In between Symbolisms and Social Constructions
Charalampos Cheizanoglou

Similarly to the words, forms have no meaning, they just convey meanings. Forms are the tokens for recalling an always deformed memory, they act like representations where meanings rather emerge from the sets of relations between the elements within the systems that constitute the forms or between the elements or the form and its context than from the elements or the forms themselves and they always leave space for multiple interpretations by the subjects that interact with them.

This is what probably Derrida means when he says that "Meaning is not a presence but a generalized economy of absences". Perception is the result of a both projective and retrospective process, we project everything we know, think, have seen, heard or read to the reality and we receive back as a result of a reflection a subjectively seen image, not by perceiving straightforward what something is but rather what this something is not. This process is not exclusively or necessarily visual and is not momentary. In that sense perception and therefore perceived meanings have origins therefore are never detached from the processes of social construction.

In the case of symbols what we conceive as meaning is the result of the projection of massive, prefabricated, usually socially constructed, concepts on the material forms themselves. What one sees on a symbol (e.g. a cross or a swastika) is not only its materiality; it's all the sets of relations with other material and non-material elements that in turn are related or constitute of other symbols.

As envisioned by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, symbols are not the creations of mind, but rather are distinct capacities within the mind to hold a distinct piece of information. In the mind, the symbol can find free association with any number of other symbols, can be organized in any number of ways, and can hold the connected meanings between symbols as symbols in themselves.[1]

But symbols apart from being the chargers of meaning for the forms (similarly to the signified for the signifier in the sign) are what the interaction of tradition and history with the materiality has created, often not in an innocent way. Symbols, and therefore their meanings, have origins, reasons and purposes which make them positive or negative but certainly non-neutral in the sense that are being formed by certain purposes in the same way that are being formative for certain purposes, no matter if this is consciously driven or not.

The question here is who or what is this that creates the symbols; is it individuals or organizations of individuals with specific aims or symbols are results of dynamic

---

[1] Source Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism

processes? I would take the position that both of them are contributing in the conception or initialization of symbols in several different ways but in general it's difficult to give a clear, specific answer and maybe it's not necessary. No matter how a symbol is being conceptualized what is more important is certainly the public acceptance of the symbol as such which plays a key role in the establishment of the symbol as a vehicle of a meaning. Symbols are initialized as representations that function as reminders of things or abstract concepts. At the very moment that the mere representation becomes widely accepted as the carrier of a meaning or significance that is worth sharing or convinces that it's worth sharing the mechanism that creates a symbol is activated. New symbols are often the parallaxes of older ones or use older ones as references to support their existence through reflections, inversions, oppositions and transformations of the original symbol.

What a symbol is and does or better what the term symbol implies becomes partially clearer since one attempts an etymological analysis of the word. The term "symbol" derives from the Greek word σύμβολον which in turn comes from the verb συμβάλλω which in English could be translated as "to contribute". Thus, symbol is the "contributor" or in a more free translation the mediator.

But what a symbol mediates is more than the mere memory of its referent (might be a specific object or an abstract concept). The symbol contributes to the conception of its referent but in such a way that in the same time attempts to bring it closer to the idea of an archetype. In order to be more specific, a symbol attempts to charge what it symbolizes with an aura or essence of objectivity which is obvious by the fact that, historically speaking, symbols are referring to eternal truths, global concepts and in general to conventions that intend to remain hermetically sealed without becoming easily open to discussion or questioning but rather have already taken or attempt to take the position of an axiom. Taking this into account it becomes even more obvious that symbols are not mere vehicles of meaning and they are not neutral mediators but they certainly have intention to simplify the referent and charge with a glow of objectivity the concepts they convey. As Umberto Eco might pose it, in any kind of text, there are three intentions; the intention of the author (intentio auctoris), the intention of the reader (intentio lectoris) and the intention of the text itself (intentio operis) and one could approach the symbol in a similar way posing that what it actually attempts to do is to make these three intentions to merge into one.

The question that rises instantly is how the "objective" symbol relates to the "subjective" person or how it has been related to its social consciousness through different historical periods.

In the *disciplinary societies* as Foucault describes them in his *Discipline and Punish* in between 17th and 19th century what became dominant was the social construction that was taking place in different enclosed places through which a person was passing during the whole of its life such as the family, the school, the military camp, and sometimes the prison. Foucault quoting Walhausen explains that the idea behind the establishment of the disciplinary power was not any more to punish but to "train" the masses in order to use them better and more productively in the extraction of labor or power and it's not by

accident that disciplinary societies reach their peak point at the outset of the 20th century together with the industrial revolution.

The position of symbols and of symbolism in general in that context was certainly formative for the subjects into the "interior" of these enclosed spaces. The symbols were there in order to support the interiority and to play a didactic role for the positions people have in the society sharing authorities and social roles. Apart from the iconography of these spaces which was certainly full of symbols, the arrangement of bodies and gestures in these spaces had itself a symbolic value for the who is who. For instance the position of the teacher in a class sitting higher than the pupils was serving something more than just a functional purpose; it was rather about serving the establishment of a symbolic scheme of power, the establishment of the teacher as the ex cathedra speaker that transmits the knowledge to the pupils in a one way process. This symbolic articulation of power through asymmetries of that type is obvious also in the other spaces of enclosure described by Foucault and the final goal was obviously always the same, the formation of people in a way that conform with the rules they are being taught and produce without questioning the processes of production.

The situation with symbols and symbolism concerning the sharing of social roles and the division of authority was more or less the same earlier in times when religion was playing the dominant role in the social construction but also later on during the world wars and also the cold war. At these times political propaganda became an entire science on the use of information and symbols for the ruling and steering of the masses. Even later on, the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a sequence of symbolic gestures and events that intended to seal once and for all the political reformation.

Today it seems that we live in what Gilles Deleuze named as *society of control* in his famous article. He described control as the new monster of our time and he makes the distinction of the differences among the societies of control and the disciplinary ones:

"The different internments of spaces of enclosure through which the individual passes are independent variables: each time one is supposed to start from zero, and although a common language for all these places exists, it is analogical. One the other hand, the different control mechanisms are inseparable variations, forming a system of variable geometry the language of which is numerical (which doesn't necessarily mean binary). Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.[2]

Symbols have never been fully detached from other symbols but they were always forming larger codification structures by being interconnected with each other. In our time it seems that these interconnections are of a broader scale forming a continuum in constant motion in a similar way as Deleuze describes control. The information society, globalization and the space – time compression have brought everything closer creating relations among things that have never been in the same context before. Different

---

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Society of Control*, L'autre journal, Nr. I, Mai 1990

symbols or to be more precise different kinds of codifications or conventions that support communication are finding themselves interrelated. This results in a communication conflict that derives from a codification conflict.

In the same time everything are being regarded as interfaces that through them we mediate ideas no matter if this is happening consciously or not. These interfaces also use symbols or become symbols themselves and are not independent from each other; they are also interconnected and significant for each other (clothing and religion) forming a continuum with different properties from place to place and time to time. In the context with the different codification systems that have been brought together it's normal to face continuities and discontinuities in this formation of the continuum but when symbols come to place and since symbols still today are often conceived as carriers of an unquestionable "objectivity" instead of discontinuities what we face are polarized oppositions between different "objectivities". These polarized oppositions in turn become symbols themselves. One is not only defined as oneself but could be defined by a series of an anti-anything (I prefer to leave this "anything" open for personal interpretation) and this becomes apart from a symbol a part of an identity, a social role.

In addition, if we regard symbol as a sign, the importance is not any more in the signified but in the signifier itself, it's a simulacrum that pretends to be detached from its history and its origin. A symbol today does not really refer so much to something outside of the symbol or the interconnection of the symbol with other symbols; it's the flag that matters, not what the flag stands for. This is why it's so easy today to de-contextualize symbols and re-contextualize them or to attach them to larger categories of symbols. For instance the symbol of McDonalds doesn't merely refer to "food" any more or to be more precise it probably doesn't refer to "food" at all. It's rather about a reference to a lifestyle that is implied by the interconnection of the specific symbol with other symbols like the one of coca cola or the American flag which in turn is connected with the Christian cross and the symbol of the U.S. dollar and these connections could continue until eventually finding a polar opposition with another symbol.

Discussing the use of symbolism in today's society is not going to have as an outcome the rejection of it. We certainly need the symbols as instruments for communication, what is an issue is what the symbol depicts and how conscious we are of the fact that it is only an instrument, a reductive tool that simplifies concepts having the danger of creating stereotypes. Marcel Duchamp was the one that in a symbolic gesture put a moustache on Leonardo's Mona Lisa and maybe this is the answer of how we should treat symbols that have constituted our societies, not as fixed, closed systems but as open-ended fields for creativity, feeling free to question them, criticize them, invert them, deform them and eventually reform them. There lays the possibility of understanding them better, being familiar with their origins, their purposes in order to consciously conform with them or consciously again reject or disobey them.

Bibliography:

Michel Foucault, Surveiller et punir Naissance de la prison Paris, Gallimard, 1975 (Greek translation: *Επιτήρηση και τιμωρία η γέννηση της φυλακής*, ελλ. μετ. Καίτη Χατζηδήμου – Ιουλιέττα Ράλλη, εκδ. Ράππα, 1976)

Gilles Deleuze, *Society of Control*, L'autre journal, Nr. I, Mai 1990

David Harvey, *The condition of post modernity: an inquiry into the origins of cultural change*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990

Thomas A. Markus, *Buildings of power: freedom and control in the origin of modern building types*. Routledge, 1993

Stan Allen, *Practice: Architecture, technique and representation*, Routledg