



Objects Between Material Culture and Visual Culture

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Abstract. What happens to a squeezer, a coffee maker, a corkscrew, when they leave the kitchen and become part of a film set? What happens when material culture is transformed into visual culture? What new roles, meanings and connections to the subject, do objects find themselves constructing in the *content continuum* of virtual media?

This paper attempts to answer, albeit partially, these questions by using a specific case study, namely the analysis of the presence of some of the most famous Italian design objects, the kitchen objects by Alessi, within the American filmography of the last twenty years.

The ultimate aim is to reason in terms of meaning and narrativity according to the methods proposed by sociosemiotics and cultural studies, in order to identify new characteristics and functions that design can perform within an experiential context that is already dominant: the world of images.

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1 Visual culture and objects

In the early 1990s, American scholar W.J.T Mitchell [1], when talking about visual culture, used the term ‘interdiscipline’ or rather ‘indiscipline’ to emphasise the hybrid and at the same time provocative character of this type of study. Since then, visual culture studies have dramatically evolved, but their innovative character has remained intact.

The first reflections on the subject actually date back to the 1970s, when in the wake of Anglo-Saxon cultural studies, people began to talk about *Visual studies*. The art historian Svetlana Alpers [2] first used the term *visual culture* with the aim of proposing a new approach to the study of artistic products. According to the scholar, in fact, in order to understand a work of art, it was necessary not only to study its aesthetic features and the culture that had produced it, but also and above all the contemporary culture of those who observed and interpreted that work, the methods and means used for observation. Taking into account these variables, Alpers claimed that the interpretation of the work of art thus became something that was never definitively given, but, on the contrary, it was configured as a dynamic practice, constantly renegotiated according to the observer and his or her reference culture. Thus, applying a method close to neo-historical textual criticism, mediology and cultural studies, the work of art became a textual system, i.e.

what semiotics defines as 'discourse', in which the production of meaning occurs through the contamination of different elements.

Although Alpers' theoretical proposal dates back to the 1970s, it is only since the 1990s that visual culture has acquired its own academic status and scientific legitimacy, becoming central to art history courses particularly in America, Great Britain and England, but above all extending its sphere of interest to other fields such as the applied arts, cinema, design and all the visual languages of mass culture. The convergence of practices and methods drawn from cultural studies, art history, but also psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history, nowadays configure visual culture as an interdisciplinary project of analysis and criticism of visual languages, whereby images are studied as 'a set of practices that vary not only their use, but also their meaning' [3].

The application of this theory to the practice of design is undoubtedly one of its most interesting outcomes, even if seemingly oxymoronic. If on the one hand there is visual culture, the images with their virtuality, on the other, almost opposite, hand there would be material culture, the objects with their thickness, weight and materiality. On the one hand the images that are looked at, on the other the objects that are predominantly used. However, we must acknowledge that, starting with the advent of photography and subsequent media such as cinema and television, up to the hybridisation of multimedia languages, the Western world has now structured its knowledge and social dynamics predominantly around images. Reality passes, is experienced and even created through images. The advent of the Metaverse is the clearest example of the priority that the visual component is acquiring over all other ways of experiencing reality. As Andrea Fontana writes, in the *content continuum* in which we live, 'the boundary between real, virtual and fictional' [4, 20] has become increasingly thin. In such a visual context, objects become part of syncretic, visual, audiovisual, textual texts that are then declined in a *polysystemic* [5, 40] perspective, i.e. replicated, translated and continuously re-elaborated according to the specific codes of the different social networks or virtual contexts. And in such virtual spaces, objects find themselves playing roles that are neither foreseen nor predictable and weaving new relationships with time, space and subjects.

We owe American scholar Bill Brown [6] an interesting reflection on *Thing Theory*, a branch of critical theory that studies human-object interaction in culture. Echoing the distinction proposed by Heidegger between objects and things, Brown restates that objects turn into things as soon as they cease to fulfil their common function, i.e. when their dynamics of production, distribution, consumption, and display change.

The transition from material culture to visual culture can be configured exactly as a transition from objects to things. When an object is photographed, placed within a film scenography, watched rather than used, it clearly changes its function and establishes new relationships with the subject looking at it. Relations that are no longer defined in terms of use, but in terms of attribution of meaning and narrativity. The object almost completely loses its specific prerogatives of form, function, matter and is transformed into image, narrative element, sign.

However, once this transition has been defined, it is necessary to understand how to analyse and study this conversion of material culture into visual culture, with what modalities and methods.

Sociosemiotics has looked into design in a complex way for a long time. Semiotic studies, in fact, conceive design not simply as an act of creation and production of objects, but as a ‘discourse’, i.e. as a ‘*social process of creation and reproduction of meaning that takes place within social, institutional and historical formations*’ [7, 269]. Studying design in terms of discourse, therefore, means focusing precisely on its being textuality, on its being a productive process of meaning made of texts, objects in this case, but also of mechanisms of enunciation, reproduction and circulation, and of all those cultural practices that produce and interpret the texts themselves [8].

Pioneering in this sense is the thought of Ronald Barthes who, in his brilliant myth-semiological reflections, wrote: ‘We believe we are in a practical world of uses, of functions, of total domestication of the object and in reality we are, even through objects, in a world of meaning, of reasons, of alibis’ [9, 48]. He is credited with having first studied fashionable objects not as such, but as images. As, in fact, fashion sociosemiotist Patrizia Calefato reminds us: ‘It was Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, who set an exemplary 20th century theory of fashion as social discourse. In this text Barthes does not in fact deal with real fashion, but rather with fashion described in the specialised press where the garment is totally converted into language’ [10, 10].

Critical sociosemiotics and cultural studies in particular as Stuart Hall [11] conceived them, i.e. as a critical investigation of the formal conditions of possibility of sociality as such, offer a methodological system suited to the case. Cultural studies, in particular, intended as a field of study rather than as a discipline itself, are specifically appropriate to this type of analysis because they open us up to new categories of thought, to new disciplinary links, force us to observe and recognise complex connections through the application of research methods from different fields, but above all legitimise us in our attempt to study design not as such, but in its becoming through modes of enunciation. In its becoming discourse.

In an attempt to try and define a method of analysis and thus of results, an example of empirical research is proposed on one of the most evident transitions from material culture to visual culture, namely the inclusion of design objects in the cinematographic language. To this end, the presence of some of the most famous Italian design objects, the kitchen objects by Alessi, within the American filmography of the last twenty years will be analysed, trying to interpret their roles and functions.

2 Empirical Attempts of Analysis: Kitchen Objects in the American Filmography of the Last Twenty years

The kitchen objects by Alessi have been chosen as a case study for several theoretical reasons. First of all, kitchen objects, more than furniture objects, have an outstanding vocation for use [12], so their cinematographic transposition makes this transition from material to visual culture particularly interesting. Moreover, of all the various Italian kitchen design objects, it has been preferred to focus on Alessi objects both because many of them are counted among the best contributions of Italian material culture, and because the company in question, by choice, does not make use of product placement [13], so that the presence of an Alessi object in a film is far more interesting and significant from a semiotic and narrative point of view.

As far as films are concerned, we have reasoned in terms of relevance. American filmography was chosen because of its strong impact in terms of global culture [14], while in terms of time limits, the most recent filmography has been preferred, i.e. those films produced and distributed between 2000 and 2020.

Once these parameters have been defined, titles have been selected in terms of relevance and significance, i.e. films that have truly had an impact in the common imaginary have been identified: Oscar-winning films, the highest-grossing films and Critics Award-winning films.

With regard to Oscar-winning films, in particular, the categories of Best Picture and Best Production Design have been taken into account. As far as Box Office grosses are concerned, we have used the noticeboards provided by the Box Office Mojo website [15], considered by industry experts as the most reliable reference. The US site is a complex database that enables different types of research on film box office according to year and geographic area of interest, and is constantly updated as it also takes into consideration the enjoyment of films through different web platforms such as AmazonPrime, Chili, Netflix and the like. The rankings considered for the purposes of this work have been those of North America for the years from 2000 to 2020. Excluding animated films, films with historical and fantasy settings, the top four films in the rankings have been examined.

As far as critics is concerned, the site metacritic.com [16] has been chosen. This US site collects reviews of music albums, films and even video games from the most important American newspapers in the field such as 'Movie', 'Best Movie' and 'By Year'. These reviews are then translated into a score whose average is expressed through a value called Metascore, which thus provides a numerical comparison between the different films. This category is very interesting as almost always films with a higher metascore are not ranked in the top positions of the highest-grossing films and are sometimes nominated for the Academy Awards, but do not win. Considering Critics Award-winning films means intercepting a set of viewers certainly endowed with a more specific and complex encyclopaedia of reference knowledge, to quote Umberto Eco [17], which will allow them to have a deeper interpretation and this also applies to the signs of material culture. Also in this case, the first four titles in the ranking have been analysed.

Once this selection has been made, and ten titles for year had been identified, we have watched every single film, identified the Alessi objects featured in them and then made an initial attempt at interpretation. Clearly, not in all the films selected do the sought-after elements appear, and even when they are present, it is fundamental that they play an effective role in the scene, since the ultimate aim of this research is not so much to identify their mere presence, as to study their narrative and semiotic value.

Three films have been selected as examples: *Minority Report*, *Monster in Law* and *Inferno* containing the *Tua* pitcher, the *Anna G.* corkscrew and the *Juicy Salif* squeezer respectively, all three produced by Alessi.

Minority Report is a 2002 film directed by Steven Spielberg. Based on the homonymous science fiction story by Philip Dick, the story is set in 2054 and stars Captain John Anderton, played by Tom Cruise.

At the very opening of the film, the *Tua* pitcher designed by Mario Botta for Alessi in 2000 appears on the scene [18, 149]. The object in this case still performs the function for which it was designed, even though it is used to pour coffee and not water, yet it is subjected to a temporal decontextualisation. Aesthetic characteristics become a priority in this case. Instead, the form and materials chosen by the Swiss architect for a design free of unnecessary preciousness become futuristic elements so that the object can be easily set in a future time.

We are faced with what in literary theory is called ‘estrangement’ [19], i.e. the unpredicted and unexpected, while, from a narrative point of view, the object seems to be subjected to an operation similar to that which the rhetorical figure of *hyperbole* performs on words: that is, the extreme exaggeration of an aspect of the object. Hyperbole is among the most frequently used rhetorical figures in advertising exactly because of its ability to alienate the object, in the very sense of making it extraordinary, beyond reality. The integration of the *Tua* pitcher in *Minority Report*, its transition to visual culture, means that the object, in the eyes of the observer, acquires new meanings, that are proper to the narrative plot and that it would not have in the context of mere material culture (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The *Tua* pitcher in *Minority Report*.

Monster in Law is a 2005 film directed by Robert Luketic, but best known for its two lead actresses: Jane Fonda and Jennifer Lopez. The plot is based on one of the most atavistic rivalries: that between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. This rivalry is so sharp that the mother-in-law Jane Fonda even decides to sabotage the upcoming marriage between her daughter-in-law and her son by feeding the girl almonds even though she knows she is allergic to them. As we see her in the kitchen, crushing almonds to mix them into a serving sauce, the *Anna G.* corkscrew [18, 53], designed by Alessandro Mendini for Alessi in 1994, appears on the countertop. It is one of the objects that best interprets the process of anthropomorphisation of design that inspired many Alessi products at the

end of the 20th century. Although the corkscrew is placed in the kitchen, it does not perform its specific function, so much so that on the surface where it appears there are no bottles. We are therefore presented with a functional decontextualisation (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The *Anna G.* corkscrew in *Monster in Law*.

In the unfolding of the scene, however, it is easy to notice the very obvious resemblance between the figure imprinted on the corkscrew and the protagonist of the scene, in the cut of her hair, in the line of her dress, almost as if it were really a personification of the character herself and her role. Exactly as a corkscrew is able to creep between cork and bottle and forcefully break the perfect joint, so Viola, played by Jane Fonda, vehemently and cunningly intrudes into a love relationship, with the specific intention of breaking it. In textual rhetoric we refer to *personification* when we attribute human traits, thoughts, behaviours to something that is not human. In this case, in the transition from materiality to visuality, the object takes on characteristics proper to the character and actress who interprets it, and becomes capable of a narrative significance, certainly not foreseen at the time of its conception (Fig. 3).

Inferno is a 2016 film directed by Ron Howard and based on the book of the same name by Dan Brown. Tom Hanks plays the protagonist, symbology professor Robert Langdon. In the agitated opening scenes, the scholar oscillates between consciousness and hallucinations and, at one point, he seems to catch a glimpse of his friend Ignazio Busoni, who is suddenly suffocated and bitten by a snake, exactly what happens in the fraud circle, by the law of reciprocity, in cantos XXIV and XXV of Dante's *Inferno*. Behind Busoni, on a bookcase, the *Juicy Sali* [18 93] appears, a squeezer designed by Philippe Starck for Alessi in 1990. In this case we have a decontextualisation of the object both spatially and functionally, as the object leaves the kitchen, completely loses the function for which it was designed and becomes a sort of sculpture to be displayed on the shelves together with books. At the same time, however, the 's vaguely zoomorphic shape, almost endowed with tentacles, seems to refer to the coils of the snake that appears



Fig. 3. The *Juicy Salif* squeezer in *Inferno*.

next to it on the scene in a perfect formal correspondence. In this film, built up to the end on the exchange of roles, whereby positive characters turn out to be negative and vice versa, this object is subjected to a metaphorical operation, becoming itself a symbol of the dystopia that underlies the whole narrative.

Whoever looks at these objects within the respective filmic narratives that have just been described, introjects, more or less consciously, new meanings. The observer looks at the same objects he or she has probably already observed in domestic scenarios, but no longer sees the same things.

3 Conclusion

The transition to visual culture inevitably modifies perceptive modes and transfers the object-subject dynamics into a cultural context made up of meanings, values, utopian projections, and expressive potentialities destined to forever modify the criteria of choice, purchase and use of the objects themselves. It is in the abstractness of the virtual that the new sense of the real is constructed and, for this reason, every sphere of thought is called upon to investigate this transition. Design can be no exception.

In the fictional economy era, we should be aware of the existence of an important relation between visual culture and design. Above all, we should point out a way to study the results of this blending between material culture and visual culture. For this reason, it is needed a comparison and a hybridization of humanities and design methods and approaches.

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