

Cyclic to Linear: The Dynamics and Ideologies of Objects as Records of Time

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Abstract

In modernity, time is regarded as an entity projected always to an ideal future and constantly seeking for the new. However, traditional perspective of time is usually pictured as cyclic and repetitive in a sense. These different perspectives of time are both created and emphasized by the objects belonging to different genres as modern constructs.

The inscription of time by objects is critical while discussing the whole culture of production of the artificial. So, the discussion on the cultures of design and craft emphasized by different production techniques are significant for understanding the philosophy in which these technologies are flourished.

Objects are designated as craft or design objects not only because of their production techniques, but also of the physical or cultural signs that they carry with. No matter how the objects are created; -either by the techniques of craft production or just formed to carry the signs of craft or design only as an image-, these embedded signs are directly related with the perspective of time that they represent. The aim of this paper is to visualize these dynamics of time inscribed on objects from an analytical perspective.

The basic axis of the study is constructed on a very simple graphic representation visualizing the critical shift or deviation from cyclic time to modern projective time. By the help of this simple graphic and the conceptualization of this deviation, the possibility of visualizing and discussing terms such as nostalgia, postmodernity, personal and collective time etc., which are the main *problematiques* of the study becomes also possible.

Keywords: Time, design, craft, modernity, nostalgia, techne, personal time, collective time

The concept of time and objects

Time, one of the most abstract concepts so hard to handle and define has always been subject to discussion in many areas of thought. Because of this abstract nature of time, it has been represented by some more concrete symbols or metaphors according to the area or ideology that it is related with. For example, in modernist point of view, time is regarded as an entity projected always to an ideal future and constantly seeking for the new. However, traditional understanding of time is usually pictured as cyclic and repetitive in a sense. These different perspectives of time are both created and emphasized by the objects belonging to different genres as modern constructs.

These different time perspectives are also the reasons of the designation of objects as craft and design objects not only because of their production techniques, but also of the physical or

cultural signs that they carry with. No matter how the objects are created; -either by the techniques of craft production or just formed to carry the signs of craft or design only as superficial images-, these embedded signs are directly related with the perspective of time that they represent. Because they affect strongly how people perceive and treat the objects, these signs are also the main determinants of the emotional aspect of them.

On the other hand, designation or differentiation is itself a modern classification because modernity is totally based on binary oppositions assuming all cultural or natural phenomena radically definable. The problem of definition mentioned here is very important from the perspective of this study. Definition is a process of classification and has a temporal character and objects are not far from this understanding. If something can be designated, it should have a sort of continuity in time, which makes it repetitive and definable. This can also be seen as the essence of language in general. The existence of a word or concept depends on such a continuity or repetition. Concrete objects are also the subjects of designation process because of their materiality making them continuous and repetitive.

Apart from this ontological character of objects making them namable in the continuity of time, there is another classification parameter related with time and objects. Designation of objects as designed, craft, modern, traditional or classical is mainly dependent on their production techniques. But objects classified with these names also have strong temporal bonds seeing them as “modern”; i.e. projecting future, “traditional”, i.e. reflecting the desire to turn back to past, “classical”, i.e. timeless. From this point of view, terms related with the production culture, like craft and design are also temporal classifications and constructed in a totally ideological way.

At this point, a brand new discussion on objects and their emotive aspects can be initiated. Whenever we talk about signs and ideologies, there always comes an emotional feedback that is intended non-intended. The reason for that can be seen as all signs are symbolic and cultural constructs, constructed to be perceived and faced in a certain way or another. To narrow this general discussion into the realm of objects, it can be said that, whenever we see and salute an object as “designed” or “crafted” we seem to be talking about a specification exceeding the object itself. This is also what creates the so called emotional aspect stuck to object by the temporal ideological narrative.

In other words, we don't have pleasure from an object just because it performs its function as all "design and emotion" paradigm states. What please us are the semiological meanings carried by the objects mostly by these aspects of objects related with their cultural value. Actually we seem to applaud the functional and production quality, i.e. use value, when preferring something, however, the qualities connecting object with some aspect of time, be it past, future or timelessness, are the main derivatives of our emotional response to them.

At this point, there comes the question if there is any way of representation without temporal considerations or connotations. Or else, is it possible to understand or name things without the notion of time? If we follow the modern conception of time and language, the answer would be no, because the designation of things depends on time in its cultural signification and language itself is dependent to a sort of continuity again related strongly with time.

There is a problem with this conception of time, because this view is the result of the shift of the terms of space into the ones corresponding to time. (Game, 1991) This can be seen as a strategy to represent time as an abstract phenomenon with the terms of a more concrete notion: space. However, this representation shift can create too many problems and deviate the real meanings or dynamics associated with time, being a very critical term. Another classification of time as cyclic and linear (Eliade, 1992) is also a result of this spatial approach. When cyclic understanding of time is attributed to the traditional societies where all references of time is arranged according to the cosmic movements of natural phenomena like sun, moon etc, linear understanding of time is typical to modern way of thinking regarding time as a progressive and projective entity directed always to an ideal future. Nevertheless, the graphic presented in Figure 1 can invoke a new understanding and illustration in the cultural dynamics of time and objects that can make clear some associate terms bound to the notion of time.

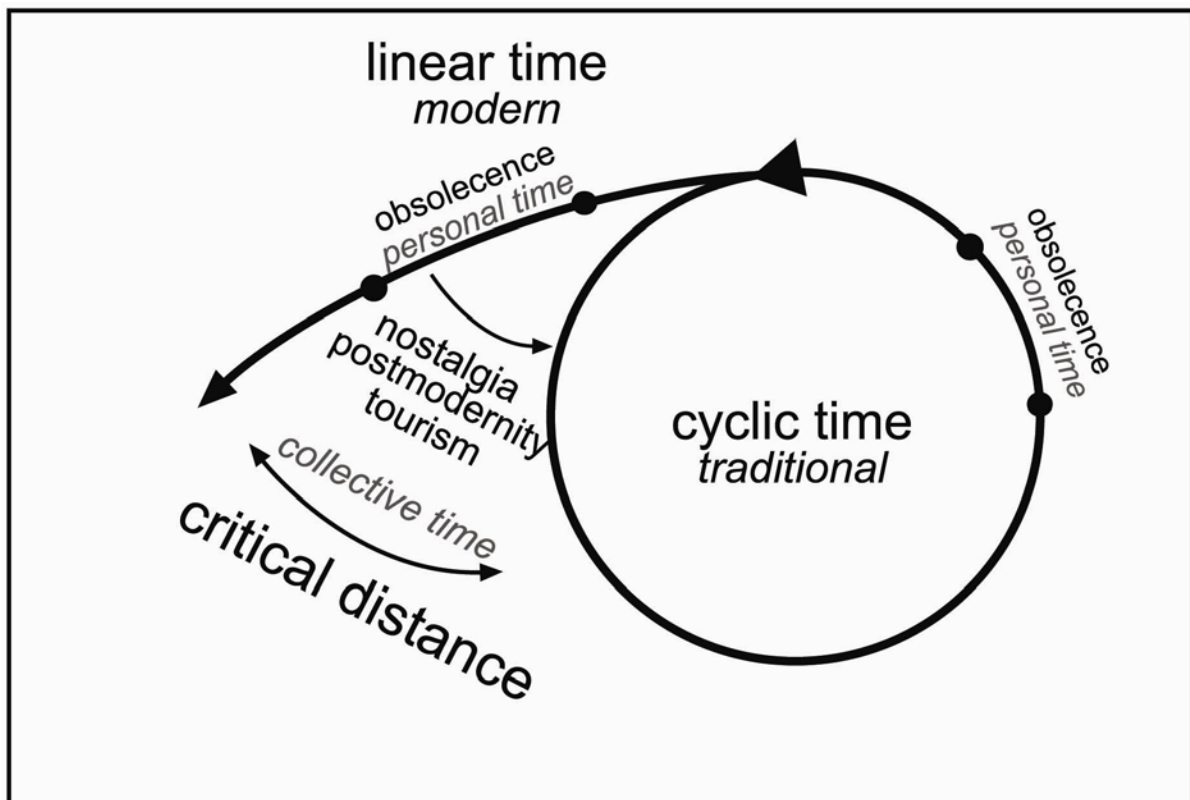


Figure 1

In this simple graphic showing the dynamics between cyclic and linear understandings of time, the possibility of situating some terms directly or indirectly related arises like nostalgia, tourism, postmodernity, personal and collective time etc. These concepts are the results of the liberation of the constantly revolving cyclic arrow of time and projecting it to a point that is hard to foresee. The “critical” distance of the arrow “freed” from the cyclic path is what makes these associate terms representable on this graphic. The reason is that when the arrow of time is freed from the cycle and a critical distance occurred between cyclic and linear lines, a new way of seeing, perceiving and defining the former situation of cyclic life –if there is any- becomes possible. This creates the concepts like *tradition* or *past* again as modern constructs visualized by the romanticized emotional attitude to objects..

Closely connected with these constructs, nostalgia and tourism as modern concepts can be made visible using the graphic, because these terms are themselves motivated by the existence of the critical distances, being spatial or temporal. Modernist principle of valuing past and future in a narrative sense (Miller, 1987) is a strong motivation of tourism as an activity because it benefits strongly from these narratives. The distance on the graphic is true

for tourism because tourism, in principle requires a change in space, but it is also a temporal distance because it usually includes a longing for an idealized past and traditional times. This feeling has also an intrinsic bond with nostalgia, which is a sort of homesickness and desire to turn back to a lost times by idealizing past. Nostalgia depends mainly on the confusion of emotions about our own past and that belongs to objects. This is what creates the very effect of nostalgia and staged craft as an emotional strategy in tourism.

Having said the concepts related with time and modernity and emphasized by this simple graphic, the objects can be questioned as the main instruments in the process of time representation. The objects overlapping with the cyclic loop of time is generally called as traditional objects because the main motive of these objects is not to create novelty like modern or designed objects do, however they follow a traditional way of production and appearance creating continuity in time. But the objects reflecting the logic of modern production are usually associated with the modern conception of progressive and linear time perspective, which is another myth creating a certain emotional feedback associating one with the specialty of progression.

Moreover, the differentiation of personal and collective time can be discussed as illustrated in this graphic with its connections with the objects. If we follow short intervals on this shape, we can also follow the routes of obsolescence in an object based perspective. So, it can be said that any object becomes obsolete with time whether modernly designed, or traditionally crafted. It is very simple to state that, but there is a hidden dimension in this simple statement, which is about the personal lives of objects that cannot be determined according to the modern classifications. Or else, we can ask a weird question like this: Is a worn out cellular phone more modern and fashionable than a brand new traditional style rug? This question simply problematizes the abstract nature of classification bound with time and explains that all of these definitions are not oriented to individual objects, but only abstract styles and collective time specifications. At this stage, we can understand and illustrate the reason why nostalgia is a collective emotion even it seems to refer individual memory.

Accordingly, “continuity” doesn’t always have to create a “tradition”, but historical mythology forces us to understand the term “continuity” bound strongly with tradition. Most of the objects can easily represent tradition or create its own tradition for they have a certain resistance to time but having to be stuffed with the agents of ideology is what we criticize

here. A new focus can then be suggested to develop a more individual and personal historical perspective to broaden the relationship between objects and time.

Moment, *dem* and *duree*

When time represented as a direction and classified basically as future and past in a linear axis, the term “moment” becomes problematic. Is “moment” a time classification? The reason for this question is that “moment” as a time component does not refer to a time span like future and past do. If future and past as time classifications show directions pointing different ways in a so-called linear direction, moment can be pictured as a point in time.

For the problem of “moment”, it will be helpful to introduce another term that is alien to western culture: this is “*dem*”. This word is a part of sufi culture in where a very deep understanding of time connected with the whole belief system and way of life. Sufis do not believe in future and past as they don’t think they have a control on them as abstractions about time, and try to exist in *dem* as the only livable authentic time, which can be described as an awareness of time and life together. Although *dem* is similar to moment as a time dimension, it also has different aspects compared the temporal significations each has. The main difference of the term *dem* from moment is it does not have a reference of time span like future and past or a point in time as moment implies. This characteristic of *dem* is this feature not referring to a spatial quality to explain a term related strongly with time.

If we perceive and name things according to their temporal values like past and future, what is the possibility of meaning making of object in the moment or *dem*? This can create a very interesting and potent discussion. The momentary perception of object freed from temporal perspective is parallel to a part from famous novel of Sartre, *Nausea*. In this novel where Sartre puts his ideas and thoughts about Existentialism, there is a scene where the character confronts with a tree. It is a traumatic moment that he cannot easily name and accept the object as a cultural being. However, he faces with the tree as a pure existence impossible to represent with the terms of language and this situation creates a sort of sickness on him. This momentary non-representable trauma has some parallel aspects with a story from *Mesnevi*: According to this story of Rumi presenting metaphors about time and creation, real existence is only a little point of light. If this point of light is moved in darkness, various shapes could appear depending on the form of the movement in time, which represents many different

creatures. Generally we don't see the existence of the point, what we perceive is the shapes created from the movement. This resembles how we attribute meaning to objects according to time limitations and suffer from a sort of trauma if we try to capture an object in a momentary sense.

This existentialist moment of confrontation with the object can be identified with the possible authentic perception of object in moment when its meaning is freed from a time span. If an object is supposed to be perceived in a pure or ideal *moment*, then the action of signification, representation or designation becomes impossible. This moment also resembles how Lacan defines Real as "that which resists signification" and this creates the state of "more in the object than the object" as the basic structure of object of desire (1977).

At this point, it will be helpful to mention about the term *duree* as Bergson puts it. He proposes the term *duree* against the homogenous understanding of time that is countable and alienated. *Duree*, contrasted with this conception of time, is more subjective and individual. It can be summarized as a component of time of *becoming*, not perceived when one thought about it. Not to be alienated to the time we live, we have to put ourselves in it, not observing ourselves from an abstract outside position (Game, 1991). That is a point where *duree* and *dem* intersects by presenting the same understanding that blends or synthesizes life and time organically.

The handling of time in the dynamics of *duree* is also effective to create a new perspective of objects. *Duree* as a subjective time component is applicable to artifacts when any action connected with objects like production or consumption is to be questioned. By the help of this term, it will be possible to discuss the processes as individual subjective phenomena. As said earlier, the processes related with artifacts are that of production and use or consumption. Whenever we took these processes not as general traits, but parts of subjective and phenomenal *duree*, a need for a new terminology and perspective arises.

The production process, especially in its industrial sense, is usually explained distant from its producer, or the technology used in the process is emphasized more. In craft production, however, the emphasis is made on the maker in a narrative sense, but it is usually an anonymous person who represents the local and unique craft production presented for tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) creating a modernist discourse. This perspective sees the producer as an

alienated “other” in a sense, reincarnated from older and traditional times. However, the production process as a relationship with the object is not secondary to the use or consumption determining the aim of production. Production can be seen as a strong relationship both with the object and the time of the creation.

Techne, as exported from old roman language is an expression containing the process of design and production not excluded and abstracted from each other. It is also the name of the process, in which material, labour and work time is combined and not differentiated from each other unlike the modern sense of industrial design and production process. In this model, time is not restricted to “productivity” that is one of the key terms of capitalist production. The relationship with time is a natural one closing to the attributes of *duree* textured with material, body, mind and labour. This is an organic process that no element connected with production is prior to other. This process resembles to the example Barthes (1972) gave about the woodcutter “acting the object” who “cannot speak *about* the tree”, but “speak the tree”. In the process, for woodcutter, tree is not an image; but simply the meaning of his action making the material, body and action of production a whole.

When we come to the terms of usage or consumption, question of how the perspective of *duree* can be applicable to these terms appears. Use or consumption is the main aim or the motive of the production and the most important process about the instrumentality of product. Because a product or artifact is not a pure natural thing, then it is attributed that there should be a reason or rationale determining the specific function of it. Functionality is not only attributed to artificial objects, but also looked for in artifacts of nature. This is what is here meant by instrumentality and this is why the fields like industrial design, design history and anthropology concerning with artifacts base their assumptions on functionality of all man made products.

This perspective of instrumental functionality is also the reason of the abstraction of artifacts from the actual use process. Designing, emphasizing and presenting ideal functions and styles of products is a kind of identity card of them proving their modern existence. However, after design and production process and sold in the market, objects become a routine part of our lives. This is where a different kind of process occurs about them. It can be resembled to the Adam sent back from heaven to earth because of his sins. After the exile, object starts its own life depending on the context it is sent and becomes an UFO no more controllable by the

designer or the producer that made it. Functionality shifts from an ideal instrumentality into a specific phenomenal meaning. This is where the object is *used* by a specific user, in a specific context and connected to *real life*. In this real stage, object is neither the creator, nor the slave of the condition it is sent. It still performs its function, but not from an ideal perspective as advertisements show us.

Objects usually accompany us; we are not always directed towards them. Let's try to picture of a condition where two people chatting and drinking tea. They don't usually see teacups containing hot tea, but it doesn't mean that teacups are not an important part of the process. If we took out the tea part from this special context, an important amount of meaning and ambiance would be lost. This is an interesting point about the artifacts in their use apart from their functional aim. Products are designed to be seen and to have a visual pleasure from them as design and emotion paradigm insists on. But whenever they are really leaked into our life and daily routine, they become –in a sense- invisible.

At this point, it will be much helpful to use the term of "*praxis*" -again borrowed from old roman language- instead of use, because *praxis* is a more general term than *use* not necessarily related with objects. Objects in the daily routine accompany to a general *praxis* of life and become a part of them. The term *praxis* is not only connected with the use or consumption process, but also an important action in the process of production as *techne*. By the possibilities of this new terminology, the division between production and consumption can become blurred and they can be combined under the umbrella term *praxis*.

Rituals are usually associated with religious or ceremonial acts having predetermined patterns of actions and objects. On the other hand, time perspective related with objects broadened by expressions like *duree* and *dem*, ritual part of objects could be seen in a new perspective related with temporal studies. So, a perception more concentrated to the process than the object itself can be suggested. In religious rituals, objects are the main actors and the signifier or the symbol of what is represented as divine and abstract. However, in daily life, objects accompany us as invisible and variable agents of our routine when some time passed after we owned them. Even if we always search for objects that we think that will make us happy or will make us, that aspect of invisibility seems to be the destiny of the relationship between man and objects. This is also one of the main strategies of capitalism that makes people

constantly searching for consumption depending on the cycle of satisfaction / dissatisfaction, or visibility / invisibility.

From the *design and emotion* perspective, the position of invisibility creates a unique problematic because pleasure from a designed item requires an intentional and concrete attention whatever the object is intended for. Emotive aspect of design puts the object into a central position and makes it the center of attraction. For example, the main motive created kitsch is this attraction ability that makes it totally emotive. However, an artifact in its non-idealized position, eradicate its existence in its function and becomes invisible after a specific user owns it if it also has a form and style that is *compatible* with the context it is served. If we assume that an emotive product should be center of attraction, then it can be stated that such invisibility erase the potential emotive aspect of design. But, this cannot be as simple as that.

The aspect of invisibility can be treated as a core concept of a new model of emotive approach in design more based on the process of ordinary lives and personal times, rather than idealized collective time attributes focused on general object categories. Even it seems as a paradox, here the main motivation could be, -metaphorically saying- not to put things into parenthesis or brackets of emotion. If design process is sensitive to individual processes, non-spatial time conceptions and people's real routines, then the emotional aspect will naturally accompany to design and flourish in use, as teacups accompany our lives silently without showing off.

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