctive character. This distinctive character, its luxury value comes only into existence, the moment someone of this elite groups distinct itself from a lower class.
 16. There is a possible exception to this: trendsetters. They are tolerated by the group as the most progressive group members that can violate the conventions. The group recognizes these individuals as innovators who can push back frontiers, as long as they show their group alignment regularly.

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