

From:  
*The System of Objects*  
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## B. THE NON-FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM, OR SUBJECTIVE DISCOURSE

### I Marginal Objects: Antiques

There is a whole range of objects — including unique, baroque, folkloric, exotic and antique objects — that seem to fall outside the system we have been examining. They appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism. It is tempting to treat them as survivals from the traditional, symbolic order. Yet for all their distinctiveness, these objects do play a part in modernity, and that is what gives them a double meaning.

#### Atmospheric Value: Historicalness

The fact is that the marginal object is not an anomaly relative to the system, for *the functionality of modern objects becomes historicalness in the case of the antique object* (or marginality in the baroque object, or exoticism in the primitive object) *without this implying that the object ceases to function as a sign within the system*. What we have here is the connotation of nature, of ‘naturalness’ — indeed, fundamentally we have the ultimate instantiation of that connotation, which is to be found in signs of previous cultural systems. The cigarette lighter described above had a mythological dimension in its reference to the sea, but it still served a purpose; the way in which antiques refer to the past gives them an *exclusively* mythological character. The antique object no longer has any practical application, its role being merely to *signify*. It is astructural, it refuses structure, it is the extreme case of disavowal of the primary functions. Yet it is not afunctional, nor purely ‘decorative’, for it has a very specific function within the system, namely the signifying of time.<sup>1</sup>

The system of atmosphere is defined in terms of extension, yet inasmuch as it aspires to be total it must conquer all of existence, including, therefore, the essential dimension of time. Clearly it is not real time but the signs or indices of

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<sup>1</sup> I am restricting my account to antiques because they are the clearest example of ‘non-systematic’ objects. Obviously this account might be applied equally well, using the same premisses, to other varieties of marginal objects.

time that antiques embody.<sup>2</sup> This allegorical presence in no way contradicts the general scheme: nature, time — nothing can escape, and everything is worked out on the level of signs. Time, however, is far less amenable than nature to abstraction and systematization. The living contradiction it enshrines resists integration into the logic of a system. This ‘chronic’ difficulty is what we see reflected in the spectacular connotation of the antique object. The connotation of naturalness can be subtle, but the connotation of historicalness is always glaring. The immobility of antiques has something self-conscious about it. No matter how fine it is, an antique is always eccentric; no matter how authentic it is, there is always something false about it. And indeed, it *is* false in so far as *it puts itself forward as authentic within a system whose basic principle is by no means authenticity but, rather, the calculation of relationships and the abstractness of signs.*

#### Symbolic Value: The Myth of the Origin

The antique thus has a particular status. To the extent that it is there to conjure up time as part of the atmosphere, and to the extent that it is experienced as a sign, it is simply one element among others, and relative to all others.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, to the extent that it is not on a par with other objects and manifests itself as total, as an authentic presence, it enjoys a special psychological standing. It is in this respect that the antique may be said, though it serves no obvious purpose, to serve a purpose nevertheless at a deeper level. What lies behind the persistent search for old things — for antique furniture, authenticity, period style, rusticity, craftsmanship, hand-made products, native pottery, folklore, and so on? What is the reason for the strange acculturation phenomenon whereby advanced peoples seek out signs extrinsic to their own time or space, and increasingly remote relative to their own cultural system (a phenomenon which is the converse of ‘underdeveloped’ peoples’ attraction to the technological products and signs of the industrialized world)?

The demand to which antiques respond is the demand for definitive or fully realized being.<sup>4</sup> The tense of the mythological object is the perfect: it is that

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<sup>2</sup> Just as naturalness is basically a disavowal of nature, so historicalness is a refusal of history masked by an exaltation of the signs of history: history simultaneously invoked and denied.

<sup>3</sup> In point of fact the antique may be perfectly integrated into structures of atmosphere, for its presence is apprehended en bloc as ‘warm’, in contrast to the modern environment as a whole, which is ‘cold’.

<sup>4</sup> And once again my remarks should be taken as equally applicable, by extension, to exotic objects; for modern man, in any case, changing country or latitude is essentially equivalent to plunging into the past (as tourism well demonstrates). The fascination for hand-made or native products, for bazaar items from all over the globe, arises less from their picturesque variety than from the

which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is 'authentic'. The antique is always, in the strongest sense of the term, a 'family portrait': the immemorialization, in the concrete form of an object, of a former being — a procedure equivalent, in the register of the imaginary, to a suppression of time. This characteristic of antiques is, of course, precisely what is lacking in functional objects, which exist only in the present, in the indicative or in the practical imperative, which exhaust their possibilities in use, never having occurred in a former time, and which, though they can in varying degrees support the spatial environment, cannot support the temporal one. The functional object is efficient; the mythological object is fully realized. The fully realized event that the mythological object signifies is birth. I am not the one who *is*, in the present, full of *angst* — rather, I am the one who *has been*, as indicated by the course of the reverse birth of which the antique object is the sign, a course which leads from the present far back into time: a regression, therefore.<sup>5</sup> The antique object thus presents itself as a myth of origins.

#### 'Authenticity'

It is impossible not to draw a comparison between the taste for antiques and the passion for collecting (which we shall be discussing below). There are profound affinities between the two, and in both we find the same narcissistic regression, the same way of suppressing time, the same imaginary mastery of birth and death. All the same, there are two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object that need to be pointed out: the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity. It seems to me that both arise from the mythical evocation of birth which the antique object constitutes in its temporal closure — being born implying, after all, that one has had a father and a mother. Obviously, beating a path back to the origins means regression to the mother; the older the object, the closer it brings us to an earlier age, to 'divinity', to nature, to primitive knowledge, and so forth. According to Maurice Rheims, this kind of mystique already existed in the High Middle Ages, when a Greek bronze or intaglio covered with pagan markings could acquire magical virtues in the eyes of a ninth-century Christian. The demand for authenticity is, strictly speaking, a very different matter. It is reflected in an obsession with certainty — specifically, certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of a work. The mere fact that

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anteriority of their forms or their manufacture, and from the allusion they contain to an earlier world — invariably a throwback to the world of our childhood and its playthings.

<sup>5</sup> Two opposed tendencies are involved here. Inasmuch as the antique is integrated into the *current* cultural system, it comes from the depths of time *as signifier in the present of the empty dimension of time*. By contrast, the individual regression that the antique object makes possible is *a movement of the present into the past, into which it projects the empty dimension of being*.

a particular object has belonged to a famous or powerful individual may confer value on it. The fascination of handicraft derives from an object's having passed through the hands of someone the marks of whose labour are still inscribed thereupon: we are fascinated by what has been *created*, and is therefore unique, because the *moment* of creation cannot be reproduced. Now, the search for the *traces of creation*, from the actual impression of the hand to the signature, is also a search for a line of descent and for paternal transcendence.

Authenticity always stems from the Father: the Father is the source of value here. And it is this sublime link that antiques evoke in the imagination, along with the return journey to the mother's breast.

### The Neo-Cultural Syndrome: Restoration

The quest for *authenticity* (being-founded-on-itself) is thus very precisely a quest for an *alibi* (being-elsewhere). Let me try to shed some light on these two notions by considering a well-known example of nostalgic restoration, as described in an article entitled 'How to Fix Up Your Ruin'.<sup>6</sup> This is what an architect does with an old farm in 'Ile-de-France'<sup>7</sup> that he has taken over and decided to restore:

The walls, crumbling because of the lack of foundations, were demolished. Part of the original barn at the south gable was removed to make way for a terrace. . . . Of course the three major walls were reconstructed. For the purposes of waterproofing we left a 0.7-metre space beneath tarred flagstones at ground level.... Neither the staircase nor the chimney was part of the original structure. . . . We brought in Marseilles tile, Clamart flags, Burgundian *tuiles* for the roof; we built a garage in the garden and installed large French windows. . . . The kitchen is a hundred per cent modern, as is the bathroom. . . .

HOWEVER: 'The half-timbering, which was in good condition, has been retained in the new construction'; AND: 'The stone framework of the main entrance was carefully preserved during demolition, and its stones and tiles were reused.' The article is accompanied by photographs which indeed clearly show just what is left from the old farm in the wake of 'the architect's soundings and categorical choices': three beams and two stone blocks. But on this rock would our architect build his country house — and indeed, the couple of original stones

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<sup>6</sup> 'Comment bricoler votre ruine', *La maison française*, May 1963.

<sup>7</sup> [Translator's note: The author's inverted commas suggest the quaintness of the name 'Ile-de-France' at the time of writing, for this was then an archaic regional denomination with no modern administrative meaning. This changed in 1976, when the entity known as the Région Parisienne was rebaptized Ile-de-France.]

left in that entranceway now constitute the most fitting of symbolic foundations, reinvesting the whole edifice with value. It is they which exculpate the whole enterprise from all the compromises struck by modernity with nature in order to make the place more comfortable (an innocent enough intention in itself). The architect, now transformed into a gentleman farmer, has in actuality built himself the modern house that he wanted all along, but modernity of itself could not invest the place with value, could not make the house into a 'dwelling-place': true *being* was still lacking. Rather as a church does not become a genuinely sacred place until a few bones or relics have been enshrined in it, so this architect cannot feel at home (in the strongest sense: he cannot thoroughly rid himself of a particular kind of anxiety) until he can sense the infinitesimal yet sublime presence within his brand-new walls of an old stone that bears witness to past generations. Were it not for such witnesses, the oil heating and the garage (surmounted by its Alpine garden!) would be nothing more, sad to say, than what they are — the sad necessities of comfort. Nor is it only the functional arrangements that are exonerated by the authenticity of those old stones, but in some measure also the cultural exoticism of less important decorative elements (which are, naturally, 'in the best of taste and not in the least rustic'): opalescent lamps, straw-bottomed designer armchairs, a Dalmatian chair 'once strapped to the back of a donkey', a Romantic mirror, and so forth. The cunning of the cultural guilty conscience even leads to a curious paradox, for while the garage is concealed by a fake Alpine garden, a warming-pan introduced as a rustic accessory is described as 'there not as part of the décor but as a serviceable utensil'. 'It is used', we are assured, 'in wintertime'! So the garage's practical materiality is masked, but the warming-pan's practical essence is retrieved by means of mental acrobatics. In an oil-heated house a warming-pan is obviously quite superfluous. Yet if it is not used it will no longer be authentic, will become a mere cultural sign: the cultural, purposeless warming-pan will emerge as an all-too-faithful image of the vanity of the attempt to retrieve a natural state of affairs by rebuilding this house — and, indeed, an all-too-faithful image of the architect himself, who, fundamentally, has no part to play here, for his entire social existence lies elsewhere; his very *being* is elsewhere, and for him nature is nothing but a cultural luxury. Which is fair enough, so long as one can afford it. The architect, however, does not see things in that light: if the warming-pan serves no purpose, it is merely a sign of wealth, and is thus of the order of *having*, of status, and not of the order of *being*. It must therefore be declared to have some purpose, in contrast to such truly useful objects as the oil heater and the garage, which are studiously camouflaged, as though they were ineradicable blots on nature. The warming-pan is therefore genuinely mythological; so, for that matter, is the whole house (although in another sense it is totally real and functional, responding as it does to a perfectly clear desire for comfort and fresh air). By choosing not to raze the old farm and build on the site in accordance

simply with his own need for comfort, by his insistence on saving old stones and beams, our architect betrays the fact that he experiences the refinement and flawless functionality of his house as inauthentic, that these characteristics do not satisfy his deepest wishes.

Man is not 'at home' amid pure functionality — he requires something like that lustre of the wood of the True Cross which could make a church truly holy, some kind of talisman — a shard of absolute reality ensconced, enshrined at the heart of ordinary reality in order to justify it. Such is the role of the antique object, which always takes on the meaning, in the context of the human environment, of an embryo or mother-cell. By means of such objects a dispersed being identifies with the original and ideal situation of the embryo, retrogressing to the microcosmic yet essential state of prenatal life. These fetishized objects are therefore by no means mere accessories, nor are they merely cultural signs among others: they symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness — that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it. The phantasy of authenticity is sublime, and it is always located somewhere short of reality (*sub limina*). Like the holy relic,<sup>8</sup> whose function it secularizes, the antique object reorganizes the world in a dispersive fashion which is quite antithetical to the extensive nature of functional organization — such organization being the very thing, in fact, from which it seeks to protect the profound and no doubt vital lack of realism of the inner self.

As symbol of the inscription of value in a closed circle and in a perfect time, mythological objects constitute a discourse no longer addressed to others but solely to oneself. Islands of legend, such objects carry human beings back beyond time to their childhood — or perhaps even farther still, back to a pre-birth reality where pure subjectivity was free to conflate itself metaphorically with its surroundings, so that those surroundings became simply the perfect discourse directed by human beings to themselves.

### Synchronism, Diachronism, Anachronism

Within the private environment, mythological objects constitute a realm of even greater privacy: they serve less as possessions than as symbolic intercessors — as ancestors, so to speak, than which nothing is more 'private'. They are a way of escaping from everyday life, and no escape is more radical than escape in time,

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<sup>8</sup> The significance of the relic is that it makes it possible to enshrine the identity of God or that of the soul of a dead person within an object. And there is no relic without a reliquary: the value 'slides' from the one to the other, and the reliquary, often made of gold, becomes the unmistakable signifier of authenticity, and hence more effective as a symbol.

none so thoroughgoing as escape into one's own childhood.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps there is something of this metaphorical escape in all aesthetic feeling, but the work of art as such calls for a rational reading, whereas the antique does not: antiques partake of 'legend', because they are defined first and foremost by their mythical quality, by their coefficient of authenticity. The antique as directly experienced is quite unaffected by period or style, whether the object is a model or whether it is serial in character, whether or not it is precious, or whether it is genuine or fake: it remains in all cases 'perfect'; it is neither internal nor external, but 'elsewhere'; neither synchronic nor diachronic, but *anachronistic*; relative to its possessor, it is neither the complement of a verb 'to be' nor the object of a verb 'to have', but falls, rather, into the grammatical category of an internal object that gives expression to the essence of the verb in an almost tautological manner.

The functional object is devoid of being. Reality prevents its regression to that 'perfect' dimension the fact of proceeding from which suffices to ensure being.

This is why such objects seem so reduced, for whatever their price, merit or prestige, they configure, and must perforce continue to configure, the loss of the Father and the Mother. Rich in functionality but impoverished in meaning, their frame of reference is the present moment, and their possibilities do not extend beyond everyday life. The mythological object, on the other hand, has minimal function and maximal meaning, while its frame of reference is the ancestral realm — perhaps even the realm of the absolute anteriority of nature. On the plane of direct experience, however, the antithetical traits of the mythological and the functional coexist in complementary fashion within the one system. Our architect, for example, has both oil heating and a peasant-style warming-pan. Similarly, a literary work may be available at the same time in paperback and in a limited edition or fine binding, an electric washing machine may cohabit with an old battledore, or a functional built-in cupboard may be found cheek by jowl with a prominently displayed Spanish cabinet.<sup>10</sup> This complementarity may even be discerned in the now common practice of dual residence, of combining a flat in the city and a house in the country.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Travelling as a tourist always involves going in search of lost time.

<sup>10</sup> We should not seek one-to-one correspondences here, however, because the functional field of modern objects is configured in quite a different way from that of antiques. Moreover, the function of antique objects in this context exists only in the sense of a function that is extinct.

<sup>11</sup> This splitting of the traditional single home into principal and secondary — or functional and 'naturalized' — residences offers the clearest possible illustration of the systematizing process: the system splits into two in order to strike a balance between terms that are formally antithetical yet fundamentally complementary. This split affects the whole of everyday life, as witness an organization of work and leisure wherein leisure by no means transcends or even provides an outlet from productive activity: instead, a selfsame everyday reality splits into two as a means of overriding the contradictions and imposing itself as a coherent and definitive system. It is true that

This duel between objects is fundamentally a duel of consciousness; it indicates a failure — and the attempt to redress that failure in a regressive fashion. In a civilization where synchronism and diachronism strive to establish systematic and exclusive control over reality, a third dimension, that of anachronism, nevertheless emerges (and this as much at the level of objects as at the level of behaviours and social structures). This regressive dimension, though it attests to a relative setback for the system, nevertheless finds a place within that system and even, paradoxically, enables the system to function.

### Reverse Projection: The Technical Object and Primitive Man

Naturally, this ambiguous coexistence of modern functionality and traditional ‘décor’ arises only after a certain level of economic development, industrial production and practical environmental saturation has been attained. Less privileged social strata (peasants, workers) and ‘primitive’ peoples have no interest in what is old: they aspire to the functional. All the same, there is a similarity here between ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ attitudes. When a ‘savage’ grabs a watch or a fountain pen merely because it is a ‘Western’ object, we find this behaviour comical or absurd, for the object is not being given its true meaning but appropriated hungrily in accordance with an infantile type of relationship involving a power phantasy. Instead of having a function, the object has a virtue: it has become a sign. Yet is this not the very same procedure of impulsive acculturation and magical appropriation that drives ‘civilized’ people towards sixteenth-century woodcuts or icons? In both cases what is being acquired under the form of the object is a ‘virtue’: the ‘savage’ acquires modern technology, the ‘civilized’ person acquires ancestral significance. The ‘virtue’ is not of the same order in the two instances, however. What ‘underdeveloped’ people want from the object is an image of the Father as *Power* — in the event, *colonial power*;<sup>12</sup> what nostalgic ‘civilized’ people want is an image of the Father signifying *birth* and value. In the first case, a projective myth; in the second, a retrogressive one. A myth of power — and a myth of origins: whatever it is that man lacks is invested in the object. The ‘underdeveloped’ fetishize power by

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this process is less marked in the case of isolated objects; the fact remains that every functional object is potentially capable of splitting in this way, of *becoming formally opposed to itself so as to fit more effectively into the overall system*.

<sup>12</sup> In the case of the child, too, objects in the environment come in the first place from the Father (and in early infancy from a phallic mother). To appropriate these objects is to appropriate the power of the Father (as Roland Barthes shows, apropos of motorcars, in ‘La voiture, projection de l’ego’, *Réalités*, no. 213, October 1963). The exercise of this power parallels the process of identification with the Father, and embraces all the conflicts this entails; consequently it is always ambiguous and partly aggressive in character.

means of the technical object; technically advanced, 'civilized' people, for their part, fetishize birth and authenticity by means of the mythological object.

This being said, the fetishism itself is identical. In the last reckoning every antique is beautiful *merely because it has survived, and thus become the sign of an earlier life*. It is our fraught curiosity about our origins that prompts us to place such mythological objects, the signs of a previous order of things, alongside the functional objects which, for their part, are the signs of our current mastery. For we want at one and the same time to be entirely self-made and yet be descended from someone: to succeed the Father yet simultaneously to proceed from the Father. Perhaps mankind will never manage to choose between embarking on the Promethean project of reorganizing the world, thus taking the place of the Father, and being directly descended from an original being. Our objects bear silent witness to this unresolved ambivalence. Some serve as mediation with the present, others as mediation with the past, the value of the latter being that they address a lack. Antiques are preceded by a particle, so to speak, and their inherited nobility compensates for the premature aging of modern objects. There was a time when old people were beautiful because they were 'closer to God' and richer in experience; our technological civilization has rejected the wisdom of the old, but it bows down before the solidity of old things, whose unique value is sealed and certain.

### The Market in Antiques

More is involved here than a snobbish and status-seeking itch of the kind evoked by Vance Packard, for example, when he describes how fashionable Bostonians install old panes of a purplish tinge in their windows: 'The defectiveness of those panes is highly cherished even when their functional value is dubious. The panes were part of a shipment of inferior glass foisted off on Americans by English glassmakers more than three centuries ago.'<sup>13</sup> Or again: 'It was found that, if a suburbanite aspires to move up into the "lower-upper class, he will buy antiques — symbols of old social position bought with new money".'<sup>14</sup> Yet social standing may be signalled in a thousand ways (by a car, a modern detached house, etc.), so why is the reference to the *past* so often chosen as a vector of status?<sup>15</sup> All acquired value tends to metamorphose into inherited value, into a received grace. But since blood, birth and titles of nobility have lost their ideological force, the task of signifying transcendence has fallen to material signs — to pieces of furniture, objects, jewellery and works of art of every time and every place. The

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<sup>13</sup> *The Status Seekers* (New York: David McKay, 1959), p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Certainly this tendency increases in a general way as people climb the social ladder, but it really takes off only once a certain status and a minimal level of 'urban acculturation' have been reached.

door has thus been opened to a mass of 'authoritative' signs and idols (whose authenticity, in the end, is neither here nor there); the market has been invaded by a whole magical flora of real or fake furniture, manuscripts and icons. The past in its entirety has been pressed into the service of consumption. This has even created a kind of black market. The New Hebrides, Romanesque Spain and flea markets everywhere have already been stripped clean by the voracious appetite for nostalgia and primitivism of the Western world's bourgeois interiors. Statues of the Virgin and saints are stolen from churches, paintings are stolen from museums, then this booty is sold secretly to rich people whose residences are too new to give them the kind of satisfaction they want. It is a cultural irony — but an economic fact — that this thirst for 'authenticity' can now be slaked only by forgeries.

### Cultural Neo-Imperialism

Fundamentally, the imperialism that subjugates nature with technical objects and the one that domesticates cultures with antiques are one and the same. This same private imperialism is the organizing principle of a functionally domesticated environment made up of domesticated signs of the past — of ancestral objects, sacred in essence but desacralized, which are called upon to exude their sacredness (or historicalness) into a history-less domesticity.

In this way the entire past, as a repertory of forms of consumption, is incorporated into the repertory of present-day forms in order to constitute a kind of transcendent sphere of fashion.