

THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS

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fact that decoration is out of favour. This furniture still sells, not because it is cheaper but because it embodies the official certainties of the group and enjoys the sanction of the bourgeoisie. A further reason is that such monumental furniture (sideboard, bed or wardrobe) and its arrangement echo the persistence of traditional family structures across broad social strata of modern society.

The Modern Object Liberated in Its Function

The style of furniture changes as the individual's relationships to family and society change. Corner divans and beds, coffee tables, shelving – a plethora of new elements are now supplanting the traditional range of furniture. The organization of space changes, too, as beds become day-beds and sideboards and wardrobes give way to built-in storage. Things fold and unfold, are concealed, appear only when needed. Naturally such innovations are not due to free experiment: for the most part the greater mobility, flexibility and convenience they afford are the result of an involuntary adaptation to a shortage of space – a case of necessity being the mother of invention. Whereas the old-fashioned dining-room was heavily freighted with moral convention, 'modern' interiors, in their ingenuity, often give the impression of being mere functional expedients. Their 'absence of style' is in the first place an absence of room, and maximum functionality is a solution of last resort whose outcome is that the dwelling-place, though remaining closed to the outside, loses its internal organization. Such a restructuring of space and the objects in it, unaccompanied by any reconversion, must in the first instance be considered an impoverishment.

The modern set of furniture, serially produced, is thus apparently destructured yet not restructured, nothing having replaced the expressive power of the old symbolic order. There is progress, nevertheless: between the individual and these objects, which are now more supple in their uses and have ceased to exercise or symbolize moral constraint, there is a much more liberal relation-

ship, and in particular the individual is no longer strictly defined through them relative to his family.² Their mobility and multi-functionality allow him to organize them more freely, and this reflects a greater openness in his social relationships. This, however, is only a partial liberation. So far as the serial object is concerned, in the absence of any restructuring of space, this ‘functional’ development is merely an emancipation, not (to go back to the old Marxian distinction) a liberation proper, for it implies *liberation from the function of the object only, not from the object itself*. Consider a nondescript, light, foldable table or a bed without legs, frame or canopy – an absolute cipher of a bed, one might say: all such objects, with their ‘pure’ outlines, no longer resemble even what they are; they have been stripped down to their most primitive essence as mere apparatus and, as it were, definitively secularized. What has been liberated in them – and what, in being liberated, has liberated something in man (or rather, perhaps, what man, in liberating himself, has liberated in them) – is their function. The function is no longer obscured by the moral theatricality of the old furniture; it is emancipated now from ritual, from ceremonial, from the entire ideology which used to make our surroundings into an opaque mirror of a reified human structure. Today, at last, these objects emerge absolutely clear about the purposes they serve. They are thus indeed free as *functional objects* – that is, they have the freedom to function, and (certainly so far as serial objects are concerned) that is practically the *only* freedom they have.³

2. We cannot help but wonder, however, whether he is not henceforward strictly defined through them relative to society at large. On this point, see ‘Models and Series’ below.

3. Similarly, the bourgeois and industrial revolution gradually freed the individual from his involvement with religion, morality and family. He thus acceded to a freedom in law as an individual, but also to an actual freedom as labour-power – that is, the freedom to sell himself as labour-power. This parallel has nothing coincidental about it, for there is a profound correlation here: both the serially produced ‘functional’ object and the social individual are liberated in their ‘functional’ objectification, not in their singularity or in their totality as object or person.

Now, just so long as the object is liberated only in its function, man equally is liberated only as user of that object. This too is progress, though not a decisive turning-point. A bed is a bed, a chair is a chair, and there is no relationship between them so long as each serves only the function it is supposed to serve. And without such a relationship there can be no space, for space exists only when it is opened up, animated, invested with rhythm and expanded by a correlation between objects and a transcendence of their functions in this new structure. In a way space is the object’s true freedom, whereas its function is merely its formal freedom. The bourgeois dining-room was structured, but its structure was closed. The functional environment is more open, freer, but it is destructured, fragmented into its various functions. Somewhere between the two, in the gap between integrated psychological space and fragmented functional space, serial objects have their being, witnesses to both the one and the other – sometimes within a single interior.

The Model Interior

Modular Components

This elusive space, which is no longer either a confined externality nor an interior refuge, this freedom, this ‘style’ which is indecipherable in the serial object because it is subordinated to that object’s function, may nevertheless be encountered in *model interiors*, which embody a new emerging structure and a significant evolution.⁴

Leafing through such glossy magazines as *Maison Française* or *Mobilier et Décoration* [Furniture and Decoration],⁵ one cannot fail to notice two alternating themes. The first reaches for the

4. In other words, these things happen at a privileged level. And there is a sociological and a social problem with the fact that a restricted group should have the concrete freedom to present itself, through its objects and furniture, as a model in the eyes of an entire society. This problem will be addressed later, however – see ‘Models and Series’ below.

5. A glossy magazine devoted to mass-produced products is unthinkable, the only appropriate form here being a catalogue.

have only couches, divans, settees and banquettes. Some 'beds' now disappear into the wall, bowing not to moral stricture but to abstract logic.²⁷ Tables are low, no longer centrally placed, weightless. The whole kitchen has lost its culinary function and is now a functional laboratory. This is progress, moreover, because the traditional environment, for all its directness, was an environment of moral obsession that bespoke the material difficulty of living. We do have more freedom in the modern interior, but this freedom is accompanied by a subtler formalism and a new moralism: everything here indicates the obligatory shift from eating, sleeping and procreating to smoking, drinking, entertaining, discussing, looking and reading. Visceral functions have given way to functions determined by culture. The sideboard used to hold linen, crockery or food; the functional elements of today house books, knick-knacks, a cocktail bar, or nothing at all. The term 'refined' – which, like 'functional', is a catchword of manipulated interior decoration – sums up this cultural constraint perfectly. Rooms have traded in the symbols of family for signs of social relationship. Once a solemn backdrop for affection, they are now an equally ritualistic décor of reception. A close reading of modern house-furnishings reveals that they converse among themselves with an ease in every way comparable to that of the dinner guests, that they mingle and drift apart with the very same freedom, and that they convey the same message: namely, that it is quite possible to live without working.

Of course, culture has always played the ideological role of pacifier, sublimating tensions associated with functional imperatives and answering the need for being to take on recognizable form beyond the material reality and conflicts of the world. Such a form – which attests, despite everything, to the existence of a purpose, and ensures the direct memory of a fundamental security

27. An exception here is an object reintroduced with a new connotation that occludes its earlier obscenity, a case in point being the old free-standing eighteenth-century Spanish bed. (See the discussion of antiques below.)

– is no doubt even more urgently needed in a technological civilization. It is just that, like the reality it simultaneously reflects and disavows, this form is now being systematized. Systematic technicity calls forth systematic cultural connotation. And *this systematic cultural connotation at the level of objects is what I am calling ATMOSPHERE*.

Atmospheric Values: Gestural Systems and Forms

When we come, in our continuing analysis of atmospheric values, to the consideration of 'functional' forms (variously described as 'contoured', 'dynamic', etc.), we find that the 'stylization' of such forms cannot be disentangled from the stylization of the human gestural systems which correspond to them. The style of such gestural systems always implies the suppression of muscular energy, of labour. Primary functions are overwritten by secondary ones, by relationship and calculation, and instinctual drives give way to cultural connotation. All these tendencies are mediated practically and historically, at the level of objects, by the fundamental supersession of the gestural system of effort, by *the great shift from a universal gestural system of labour to a universal gestural system of control*. This is the turning-point at which a status enjoyed by objects for millennia, their anthropomorphic status, is definitively terminated – destroyed by the new abstractness of energy sources.

The Traditional Gestural System: Effort

So long as the energy applied was muscular in character, and hence immediate and contingent, the tool remained embedded in human relations, rich symbolically speaking but not particularly well designed structurally. The adoption of animals as a source of power did not represent a qualitative change: for entire civilizations human and animal power were essentially on a par. The unchanging nature of the energy employed meant that tools, too, underwent little change. Thus the status of the tool or manual

object varied hardly at all over the centuries. Man's profound gestural relationship to objects, which epitomizes his integration into the world, into social structures, can be a highly fulfilling one, and this fulfilment is discernible in the beauty – the 'style' – of the relationship in its reciprocity. It nevertheless constitutes a constraint which, in tandem with the constraints imposed by social structures, stands in the way of real productivity. We cannot but admire scythes, baskets, pitchers or ploughs, amalgams of gestures and forces, of symbols and functions, decorated and stylized by human energy and shaped by the forms of the human body, by the exertions they imply and by the matter they transform; yet the magnificence of such conformities remains subordinate to the limitations of the relationship in question. Man is not free with respect to these objects, nor are these objects free with respect to man. A revolution in energy sources had to occur – long-range practical control had to become possible, along with the storage and measurement of a newly mobile energy – before man and object could be drawn into a fresh, objective dialogue, into a conflict-laden dialectic which had never been implicit in the reciprocal goal-directedness of their former constrained relationship. Only then could man embark upon an objective process of social development and the object likewise tend in the direction of its own truth, that is, its functionality multiplied by the amount of energy released.

For the real object is the functional object. Revolutions in the field of energy entail the replacement of energy symbiosis and symbolic compliance by the rationality of technology and the (relative) rationality of the reign of production. By the same token, man's relationship to objects becomes subject to a social dialectic which is basically that of the forces of production. What interests us here, however, is the impact of this upheaval on the realm of everyday life.

The Functional Gestural System: Control

We know from our practical experience how very far the mediation of gestures between man and things has been stretched:

household appliances, cars, gadgetry, heating, lighting, communications and transportation systems – all require no more than minimal energy and action in order to function properly. Often a slight motion of hand or eye suffices; no dexterity is called for – at the most, reflexes. The domestic world, almost as much as the world of work, is governed by regular gestures of control and remote control. Buttons, levers, handles, pedals (even nothing at all – as when one passes in front of a photo-electric cell) have thus replaced pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body, the intensity and distribution of force, and the abilities of the hand (from which little more than quickness is now asked). A prehension of objects involving the whole body has given way to simple contact (of hand or foot) and simple surveillance (by the eye or, occasionally, by the ear). In other words, only man's 'extremities' now have an active part to play in the functional environment.

The liberating abstractness of energy sources is thus accompanied by a concomitant abstractness of human praxis with respect to objects. What is called for here is less a neuromuscular praxis than what Pierre Naville describes as a system of cerebro-sensory vigilance. But such a system cannot be self-sufficient: the total abstractness of remote action must be mitigated by what I refer to as a gestural system of control (by hand, eye, etc.).²⁸ There is a sense in which this minimal gestural system is essential, for without it all this abstract power would become meaningless. Man has to be reassured

28.. To be more exact, it is not simply that the old gestural system of effort has been stretched out into a gestural system of control: it has also been split into a gestural system of control and a gestural system of *play*. Ignored by modern praxis, but nonetheless freed from its old constraints, the body finds genuine expression in sports and physical leisure activities – or at any rate, these supply it with a compensatory release, for we may well ask whether the splitting into two of the gestural system of effort institutes any real freedom of the body, or whether it merely establishes a binomial whose second term (in this case, games and sports) does no more than compensate for the first. A parallel might be drawn here with the splitting of time into active time and leisure time.

about his power by some sense of participation, albeit a merely formal one. So the gestural system of control must be deemed indispensable – not to make the system work *technically*, for more advanced technology could (and no doubt will) make it unnecessary, but, rather, to make that system work *psychologically*.

A New Operational Field

Since the energy of objects is abstract, their functionality is limitless: just as there is now scarcely any substance that has no plastic equivalent, so there is no gesture that cannot be replaced by technology. The simplest of mechanisms is liable to replace and subsume a whole set of gestures, concentrating their effectiveness and becoming independent not only of the agent but also of the material acted upon. Form and utility of the tool, raw material, energy applied – all these factors have changed. Thus the matter dealt with has undergone infinite differentiation – even to the point of disappearing altogether: that processed by a radio, for example, is information. The transformation of energy has entailed that of both materials and functions, for technology is not content merely to encapsulate earlier gestures, it also invents new operations, and above all splits up the operational field into completely different functions or sets of functions. Man's abstract relationship to his (technical) objects, his 'spectacular alienation', is thus less a matter of his gestures having been *replaced* than of the abstractness of the very way in which functions have been *split up*, and the impossibility of any analogical apprehension of this splitting-up by reference to earlier gestures.²⁹ Only an abstract

29. The fire is a case in point. Originally the 'hearth' filled the combined functions of heating, cooking and lighting. This was the basis of its symbolic complexity. Later, the kitchen stove – already a kind of appliance – took over the functions of heating and cooking, while retaining a certain symbolic presence. Eventually all three tasks were separated in analytic fashion and assigned to separate specialized appliances whose synthetic aspect lay not in the concrete unity of the hearth but solely in the abstract identity of the energy (gas or electricity) on which they ran. This new environment, based on a completely different division of functions, has no symbolic dimension whatsoever.

(never an unmediated) intelligence can adapt to the new technical structures; meanwhile, man himself has yet to adapt to the increasingly exclusive use of these higher functions of intelligence and calculation. Resistance here has deep roots, and creates an irreparable delay. Man has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings and thus appropriating his actions. Take the washing machine, for instance. In its form and operation it has no clear relationship to the clothes washed. The whole operation of washing has lost its specificity in space and time; it is a minimal intervention, a timed procedure in which the water itself is no more than an abstract vehicle for detergent chemicals. Functionally speaking, the washing machine belongs, therefore, to a relational field utterly different from that of the old-fashioned washboard or washtub – a functional field of associations which is no longer coextensive with other objective operations, with the refrigerator, with the television, with the components of interior design, or with the automobile. Traditional tools, by contrast, belonged to a field of practical mediation between the material to be transformed and the person doing the transforming. We have thus moved from the depth of a vertical field to the extension of a horizontal one.

Just as the various parts of an object's mechanism have structure, so the various technical objects tend, independently of man, to become organized by themselves, to refer to one another in the uniformity of their simplified praxis, and thus come to constitute an articulated order, pursuing its own mode of technological development, wherein man's role does not go beyond a mechanical control which may well ultimately be taken over by the machine itself.

Miniaturization

In place of the continuous (but finite) *space* that gestures create for their purposes around the traditional object, the technical object institutes discontinuous and unlimited *extension*. The principle that regulates this new extension, this functional dimension, is the

requirement that organization be maximized and communication optimized. Consequently, technological progress is now accompanied by an ever stronger tendency towards the miniaturization of technical objects.

Freed now from the need to refer to the human scale, to the 'life-size', and ever more taken up by the complexity of messages, mechanisms tend increasingly, on the model of the brain, towards an irreversible concentration of their structures, towards the quintessentially microcosmic.³⁰ After the Promethean expansion of a technology striving to occupy the whole world, the entirety of space, we are now entering the era of a technology that works on the world 'in depth', so to speak. The reign of electronics and cybernetics means that efficiency, freed from the shackles of gestural space, is henceforward dependent upon a saturation of minimal extension, governing a maximized field, which is without common measure with sensory experience.³¹

30. This is the reason for our fascination with miniaturized watches, transistor radios, cameras, and so forth.

31. This tendency to miniaturize may seem paradoxical in the context of a civilization of extension, expansion and spatialization. It is a tendency, however, that embodies both the ideal goal of that civilization and a contradiction within it. For our technological civilization is also a civilization of limits imposed on urban life, of a critical scarcity of space. And it is increasingly, by absolute everyday necessity (and not just by structural necessity), a civilization of the 'compact'. There is undoubtedly a link between lasers, calculators and microtechnology on the one hand and small cars, multifunctional gadgets, 'planned' flats and transistor radios on the other – but this link is not necessarily structural or logical. The principle of maximum organization which gives rise to technologies of miniaturization has the parallel function of palliating (though not resolving) a chronic shortage of space in everyday life. The two functions are not structurally related; it is simply that both are bound up with each other in the context of a single system. As for the everyday technical object, caught between the two, it is uncertain whether it represents a technological advance (miniaturization) or a degrading of the practical system (shortage of space). (The antagonism between structural technological evolution and the constraints of scarcity which govern the system as directly experienced is discussed later – see 'The Transformations of Technology', pp. 123 ff. below.)

Stylization, Manipulability, Envelopment

The stylization of forms is invariably a corollary of the growing autonomy of the functional world and the optimized organization of space in its extension. Forms themselves also become more autonomous as they diverge further and further from a morphology founded on the human body and on the physical effort exerted by that body, yet they continue to allude thereto in one way or another. They organize themselves independently, but their former relationship to primary functions subsists in the abstractness of the sign: this is their *connotation*. Consider the hand, whose importance for the gestural system of control we have already mentioned. The first aim of all modern objects is manipulability ('manipulable' being virtually synonymous with 'functional'). But just what is the nature of the 'hand' which thus determines the forms of these objects? Certainly no longer the prehensile organ that focuses effort: rather, nothing more than the abstract *sign* of manipulability, to which buttons, handles, and so on are all the better suited in that the operation concerned no longer calls for manual labour and, indeed, takes place elsewhere. Here we rediscover (though now on the morphological plane) the myth of naturalness of which we spoke above: the human body delegates no more than the signs of its presence to objects whose functioning, in any case, is independent from now on. At the very most it delegates its 'extremities', while objects, for their part, are 'contoured' in accordance with an abstract morphological meaning. There is a collusion of forms here which no longer refers to man save by way of allusion.³² It is in this sense only that the object's form 'weds' the hand, that Airborne's armchair (of which more later) 'weds' the shape of your body: one form adapts to another. The traditional object or tool, by contrast, was not in any way 'wedded' to human forms; what it wedded was human physical

32. Just as we saw that in the realm of atmosphere, nature is no more than an allusion.