

Using Barthes¹ Quote, issued from Walker's book², discuss a mass product object's role within the 20th Century.

Barthes Quote:

Designed goods as the object of study

"It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky, in as much as it appears at first sight a superlative object. We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and, a brilliance - a transformation of life into matter..."

In order to avoid any confusion between different uses of the words sign, signifier and signified, Barthes leaves the 'first' sign with its proper term, but he calls the 'second' signification. In a myth, the first signifier is a meaning and its signified is a concept. The second signifier is a form and the second signified is still a concept³.

In his closing essay of *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines his conception of the form and function of modern myth as well as touching upon what would appear to be his own role, that of a mythologist. He first outlines the form that myth takes as a second order signification or "semiological system". In other words, an already existent linguistic sign (the association of a signifier and a signified) is, in some sense, drained of its first-order meaning to become now, a form which is imbued with the myth-concept, forming a new second-order signification. As one example, Barthes cites the cover of *Paris-March* which depicts a black French soldier, ostensibly saluting the tricolour. While as an image this has a first-order meaning of this particular individual serving in the military and saluting, the working of myth have distorted the image to become a statement about French imperialism.

The object I chose as a starting point, is the fax machine. Indeed, this product takes part of the wide range of technological tools which glutted the market (and still glut it),

¹ BARTHES, Roland, (1915-1980), French critic and professor of Semiology at the College de France. Author of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Mythologies* (1957), *Critical Essays* (1964), *S/Z* (1970), *L'empire des Signes* (1970), *Sade, Fourier, Loloya* (1971), *New Critical Essays* (1972), *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)

² WALKER J., *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press, London, 1989, p58

³ Barthes R., *Mythologies*, Vintage, London, 1993, p115

such as the microwave, the video tape recorder, the CD player, the computer, the mobile phone and so on, at the end of the 20th century.

One consideration that may be taken into account to the explanation of this choice could be the particular care I attribute to my own fax machine, the main object which keeps me in touch with my family and people of my interest for four years now, since I left home...

Whereas telex and teletex cater for text only, facsimile (or fax) treats a document as a picture. Facsimile services can utilise either the telephone or the telex network for transmission of a faithful copy of an original document. The signal for transmission is generated by automatically scanning the page to be sent.

The main advantage of facsimile is that it transmits texts and graphics, diagrams, handwriting etc. equally as easily because it treats them all as still pictures. Its transmission accuracy is of particular benefit in sending financial documents, engineering drawings, satellite photographs, newspaper pages, etc. International standards for facsimile are well established⁴.

One serious limitation of fax systems is that the sender and receiver terminals are expected to operate simultaneously, one scanning, the other printing the page. But if the receiving terminal is busy or faulty the service comes to halt.

An obvious development of the fax machine was the combination of the fax-modem. This often takes the form of an add-on 'card' inserted into the computer. The card takes care of sending and receiving computer-generated documents, when connected to the public telephone network. The current generation of hardware and software for PC-based services permits any document displayed on the screen to be transmitted via a dialled connection. A data-base stores individual phone numbers or permits the creation of groups for broadcasting and transmission can be timed to match local cheap-rate periods.

All the fax machines one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world, of the business world, even if they tend to be used as an household every day life object; they are all a crossing over of phones and post mails, as if in the eyes of the public, someone sent a message from the back of the house, using a postman to

⁴ ZORKOCZY P., HEAP N., Information Technology An Introduction, 4th Edition, Pitman Publishing, London, 1995, p132

carry the message across to the kitchen, the lounge and the small corridor to deliver it almost instantly.

The forms created by the engineer and which change for the ordinary shape of this one hundred per cent functional product are not very different each other: a few sets of these, which appeal to the spirit of do-it-yourself, and invented to the destination of the mass market, are the only ones which offer dynamic forms. As for plenty of objects, fax machines always mean something, and this something is always entirely socialised, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life: communicating, exchanging information, recording (a proof of what has been said or done is obligatory in the business life), tracking, functionalism, miniaturism, technology, cost of life (sending an A4 format, full of writings is much cheaper than reading the equivalent on the phone).

The fact that "advanced countries" use fax machines, literally prefigures the world of businessman functions obviously can not but give an example to the mass market of what helps the industry, companies, to stay in touch with their affairs, their clients, budgets, and other stuff. Fax machines come here in the reality of the everyday communication, revealing the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: bureaucracy, work, speed, money, interrelation, data record.

As many products mainly used at first in the industry, fax machines have quickly derived onto another layer of the society hierarchy, coming from the huge towers to the grocer retailer, before landing on the household desk, in the real world, the mass market. There, its entry has not been a noisy one: whereas the majority of people kept on using the phone, to talk each other, to stay in touch, to swap their "so important news", fax machines, which still evolved by their reliability, ease of use, always lighter weight, introduction of "normal A4 paper" rather than rolls of extra-thin-non-durable paper, and overall ever decreasing cost, missed one important step: the arrival of the computer, with its E-mail packages which tended to revolution the proceeding of communication.

However, to come back to the fax machine, faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, people could identify themselves as owners, as users, as givers

of good and bad news, as pioneer, in the sense or this fantastic machine permits to everybody to transport written or drawn, ideas, feelings, answers, proposition, emotions, etc., from somewhere to somewhere else thanks to the use of a plastic machine and cables. One only has to help itself to convey messages that can turn things into dramatic or fantastic ones according to the sensibility of the emitter towards the receptor. The performed actions to the sending of faxes are not those of a user but those of an informant. He writes messages which inform, destruct, affect the feelings, change the behaviour, interrupt the normal way things normally go. But such faxes, such information are rather rare: emitter and receptor normally know each other enough to expect a certain range of news...

Coming from the assumption that the fax machine is in a sense a good conveyer of sensitive messages, it seems necessary to say, as well, by reference to Jean Baudrillard thoughts⁵, that a fax machine is overdetermined in its power, like every functional object. In other words, its functionality confers to the fax machine, a status of king product, almost...

⁵ Baudrillard J., The system of objects, Verso, London, 1996, p65

Bibliography

BARTHES, Roland, (1915-1980), French critic and professor of Semiology at the College de France. Author of Writing Degree Zero (1953), Mythologies (1957), Critical Essays (1964), S/Z (1970), L'empire des Signes (1970), Sade, Fourier, Loyola (1971), New Critical Essays (1972), The Pleasure of the Text (1973)

BARTHES R., Mythologies, Vintage, London, 1993

BAUDRILLARD J., The system of objects, Verso, London, 1996, p65

WALKER J., Design History and the History of Design, Pluto Press, London, 1989

ZORKOCZY P., HEAP N., Information Technology An Introduction, 4th Edition, Pitman Publishing, London, 1995