

Consumption and identity, consumption and relations: How things make people

Week 8, 10th April 2019

Consumption and identity

Premise: Ability of objects to communicate social position

- Not necessary through ownership – importance of **distribution and circulation** of goods for asserting status in some non-industrial societies (e.g. kula, potlach)
- **Consumption** as an important status-signifier: concept of **luxury goods** in both non-industrial and industrial societies, **taste as a class classifier** in industrial societies (Veblen, Bourdieu).

Friedman, Jonathan (ed.). 2004. *Consumption and Identity*.

- explicit connection between self-identification and consumption. The former may be a conscious act, a statement about the relation between self and world, or it may be a taken for granted aspect of everyday life, i.e. of a pre-defined and fully socialized identity.

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class (1899)

- Social status is measured by separation from everyday productive work.
- **Aim: visible distance from productive work**
- **Conspicuous consumption** and **Leisure**; Leisure does not mean passivity
- Lifestyle is created in order to **distinguish leisure class from productive classes** (through consumption and leisure). In modern society it regulates relationships between classes
- Objects are able to demonstrate status, because they are part of the lifestyle of groups with high status. Since goods can signify status, they can be also the means of status competition.
- Model of **emulation**– **competitive mimicking of consumption patterns**
- **Lower classes want to increase their status by mimicking style of higher classes. Higher classes respond is a change of style**
- One of explanations of the dynamics of consumer culture

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class

Critique of Veblen:

- Reduces social motivation to envy and repetition – desire to be equal with those who have higher status.
- Style is not only trickling down
- Mechanistic view on hierarchies and their reproduction

Consumption and identity

Veblen: inspiration for:

- Sociology of consumption, especially American
- Consumers try to acquire **things** that can serve as **positional goods** – status symbols. Through acquisition and/or display of such goods they try to show or improve their position in social structure and confirm so social hierarchies and borders
- This discourse changes with *World of Goods* and *Distinction* - > **Objects as material means of social interaction and communication, as mechanism of social reproduction**

Douglas, Isherwood 1979 World of goods

- Inspired by Veblen
- How objects define social position? Information approach to consumption
- Social meaning is unstable. Consumption as a ritual activity creates visible public definitions of cultural categories and classifications
- Consumption as a flow of information integrates people into meaningful world but creates also inequalities: poverty is not lack of possessions or wealth, but exclusion from the flow of informations
- Meanings of things reflect pre-existing social reality. They are structured by society. This approach ignores the fact **that social order is not only reflected but is also constituted, reproduced and changed through material praxis**

Douglas, Isherwood 1979 World of goods

- „ **Rituals** are conventions that set up visible public definitions.“
- „**consumption is a system of reciprocal rituals** which entail expenditures for appropriate marking of the occasion, or of the guests and hosts, or the community at large.“
- „**Goods**, in this perspective, are **ritual adjuncts; consumption is a ritual process** whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events.“

Individual work

Summarise what you learned during the last lesson and answer:

- How Bourdieu describes relation between consumption and social position?

Consumption and identity

Daniel Miller (ed.). 1995. Acknowledging Consumption.

- The study of consumption transforms anthropology as a discipline
- Global mass consumption leads to increase in definition of culture, ideas and selves through commodities
- Gender, ethnicity, religion etc. expressed through commodities

Consumption as an important sphere for creating and expressing identities in postmodern societies.

- **Bauman (Liquid Modernity):** Consumption as a means for creation of identity in postmodern society, identities are liquid – people can experiment with them, adopt and abandon them; consumption is an individualistic play with identities

Consumption and identity in postmodern society

Consumption and identity are related through **lifestyle**. Lifestyle is oriented around objects of consumption. Everyday routines of sociality:

- **Giddens:** Consumption and identity are related through **lifestyle**; Everyday routines of sociality: „lifestyle is routine acting “; routines are embedded in everyday choices and practices of fashion, food, behaviour etc.; Routines (unlike Bourdieu’s habitus) can be changed
- **Slater:** lifestyle does not correspond to traditional status differences and class differentiation, does not expect long socialization and learning. Is not stable, depends on consumer choices, cultural representations, signs and media. **Voluntary – choice** of identity; identity can be accepted and abandoned

Consumption and identity: example - gender

Jantzen, Ostergaard, Vieira: Becoming a woman to the backbone.

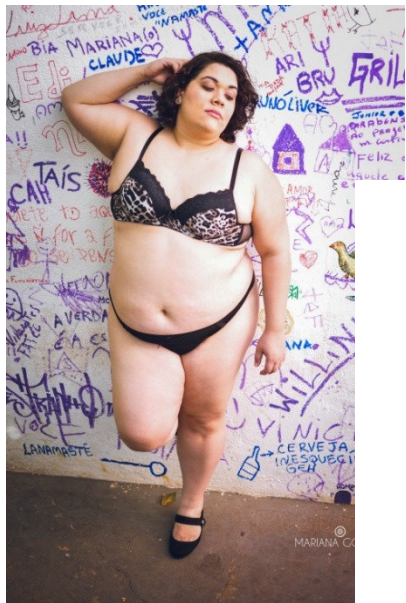
Lingerie consumption and experience of feminine identity

- Endeavour to control the environment through the control over the body:
- Foucault: technologies of subjectivation -> technologies for creation of self/person -> formalized sets of techniques leading individuals to correct management of their bodies
- Right things for the right occasion on the right body; lingerie enables certain feeling, experience of the body

Power of invisible things



Importance of having right b



Harlot versus Madonna; courtesan versus housewife



Work in couples:

- Describe (10 sentences) relation between consumption and identity in Layne's work on pregnancy loss.

Consumption and relationships: objectification

Daniel Miller. 1987. Material Culture and Mass Consumption

- Objects of consumption are key elements of culture – they are used in dialectic process of **objectification** and as such are means for creation of social meanings, identities and practices
- The concept is inspired by Hegel, Marx, Simmel”, Bourdieu, and Munn
- For Miller it does not make sense to analyse things on their own and social relations on their own: Culture „is always a process and is never reducible to either its object or its subject form“ p.11

Consumption and relationships: objectification

Mass culture as a dominant context for subject-object relation

- „A theory of culture can have no independent subject, as neither individuals nor societies <subject> can be considered as its originators, since both are inseparable from culture itself <object>“
- “Finally, the term objectification may be used to assert that the process of culture, which must always include self-alienation as a stage in its accomplishment, is thereby inherently contradictory.” p.

Miller, Daniel. 1998. *Theory of Shopping.*

- Consumption as a ritual practice
- Consumption as destruction – opposite of production, TBC
- Sacrifice – in archaic religions related to consumption. Idealised segment of production is given to Gods and cancels negative consequences;
- Shopping and sacrifice – same structure

Shopping and sacrifice – same structure

Sacrifice

- separates parts consumed by gods from parts consumed by people
- Transcendental transformation leading to social order and relations. Sacrifice creates relationship to divine

shopping

- spending changed to saving, thrift separated from treat
- Transcendental transformation leading to social order and relations. shopping creates relationship to people -> making love in supermarket

Miller, Daniel. 1998. *Theory of Shopping.*

Shopping: Stages

1. Idea of excess connected with violent destruction – spending woman – discourse, not practice
2. Practice negating discourse – ritual of shopping – the aim is transcendence
3. Creation of relationship with other important subjects. Shopping as expression of love and other relationships

Work in groups

Prepare examples of:

- Consumption expressing position in social hierarchy (e.g. class)
- Consumption related to ethnic, gender or other group identity. You can think about social categories intersectionally
- Consumption expressing self/relation: a Unique combination of personal characteristics and preferences
- Consumption expressing/creating relation