

Making Ourselves: An Outline of Material Culture

Charlie Holloway

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33465106



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The freedom to choose is the fuel of a culturally stimulated, democratic society. Without the ability to act on one of x number of options, the ability to assign our sentiment and value to the outcome is negated. Our choices are based on our social, learnt past, but to be learnt is to lack ignorance. We understand the choices that we make as direct futures, but do we understand both the future links from our decisions or what was enveloped in the past that lead to the present? Are our choices bids for a perceived freedom from ignorance?

Our existence without choice is equivalent to a determined future. Dictatorial regimes remove choice to increase the predictability of actions, and therefore ease of control. If experience creates individuality, then it is easier to manipulate communal opinion of people if their experiences are tied. The Nazi regime emphasised the benefits of cultural products in their choice to conceive them, the Beetle as the family car, the Prora Holiday Complex as the ideal break.¹ Evidently, there is more choice in a functional society, but the weight of what is determined and what is free can be viewed differently. Jean Paul Sartre represented the desire to logically prove Existentialism, founded on Libertarianism. "Nausea" explored the weight of objects in the everyday as reminders of our physicality.

"I got up, I could no longer stay where I was in the midst of these enfeebled objects. I went over to the window and glanced at the skull of Impétra, I murmured, "Anything can occur, Anything can happen."²

We respond to restrictions with the desire to be free, and the balance of wanting the opposite is both absolute and necessary. We are bound by our physicality and the traces we leave behind. Mentally we are free to change everything about ourselves, thoughts are lucid and transparent, but exercising them requires the union of physicality and time that are unescapable. Ted Honderich describes this as a challenge to the hope of an open future. Likening Determinism to J.S. Mill's "Incubus", he states that negative connotations are associated to a future without hope, as a future linked to a chain of events provides no incentive to act. Honderich doesn't argue for this form of 'pre-determinism', but for a shift in the change of teaching surrounding accountability and responsibility, with determined actions precluding human responsibility.³ There is an issue of indeterminism at the point of an action as our perception is that of free-will, for example, one choosing to stand or sit at this exact moment, but Honderich follows thinking from Robert Kane; that one would need a random event at the moment of a "Self-Forming Action"⁴ to be truly free in choice, to state;

"If it really were accepted as true that a random event could get in between the question and the intention, with great effect, then it would have to be accepted that one could get in between the intention and the lie, with as much effect. Any attempt to exclude the possibility is bound to be fatally ad hoc."⁵

1. C N Trueman "Prora Holiday Resort", 9th March 2015,
<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/nazi-germany/prora-holiday-resort/>

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Nausea", p113, Penguin Modern Classic

3. Ted Honderich, "On Determinism", from p281 on
<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/books/scandal/Honderich.pdf>

In consumption then, are we choosing at all when we are bound to choose one of x choices or not to choose at all?

With the means of digesting information coming through immediate channels; Instagram is predicted to bring in \$595M in advertisement revenue ⁶(each no longer than a minute), it has become easier to commodify discrepancies and idiosyncrasies in personality, and therefore dictate what is “right or wrong”.

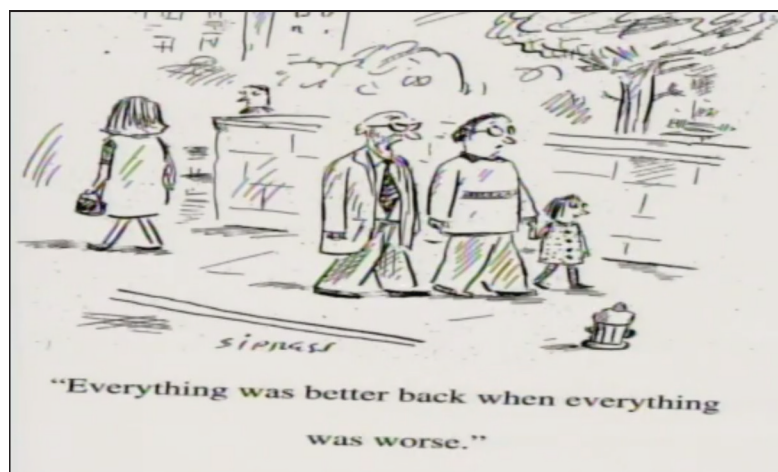
In “The Social Life of Things”, Appadurai cites a piece of theory by Georges Simmel from “The Philosophy of Money”. Economic value is never inherent to an object, but in the grey area between “subjectivity and physical ownership” ⁷. An object is not valued beyond sentiment when in one’s possession, “but we call those objects valuable when they resist our ownership”. Essentially the basis of eBay, objects used or new gain value based on a subjective/objective want from outside the personal interaction, meaning that what is being traded is not the object/money, but an exchange of values that change our perception of who or what we define ourselves as being. Modern consumer culture sells an association with the image of the brand and the image of those who buy the products. Quality related to durability is no longer requisite in the sale of an item, only the perception of the quality of its image.

Entwined in the everyday is consumption to be had and to be done. Whether we want to or not is a different matter. Prof. Barry Schwarz in a TED talk titled “The Paradox of Choice” ⁸ argues that the change in consumerism is so fast and so drastic, that it passes scales that the previous generation fail to grasp. In a ripped t shirt and cargo shorts, he makes an analogy on buying jeans.

“...there was a time when jeans came in one flavour and you bought them and they fit like crap... and after you wash them enough time they start to fit okay. So, I went to replace these old ones... The shopkeeper offered slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, zip fly, button fly, straight cut, or boot cut, stone wash or acid wash...? My jaw hit dropped, and after I’d recovered I said,

‘I want the kind that used to be the only kind’” ⁹

This seems to lead to more than simply more than the annoyance of being forced into wasting time. The desire to perfect the unnecessary stands as a block to the same for what is necessary.



“The reason everything was better when everything was worse was that when it was worse there was space to be pleasantly surprised”. This over saturation, choice upon choice, demeans the importance of free will, embedded in choice. This is what Schwartz refers to as “Paralysis in Freedom”. Whether we have free agency to choose or not, the general cultural perception is that we can so does perception lie at the apex of good/bad? Propaganda can be used when bad is good, or to reinforce what should be good. Schwartz shows when good is bad, and perhaps the only adaptation to culture that will have any major effect to combat issues surrounding consumption is to bring cultural perception in line with cultures developed from Taoist religions. To remove notions of the self, a construction of the past and present, in favour of an existence in the moment, would remove any need to consume for identity as identity comes second to doing. As the Tao travelled into China and Japan, later becoming the basis of Buddhism, the learned ideas were carried in process.¹⁰ Crafting a Nihon-Teien embodied the balance sought in the everyday on every scale, Raku wares the tenet that the unknown is as valuable as the known. These pieces lead to the sentiments of the modern nations, but at every point the investment of those doing was not in themselves but in something greater.

The idea of “something greater” can be embodied within the jacket and more specifically the jacket patch, serving as a marker that reaffirms the conscious decision made in their use. Passively broadcasting ties to ideologies and groups, the patch disrupts the use of space on the exterior of our constructed selves. Military use popularised an ancient method for embellishing garments in ancient and minority cultures, seeping into sub-culture for distinction and association. The Hell’s Angels have the insignia and code for layout and pattern, the British 70’s punk movement had freer methods for distinction (Westwood’s iconic bricolage tartans), and patches even worked their way into mainstream culture with James Hunt’s “Breakfast for Champions” patch. The patches themselves gain value through rarity, an original “Order of the Arrow” patch can be worth as much as \$2,000,¹¹ but their importance lies with their importance in being able to unite.

4. Robert Kane, “Free Will and Values”, p165

5. Ted Honderich, “On Determinism”, p125

6. Erin Griffith, “Wall Street wants to know if Instagram can make money”, 29th July, 2015.

<http://fortune.com/2015/07/29/wall-street-wants-to-know-if-instagram-can-make-money/>.

7. Arjan Appadurai, “The Social Life of Things”, p3

8. Barry Schwartz, “The Paradox of Choice” TEDGlobal 2005.

https://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice#t-848670

9. Barry Schwartz, “The escalation of expectations” from “The Paradox of Choice”

10. Andrew Juniper, “Wabi Sabi”, Chp “The Development of Wabi Sabi”

11. Lodge 99 Tonkawa A-2 Straight W’s Felt Arrowhead Patch

<https://www.ebay.com/itm/LODGE-99-TONKAWA-A-2-STRAIGHT-WS-FELT-ARROWHEAD/400515467807?hash=item5d40950aif:g:U1AAAMXQ855RxIND>

An especially important tool when used with a cause, it is able to explicitly/implicitly converse using iconography. It is the exact basis for modern consumption, but maintains seems to maintain its integrity. Soldiers with stripes removed were disgraced, and it is perhaps the permanence that helps achieve the probity. Modern narcissistic traits can be erased or adapted to re-affirm a fluid personality depending on circumstance. LinkedIn is “professional” Facebook. The construction of identity is often tied to a Hegelian “scala paradisi”¹², a ladder which provided steps which if followed would lead to a logical understanding of the universe, but knowledge is not a predicate in organic structures, it is simultaneously developing. One can force the matter through simulation and belief, or “Geist”¹². One can provide examples of disingenuous action whilst growing up where imitation was a factor in decision making, most notably the purchase of a jacket that made one look like someone else.

The patch’s function of tying groups together is also rooted in the collective desire to disrupt. If one accepts conditions, there is no desire to vociferously champion your stance. Late 60’s Hippie culture and British Mod culture are two juxtaposing reactions to the norm. Hippie protest was actively the opposite of staunch discrete wartime tradition and gender roles, whereas Mod culture sought to refine and enhance the details of what existed before to represent something other, although in the case of Mods and Rockers they’re message seems purely tribal and aesthetic.¹³


“I don't wanna be the same as everybody else. That's why I became a Mod, see? I mean you gotta be somebody, ain't ya?”

– Jimmy Cooper, Quadrophenia

Our interactions with objects can be physical manifestations of the conscious, but also items that enable the necessary to become seamless process. Utensils can be shown to be some of the first creations in a devised society. The stone age findings of Louis and Mary Leakey¹⁴ in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania lead to the name Homo Habilis (handyman) for the first hominid species to use stone tools, a definitive feature in the perception of their existence. The scale of consumption of the objects was relatively high, hand axes were “knapped” and wasted when the flint grew blunt but the efficiency in consumption was based only on need.

This cultural difference is reflected when comparing modern cultures with exposure to different material sentiment. Sheena Iyengar investigates this indirectly in a study¹⁵ on whether habit can be subject to choice*. Asking test subjects in Kyoto from America and Japan to record the decision they felt they made in a day, the American subjects included rituals such as brushing teeth and taking a shower. Although both groups performed the same tasks, the perception lies within custom and teaching.

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12. Both:
Kierkegaard's Rhetoric, Stanford Press,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>
Kant, Schiller and Hegel on Beauty and Freedom, Stanford Press,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/#ArtIde>
13. “Mod Culture”, John Smedley Designs.
<https://www.johnsmedley.com/discover/community/mod-culture/>
14. “Origins”, Turkana Basin Institute.
<http://www.leakey.com/origins>
15. Sheena Iyengar, 1995 Kyoto Study on choice.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/books/review/Postrel-t.html>



Objects such as spoons, glasses (bichierri), and plates can be designed to appear different from one another, and aid their effectiveness as an item of sale, but our possession of these items doesn't reaffirm any ideas of what we are. Bruno Munari believes one can determine traits of a culture from the form of the spoons.¹⁶ (explain form of spoons). These objects are affirmative confirmation of progress, abstract totems of human development. The materiality of stainless steel points to the process of producing stainless steel. The first example of electro-deposition was credited to Luigi Valentino Brugnattelli in 1805,¹⁷ therefore any object including this process represents Homo Sapiens post 1805. Perhaps the aesthetic qualities become rooted in stereotype and collective judgement, but Munari's study of ignored cultural products represents a definition in the negative. Modern man can be defined by its art, its polemics, but also the island of plastic in the Pacific Ocean or the irreparable damage of the Great Barrier Reef. Waste is a cultural product and the application of Schwartz's thinking, less is less but less is good, would certainly allow for a greater focus on our collective achievements.

The factors and outcomes of choice are wholly natural in the development of a free and open society, maximising welfare is maximising freedom, and freedom grants the right to choose what actions one takes to maximise this welfare, Freedom is a priori good, at least with regards to how societies choose to construct themselves. There is a contradiction in the a posteriori, where our experience becomes swamped with too much choice, although too much is blurred, and we are left with so many areas in which we need to know everything before we can begin to make a decision. This variety in choice leads to a right and wrong based on perception and ignorance, where the good/bad/right/wrong is entirely subjective on experience. Cultures can be formed on nuances within a certain field of knowledge, and it is the personal construction of personality that allows for one topic to be of more value than another.

Each discrepancy in value leads to an amalgamation of bastions and totems within a physical space and here lies a society. As exposure to objects and a greater variety in consumption increases, the permanence of every totem becomes less permanent, and the ability to change interests and reconstruct our personalities becomes easier. The accuracy with which one sees someone and how they see themselves becomes more fluid and interpretive, driving an ever more detached world. This permanence can be found or prescribed to an object, and in the case of sub-cultures, allow for the birth of a more permanent identity.

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16. Bruno Munari, "Design as Art", "Forks, Knives, and Spoons", p138

17. "Micro and Nano Fabrication: Tools and Processes", Hans H. Gatzert, Volker Saile, Jürg Leuthold, p176.

