

The performativity of objects¹

Abstract

This essay, a revised version of the keynote lecture prepared for Sociologidagarna 18–20 March 2020 in Stockholm, introduces a new, cultural-sociological theory of materiality. Sociology did not metabolize the cultural turn until the 1980s. Even when cultural sociology finally did emerge, moreover, there were powerful pushbacks against it. Neo-Marxism, neo-Pragmatism, neo-institutionalism incorporated this or that cultural concept but resisted the culture turn more broadly, tying meaning to social structure and practice rather than recognizing its autonomy. Cultural sociology has flourished in recent decades, but so have new backlash movements. None has been more persistent than the turn toward the object and its reduction to materiality. Icon theory positions itself again this turn, suggesting that, in society, materiality is invested with imagination and enlivened by performativity. The surface of objects is aesthetically formed, and the meaning of such sensuous experience of outer form is structured by invisibly discursive depth. Durkheim's sacred and profane must be complemented by Burke's beautiful and sublime. Informed by background representations, such aesthetic-cum-moral objects are designed by artists and craft-persons; produced by creators with access to material resources; put into the scene by advertisers and PR specialists; and mediated by criticism – before they are embraced or rejected by audiences.

Keywords: Material objects, Cultural sociology, Cultural performance, Design, Criticism

”An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Ezra Pound (1918:96)

IN THIS LECTURE, I will advance a project I call “icon theory.” I began thinking its theoretical foundations more than a decade ago, in essays about Giacometti (Alexander 2008a), materiality (Alexander 2008b), and celebrity (Alexander 2010a), and in a co-edited book called *Iconic Power* (Alexander, Bartmanski & Giesen 2012). Since then, while regularly conducting seminars on iconicity, my research and writing has focused on more politically relevant issues, like elections (Alexander 2010b), revolutions (Alexander 2011), and backlash movements (Alexander, Kivisto & Sciortino 2020), on which I brought to bear other research programs in cultural sociology's “strong program,” theories about cultural trauma, social performance, and civil sphere.

1 I gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Yale doctoral student Vanessa Bittner.

Materialism old and new

Modern social theory and social science have mostly treated the object as a thing, as a dead materiality reduced to the minimalist capacity of blocking or facilitating human action – merely an “affordance,” to employ the term James Gibson introduced more than 50 years ago and which has become widely used today in just such a reductively materialistic way. Here’s one of Gibson’s definitions of the term: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.” It “implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment” (Gibson 1979:127).

Such a perception of objecthood (object-hood?) is a consequence of the identification of modernity with disenchantment and alienation. Under the shadow of industrial capitalism, Marx rejected Hegel’s phenomenological understanding that “things” are objectifications of spirit, that external forms can be deciphered in a manner that renews subjectivity and allows empowerment and autonomy (Hegel 1977[1807]; Miller 1987). Under capitalism, Marx believed, the reification of the spirit that animated Hegel’s dialectic was bottled up in the objectification phase. For Marx, *things* were now in the saddle, and human beings would be unable to experience their subjectivity in human-made objects until commodity exchange were overcome. In the shadow of *fin-de-siècle* Europe, Weber generalized this critical understanding of objectification to Western modernity as such. Because rationalization permanently separated subject from object, and mandated *Zweck*-rationality, or means-ends calculation, impersonal bureaucratic domination – the “iron cage” of “mechanized petrification” – prevailed (Weber 1930[1904–1905]:182). “[M]aterial goods,” Weber (*ibid.*:181) rued, “have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men.” Walter Benjamin’s claim about art in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1969[1935]) – that only the original, not reproduced art possesses aura, mystery, and the power of enchantment – combined Marx and Weber in a powerful manner that has become extraordinarily influential today.

This objectification of objects – a materialist understanding of materiality – need not be connected to such sweeping historicist metaphysics. In the sociology of objects that has emerged within contemporary sociology, objects are also mostly treated merely as things; indeed, they are often heralded for such an unhuman status. Bruno Latour (2005) sees the modern world as filled with mundane and un-inflected things, and he celebrates it. Challenging the cultural turn, Latour wants sociologists to shift focus from human action to the action of things. It’s the action of things that defines modernity, not meaningful action, and that’s more than okay with Latour.

It is even more startling when you realize that this discipline emerged a full century after the Industrial Revolution and has been evolving in parallel with the largest and most intensive technical developments since the Neolithic. [...] [H]ow to explain that so many social scientists pride themselves in considering “social meaning” *instead of* “mere” material relations, “symbolic dimension” *instead of* “brute causality”? (Latour 2005:73, original italics).

In Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), things become “actants”; it is they who possess agency, not persons. Dead materialities, like the speed bump, become for Latour (2005:77–78) the unsung heroes of modern social life. In the midst of the intellectual backlash against the cultural turn, such mundane objectivism has come to many as a decided relief. Beyond ANT, American sociology has its own homegrown thing-reductionists, like Harvey Molotch’s *Where stuff comes from* (2003) and Terence McDonnell (2010), whose work on “cultural entropy” seeks to demonstrate how material emplacement shapes meaning and action. Outside of sociology, whether American or European, there has been a broad movement away from what Gumbrecht (2006) calls “meaning effects” to “presence effects,” from the Derridean emphasis on absent discursive structures to the phenomenology of presence. Gumbrecht sees the alternative to meaning as aesthetic experience, but other anti-meaning movements, like thing theory (Brown 2001) and practice theory (Bourdieu 1977), either ignore aesthetics or, like Bourdieu and Latour, make its effect epiphenomenal to material things. Whatever the fifty shades of difference, these intellectual movements have together contributed to what Pels, Hetherington, and Vandenberghe (2002) welcomed as “the new materialism” (cf. Coole & Frost 2010; Harman 2018).

Figure 1



One might well ask, as have many Yale students over the years: Isn’t this simply common sense? What else are objects *except* things? And what else is materiality except hard stuff you bump into, stuff that confronts your gaze, an environment that blocks or propels your movement in space? This is indeed common sense, but it is more what Geertz (1975) called common sense as a cultural system – common sense in a certain kind of modernist culture – than an accurate perception of social reality. In the remainder of this lecture, I outline a pathway for getting beyond this common sense about objects.²

2 This intellectual ambition is shared with a small but hardy band of other anti-materialist, culturally-oriented “object thinkers” in sociology, among them Fiona Greenland (2016), Julia Sonnevend (2012, 2016, 2020), Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward (Bartmanski & Woodward 2015; Woodward 2003), Genevieve Zubrzycki (2017), and Claudio Benzecry (2008).

Objects are living, not dead

In my own theorizing about iconic consciousness, I see objects as living, not dead. Objects possess materiality, but at the same time they are cultural and imagined. Cultural meanings encased inside aesthetically shaped material shells, objects trigger intense *experience* (Lash 2018). In the minimal sense of efficient cause, it is possible, of course, for objects to exert their force without reference to meaning or aesthetic experience. A bomb, a bullet, or a Corona virus destroys without reference to subjectivity, for simply material, mechanical, physiological reasons. But even when an object does exercise such naked materiality, it is enmeshed in networks of meaning before its physical impact and immediately enters into other meanings and emotions after. Latour's speed bump was put into place by traffic engineers concerned with the safety of children and pedestrians; drew from established crafts of industrial and road design; and depended for its effect not only, or even mainly, on its materiality, but on drivers possessing moral commitments to the safety of pedestrians, the value of their cars, and the sacrality of their selves.³

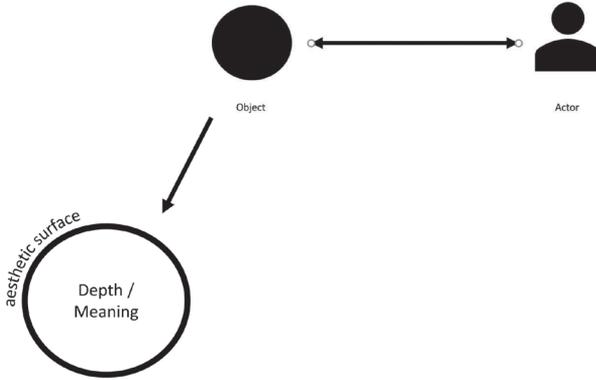
Structure, performance, historicity

Icon theory may be conceptualized across three dimensions: structure, performance, historicity.

Most of my earlier, published work addresses the first of these. Rather than conceiving structure as a pure materiality, I conceptualize objects as being composed of aesthetic surface and discursive depth. The surface is form and shape, and its texture is sensually experienced via the five senses, sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. "Inside" the aesthetically formed surface are discursive meanings – moral associations, collective beliefs, socially shaped emotions. They are inside metaphorically, in the sense that discursive meaning is invisible to the senses. As Derrida emphasized with his idea of textual absence, meaning cannot be seen or experienced as such. The secret of iconicity – the sociological miracle of it, one might say – is that invisible depth meaning and visible surface form are analytically separate, yet, at the same time, they are, in a concrete empirical sense, wholly intertwined. The aesthetic experience of form always *means* something, and often means a great deal. Meaning becomes, not ratiocinative discourse or cognitive understanding, but aesthetic experience.

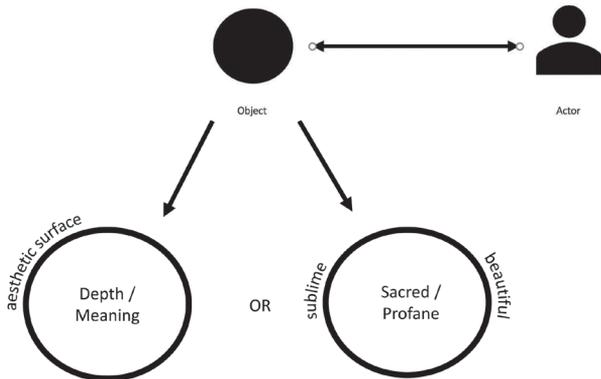
3 For a terrifying example of what happens when a driver who does not possess such concerns, see Steve McQueen's highspeed, maniacal chase through the streets of San Francisco in the movie *Bullitt* (1968).

Figure 2



Theories of totemism, whether anthropological (Lévi-Strauss 1963[1962]), semiotic (Barthes 1972[1957]), or sociological (Durkheim 1995[1912]), have long posited that material objects may carry collective meanings. What these approaches have usually ignored, however, is the totem's aesthetic surface, which actually plays a critical role. Totemic meaning is carried through the sensuous experience of an aesthetically constructed material surface. We need to amend Durkheim with Edmund Burke, whose extraordinary *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (Burke 1990[1757]) informed Kant's own pre-analytical essay on aesthetics (Kant 1960[1764]). To the sacred and profane of morality that constitutes the depth of an iconic object, we must add the beautiful and sublime that constitute its aesthetic surface.

Figure 3



Let me briefly illustrate this structural dimension of iconicity in reference to the American nation. The United States is a sovereign, state-controlled, constitutionally grounded, rational-legal country. But it also exists iconically, in the special sense I am defining this term. In “America the Beautiful” (1893), the more than century-old popular song, the American nation is experienced sensuously, as an inspiring musical melody and as lyrics that trigger visual images of its physical countenance. The song celebrates America for its “halcyon skies,” its “amber waves of grain,” its “purple mountain majesties above the enameled plain,” its “alabaster cities” that “gleam undimmed by human tears!” An aesthetic surface of the American nation is evoked by evocative images that we experience visually in our imagination, and aurally, by melodiously singing about. But wrapped up inside these sensuous surfaces are discursive phrases that define “America the beautiful” in moral ways: The song sings of the nation, for example, as a “thoroughfare for freedom” that “selfish gain [will] no longer stain.” The same kind of moral discourse is evoked by America’s national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner” (1814) composed almost 80 years before. While the anthem famously celebrates the collective identity of the new American nation as “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” it does so through the rhymed and rhythmic sounds that have also triggered romantic imagining in other aesthetic mediums, like painting. The Anthem begins by asking Americans to imagine rising and falling sun light at dawn and twilight: “Oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming?” What listeners are moved to see through this painterly light is another striking visual image – that “our flag was still there,” its “broad stripes and bright stars” still “gallantly streaming”.

After this brief discussion of iconic structure, I can say even less, here, about historicity. I reject the historicist idea that modernity has upended the subjectivity of objectivity, yet historical context is still critical to understanding iconic consciousness in the present day. With the onset of Western modernity, the cultural construction of iconicity shifted in a fundamental manner. For Western art during medieval times and “Eastern” art until relatively recently, the highest aesthetic ideal aimed at replicating the finest of the past, to honor the traditional in art as in life. The artistic and scientific revolutions of late medieval and Renaissance times challenged this orientation, and modernity has been characterized by an unrelenting insistence on the “new” ever since (Hughes 1980). There emerged avant-gardes in art, in science, and even in economic production; the obligation of such “frontlash” groups (Alexander 2019) was to create objects that had never existed before. To be vivid, to resonate, objects had now to be experienced as altogether distinctive. This modernist demand for innovation intensified with technological advances in the means of symbolic production, which were themselves a manifestation of it. Their combined effect has been to exponentially increase the quantity of iconic objects even as it has rent asunder – defused – the elements that have contributed to the successful production and performance of their qualities. Such “iconi-celeration” has not affected only icon creation and production but the expectation of audiences, which have developed an insatiable hunger for the new. The half-life of iconic objects (Alexander 2012) – the ability of material objects to

exert iconic power – has been exponentially shortened, a reduction that digitalization exacerbates. In contemporary societies, iconic power has become ever more difficult to maintain.

Object-audience fusion and defusion

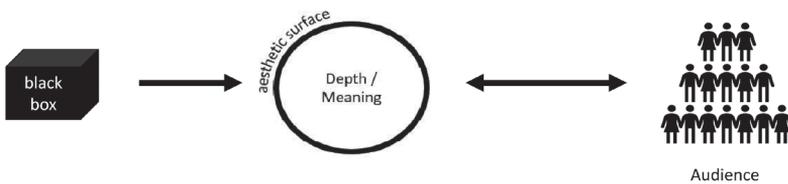
I will devote the rest of this talk to the third dimension of iconicity – the performativity of objects. My starting premise is that, contrary to what might be called “aesthetic ideology” (the world views of practitioners) and most classical and modern philosophies of aesthetics, icons are not pristine. Their surface and depth do not glow like embers inside a transcendental realm. Rather, iconic structure (surface/depth) effectuates itself sociologically, in space, time, and social relationships, as a social performance. Another way of putting this is that iconic power depends on how surface and depth are experienced by audiences.

Figure 4



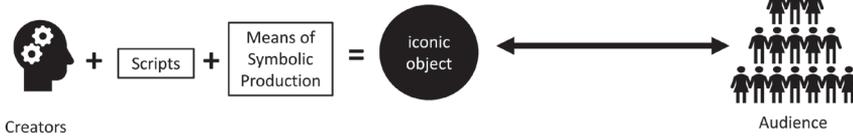
As the material “actor” in a social performance, iconic objects are not structures that stand alone.

Figure 5



They are produced, or created, by agents who write scripts and have access to the means of symbolic production.

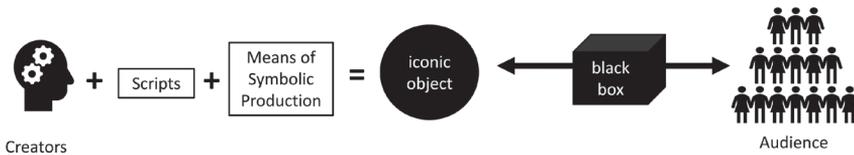
Figure 6



While gaining such access is not particularly challenging for painters and sculptors, it is more difficult for other creative figures, like orchestral composers and film makers, and those who wish to create mass produced consumer icons like automobiles and computers. For the latter, large capital sums and mass production materials and techniques are required. The material and ideal interests of business owners and managers then becomes crucial for iconic production, and so does the prowess of engineers.

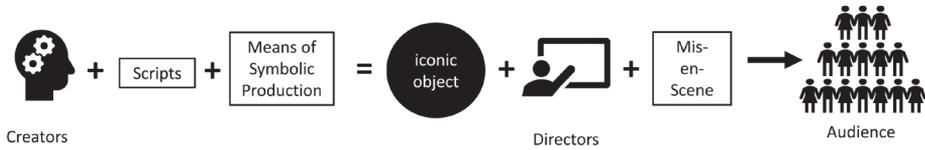
Once such scripted material forms are produced, there emerges the performative challenge of putting them into the scene – the *mise-en-scène*.

Figure 7



Here, a new set of human agents comes into play, figures like marketers, advertisers, and public relations specialists.

Figure 8



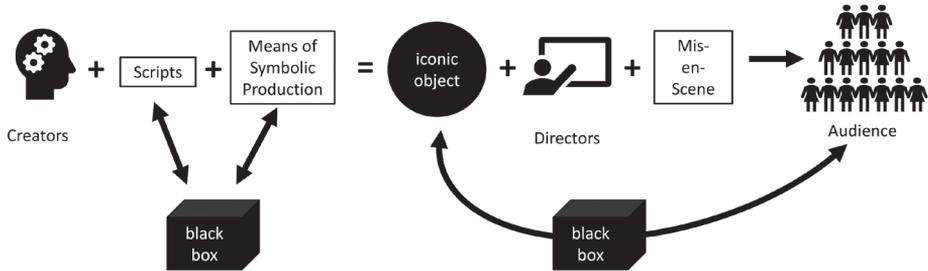
This depiction of the production of iconic objects – of iconic performance – pretty much exhausts not only lay understandings of iconic production but academic accounts of material production as well. Things are made by agents who create scripts and have access to the means of symbolic production, whether such agents are individuals or wealthy companies. The objects so produced are then put into the scene by gallery owners, advertisers, and PR. At this point, the objects come into contact with potential audiences, who fuse with the iconic performance or not.

In terms of lay understandings, consider the fantastic success of the Mustang, Ford’s “family sports car” in the 1960s. In the popular consciousness of the day, the creation and success of the Mustang was attributed to the man who played the public role of producer, Ford executive Lee Iacocca.

But the same simplified, if not simplistic, understanding of production also informs some of the best academic literature on iconic material objects. Consider business school doyen Douglas Holt’s (2004) widely influential work, *How brands become icons*. The innovation for which this work has been heralded is Holt’s insight into the critical role that shifting social myths play in advertising and marketing – in what I have called the *mise-en-scène*. Scott Lash and John Urry’s (1994) depiction of postmodern capitalism, in their celebrated *The economy of signs and spaces*, employs the same compressed production model, except that it moves the position of iconic myth and narrative from post- to pre-production, making it part of the means of production itself. Or consider Igor Kopytoff and Daniel Miller, each of whom has made major contributions to conceptualizing how consumption de-commodifies and humanizes objects (Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1987); they have little to say about the complexity and sequencing of the elements that go into production and performance.

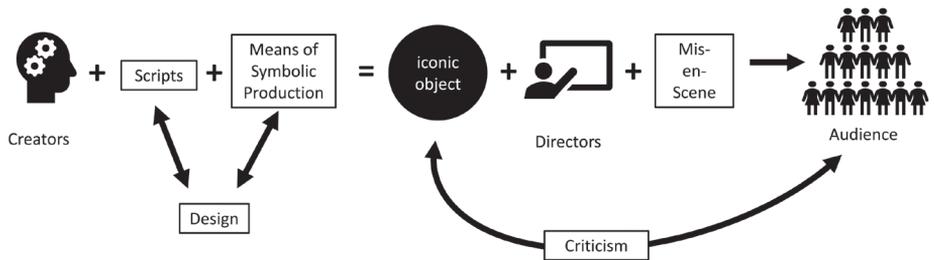
I propose to add new elements to this standard model, to open up two more black boxes in the lay and academic understandings of iconic production.

Figure 9



What we find inside these boxes, when we open them up, are “design” and “criticism.”

Figure 10



Design and criticism are little understood elements of iconic creation and performance. Each is vital to the construction of surface and depth, but neither has been a focus for social theory.

Design

An object is not only scripted in the process of iconic performance, but also aesthetically designed. Design operates via the actions of artists, architects, craftsmen, and engineers. It also operates informally, when everyday social actors bring previously designed and produced objects into everyday life. This is something that happens when one looks carefully at oneself in the mirror while shaving, shaping how the whiskers are cut; when one adjusts one's tie, combs one's hair, applies lipstick, eye shadow, jewelry, tattoos. Think of the motorbike boys Paul Willis (1978) describes in *Profane culture*, how they customize their cycles and their clothing to maximize the searing sensation of wind across the face.

Some iconic objects are not “designed” at all, for example clouds in the sunlit sky, stars in the dark night, or trees in a forest. Yet, even such objects *have* a design or, more precisely, a design is attributed to them. Human beings see in natural objects a form and shape and texture that create the conditions for experiencing their aesthetic surface and discursive depth.⁴ It is the *attribution* of design that allows clouds, stars, cabbages, and trees to be primordial sources of iconic experience, in literature, art, and folklore. For stars: Think of van Gogh's famous painting, “Starry night;” of Greek mythology and its gods and goddesses; of Astrology. For clouds: Think of the *Ancien Régime* “happy clouds” in the decorative paintings of Boucher and Watteau, or John Constable's “angry cloud” studies in the 1820s. For trees: Well, again, you can't beat van Gogh, but Monet and Klimt also painted trees of mythopoetic proportions.

Figure 11. *Map of the heavens*, Giovanni Antonio Vanosino da Varese (1573–1575)



4 “[t]he proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use ‘symbols’ he must so use them [so] that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk” (Pound 1918:103).

Figure 12. Orion's belt



Figure 13. *The starry night*, Vincent van Gogh (1889)



Figure 14. *Landscape with waterfall* (Jean-Antoine Watteau (1713–1715)



Figure 15. *Cupids target*, François Boucher (1758)



Figure 16. *Extensive landscape with grey clouds*, John Constable (1821)



Figure 17. *Trees by the seashore at Antibes*, Claude Monet (1888)

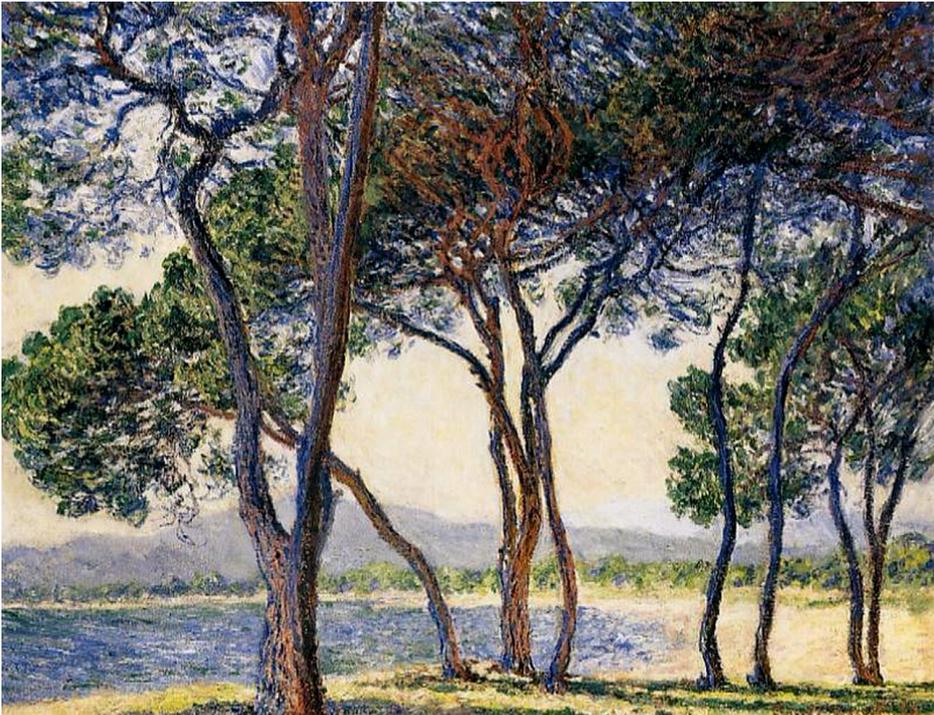
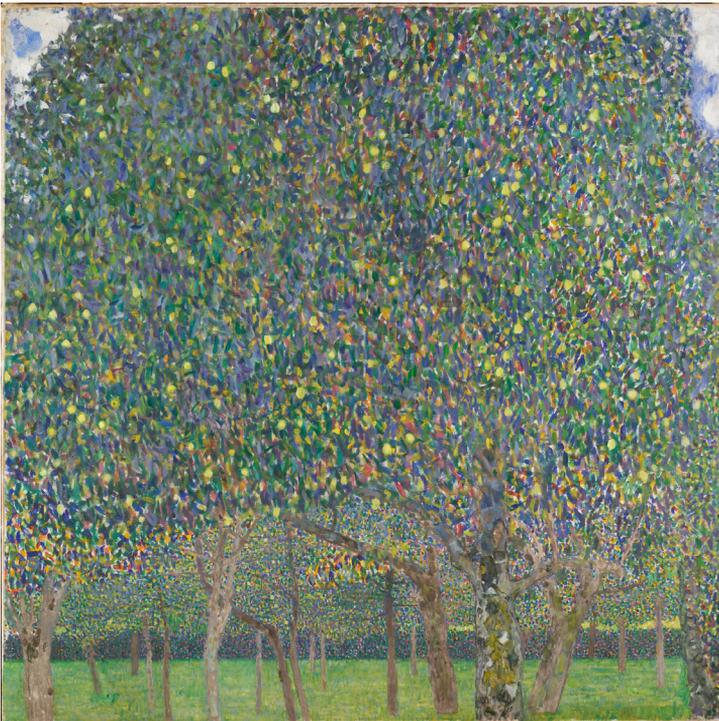


Figure 18. *Olive trees*, Vincent van Gogh (1889)



Figure 19. *Pear tree*, Gustav Klimt (1903)



As for cabbages, take a look at Edvard Munch's "Cabbage field," painted in 1915.

Figure 20. *Cabbage field*, Edvard Munch (1915)



In a referential sense, the painting simply "depicts a cabbage field," Karl Ove Knausgård writes in his book length appreciation of Munch.

The cabbages in the foreground are roughly executed, almost sketch-like, dissolving into green and blue brushstrokes deeper into the background. Next to the cabbage field there is an area of yellow, over that an area of dark green, and over that again a narrow band of darkening sky.

That is all, that is the whole painting. (Knausgård 2019:1).

But these painted objects are not merely referential.

[t]he picture is magical. It is so charged with meaning [...] When I look at its colours and shapes, which are so radically simplified that they suggest a landscape more than they represent it, I see death [...] a trace of something terrible [...] a longing to disappear and become one with the world [...] which fills us [...] with its emptiness. (Knausgård 2019:1–2)

The design of an object's aesthetic surface profoundly affects the possibilities for audience fusion, the condition that indicates performative success. Audiences are exposed to designed object-experiences in various ways: they go shopping, surf the web, glance at images in Instagram and Facebook, attend museum openings and fashion shows, look at images in advertisements, read marketing texts, listen to jingles, go to showrooms and car lots, walk on nature trails and go swimming. They also encounter iconic objects in the course of the random flow of interaction in everyday life. Encountering these designed and scripted objects, audience members often experience fusion. In the fused state, audiences attribute to objects an aura of sacrality and beauty; they have an aesthetic-cum-iconic experience, of intense meaning and emotion. Experiencing identification, they subjectify objects, feel love and admiration, bring the object from the outside to the inside of their selves, and then make efforts to objectify the surface of their selves in the same iconic terms (Alexander 2010a).

If an object doesn't speak to them, doesn't resonate with them, doesn't "catch" them, an audience is unmoved; iconic performance has failed to fuse, and the audience turns away. They experience the object neither as aesthetically sublime nor as beautiful. They experience repulsion (it's ugly or disgusting) or simply indifference (didn't notice, don't care, been there done that). There is a continuum of aesthetic defusion, stretching from the repulsive to the routine.

The aesthetic power of iconic surface can have immense real-world consequences, political, economic, and existential. It helps elect presidents and powers support for demagogues. It allows companies to hire workers and provide families with living wages. It triggers bankruptcy, unemployment, and human degradation. It makes unknown painters into geniuses and struggling crooners into fabulously wealthy superstars. It shuts enormously expensive Broadway productions after opening night.

Marx claimed that capitalism had eclipsed use value, but well into the 1920s most of the objects manufactured by capitalism *looked* more or less how they were meant to be used. When the mass production of automobiles first began, their bodies were constructed by the same engineers who built their engines. Consider Ford's famous Model T.

Figure 21. Ford's Model T



While the Model T eventually became its own kind of icon, its surface, rather than being aesthetically charged, or designed, was epiphenomenal to its utility.⁵ The first mass produced cars were evaluated according to the framework of function and cost, and the Model T Ford won out on these grounds. It was marketed as cheap and practical, far stronger and faster than a horse and, after its initial purchase, not much more expensive to maintain. Here's how Henry Ford himself described it in a 1906 letter to the magazine *The Automobile*:

[The] greatest need today is a light, low priced car with an up-to-date engine with ample horsepower [...] powerful enough for American roads and capable of carrying its passengers anywhere that a horse-drawn vehicle will go (Ingrassia 2012:8)

Enter Harley Earl, the designer who became the pivotal figure in the car industry throughout the middle half of the 20th century (Knoedelseder 2018). Earl's father had a successful Hollywood business designing and producing body shells for the automobiles of the Los Angeles elite, literally placing painted facades over car skeletons to make them beautiful. Earl continued the family tradition of surface design but applied it to the construction and appearance of the entire automobile. "My primary purpose," he once wrote, "has been to lengthen and lower the American automobile, at times in reality and always at least in appearance" (Ingrassia 2012:25). What Earl aimed for was fusion between object and audience: "If you drive by a schoolyard and the kids don't whistle, go back to the drawing board" (ibid.) In 1927, Earl created the LaSalle for Alfred P. Sloan's young company, General Motors.

Figure 22. General Motor's LaSalle (1927–1940)



5 "Someone should write an erudite essay on the moral, physical, and esthetic effect of the Model T Ford on the American nation. Two generations of Americans knew more about the Ford coil than the clitoris, about the planetary system of gears than the solar system of stars" Steinbeck (1945:41).

It was “longer and lower than other production cars, with sweeping fenders, elongated windows and a novel molding accentuating its horizontal lines” (Gartman 1994:13).

Earl’s design rounded off all sharp corners, thus replacing the mechanical look of rectilinear lines with the organic appearance of curvilinearity. The whole package, down to the last detail, was blended into one harmonious, unified whole that contrasted sharply with the fragmented, assembled look of most production cars. (ibid.)

LaSalle’s sleek style played the beautiful to the grotesque upright and boxy cars of the day (Inglassia 2012:19). The *New Yorker* magazine waxed ecstatic about what it described as LaSalle’s “line,” declaring it “as refreshing as a Paris frock in a Des Moines, Iowa, ballroom” (Inglassia 2012:22). *Vogue* called attention to its “smart lines,” describing the LaSalle as a “graceful car, with a great deal of charm for the female eye.” (ibid.). Harvey Earl’s new auto-icon made the Model T obsolete, its aesthetic surface forever transforming American automobile production. As one automobile historian recently put it: By “introduc[ing] art into the rigid mechanics of mass automobile manufacturing,” Earl had “changed the game forever” (Knoedelseder 2018:7).

Earl had designed a material surface that “expressed” the emerging meaning of the automobile in America. This romantic mythology about a new kind of heroic quest plumbed the nation’s collective consciousness, triggering innumerable road movies (Eyerman & Löfgren 1995), road novels, and popular songs about love, sex, and cars. Not long after the LaSalle achieved take-off, Earl revealed his redesigned Cadillac.

Figure 23. Cadillac (1941)



And not much more than a decade later came his extraordinarily riveting Corvette:

Figure 24. Corvette (1953)



And finally his *pièce de la résistance*, the Great Shark finned Cadillac Eldorado;

Figure 25. Cadillac Eldorado (1957)



When Harley Earl had first set up shop on GM's vast Detroit production lot, his unit was derisively referred to as "the beauty parlor." But he had the last laugh. GM became the most successful capitalist company in the world, and the reason had nothing to do with either use value or for that matter exchange. "It was styling, not engineering, that had propelled GM past Ford to an indomitable fifty-plus percent share of the U.S. auto sales" (Knoedelseder 2018:7).

What Earl did to the surface of the mass-produced automobile, a French immigrant to the U.S. named Raymond Loewy did to just about everything else. Beginning in the late 1920s, he and his thousands of disciples created the field of “industrial design” and, in the process, as the *New York Times* once put it, “radically changed the look of American life [,] drastically alter[ing] the appearance of thousands of everyday items, from toothbrushes [to] Coca-Cola dispensers, dinnerware, sewing machines, toasters, electric clocks and radios and television sets, [the] cookie shapes for Nabisco, [the] eagle silhouette logotype of the United States Postal Service [and] the distinctive look of the President’s white Air Force One jet” (Krebs 1986). When the director of the Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts introduced the museum’s one-man retrospective of Loewy designs in 1975, he observed that “[m]uch in this exhibition will seem astonishingly familiar,” explaining that “so much with which we [modern Americans] have been surrounded [...] has been the product of [this] one man’s vision.” (Taylor 1975:7).

Loewy dedicated his professional life to packaging. He encased functional items, large and small, inside aesthetically designed shells, surfaces that compelled because they appeared, to early and mid-century Americans, as modern and *à la mode*. Not for nothing was he hailed as “the father of streamlining.”

Loewy’s powerfully designed surfaces modeled the modern mythos, sweeping back and sleekly smoothing out, narrowing and shaping the materiality of toasters and buses and planes and ships so they seemed to surge forward into the future, where speed was not just a means to an end but a good thing in itself, something happy, something arousing, something sacred.

Figure 26. Greyhound Scenicruiser



Figure 27. Studebaker Commander (1951)



Figure 28. Studebaker Avanti (1963)



When we gaze at such archetypical 20th century objects, we see inert “things” – buses, cars, trains, ships, airplanes, bottles, and postage stamps. They are actually iconic materialities, which have not only been scripted, produced, and marketed but also, more invisibly, exquisitely designed. Is this simply a material object, a plane or a stamp, or is it an aesthetic surface that allows us to experience what it feels like to fly sky high at great speeds, what it means to be a proud citizen of the most powerful nation in the world?⁶

Criticism

What remains to be discussed is what we find inside the last black box (see Figure 9). Criticism is central to the performativity of objects. As a matter of empirical fact, audiences rarely encounter the iconic object as such, whether it be person, product, art, or natural object. Between the audience and the object – no matter how the *mise-en-scène* has been shaped by advertising and PR, no matter how beautifully or powerfully designed, no matter how skillfully produced – there lies the mediating element of criticism. Critics provide audiences with authoritative interpretations of objects before audiences themselves encounter them. Criticism is a relatively autonomous mediation; it is not controlled by the other elements of iconic production, though it can and certainly often is influenced by them. Criticism intervenes after objects are designed, after they are produced, and after they are put into the scene. Criticism can be formal or it can simply be public opinion that circulates judgments about iconic objects, i.e., “taste.”

Lay audiences always are aware of objects and, frequently, of their producers. More sophisticated and informed audiences are aware that objects are put into a scene. Only a very small number of observers are aware that behind all this, in the beginning of it all, there is design. Fewer still – no matter how sophisticated – have thematized criticism as an independent factor in the performativity of icons. The reason, I think, is that critics present their contributions in such a powerfully essentializing way. They don't say, “this is my opinion.” They say, “this is how it is.” Critics tell people about an object; they describe the aesthetic qualities of its surface and expound on the meaning of its depth. Yet, what critics actually do is, of course, interpretation; they tell us *how*

6 In *Industrial Design*, Loewy's book length account of what he regarded as his most important projects, he describes his iconic experience of the S-1 steam engine which he had streamlined for Pennsylvania Railroad: “On a straight stretch of track I waited for the S-1 to pass through at full speed. I stood on the platform and saw it coming from the distance at 120 miles per hour. It flashed by like a steel thunderbolt, the ground shaking under me, in a blast of air that almost sucked me into its whirlwind. Approximately a million pounds of locomotive were crashing through near me. I felt shaken and overwhelmed by an unforgettable feeling of power, by a sense of pride at the sight of what I had helped to create in a quick sketch six inches wide on a scrap of paper. For the first time ... I realized that I had, after all, contributed something to a great nation that had taken me in and that I loved so deeply” (Loewy 1979:90).

we should look at an object, and how we should *feel* about the object when we do.⁷ Criticism constructs the object (for the audience) long after it has been made.

Criticism never “outs” itself as construction. The iconic structuration it accomplishes proceeds invisibly, as ontology rather than epistemology. Yet, the rhetoric of criticism gives its performativity away. When the Ford Mustang was rolled out in 1956, *Time* magazine – a popular medium of critical mediation if there ever were one – described it, with an extraordinarily evocative metaphor, as “a high-strung pony dancing to get started on its morning run” (Ingrassia 2012:154) and quoted a Ford executive bragging that the car had “the excitement of the wide-open spaces and [is] American as hell” (Ingrassia 2012:152). The mediation of such critical excitation helped Mustang achieve the hottest sales of any new model in American history.

The interpolating of “rah-rah” rhetoric and metaphor into ostensibly descriptive reviews is hardly confined to objects of popular culture. Criticism plays a formidable role in the production of high art icons as well. Artists can paint all they want; there’s no problem with access to the means of symbolic production. Most of these paintings, however, will never be seen by a wide audience. For that to happen, gallerists and curators need to provide *mise-en-scène*; in this way, they exercise significant structural power over the process of iconization. Yet, even when there is a gallery showing, it is relatively short-lived, and the artwork soon finds its way back to the shelves of the storehouse. This is what makes painters, even more than other artists like composers and play writers and choreographers, so dependent on critics. The brilliant and audacious criticism of Clement Greenberg (Marquis 2006) and Arthur Rosenberg (Rosenberg 1959) was absolutely critical to the explosive iconic power that abstract expressionism achieved in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the modern era, when patronage has ceased to be critical and the opinion of the “cultured public” becomes decisive, one rarely sees a discussion of the rise to eminence of a painter or a school without reference to a group of critics who named and championed them (e.g. Ruskin 1906[1843]).

There is a great deal of icon-performative understanding to be gleaned from reconstructing the culture structures of reviews about cars, plays, movies, architecture, music, dance, and even restaurant meals. The aesthetic gestures of each distinctive art and craft are wrestled into (or outside of) the binaries of beautiful and sublime, and the brushstrokes, the camera work, the *pas de deux*, the play of light and shadow, the aroma of spices, and the texture of perfectly cooked and flaky fish are read as expressions of the contemporary mythos, of popular heroes, and of currently pre-occupying events.

In conclusion, I will highlight one particularly fascinating and quite unexpected cultural structure uncovered in the course of my research into criticism. It is the nar-

7 Thus the fascination of critical reviews, written by critics who are themselves authors, about collections of a famous reviewer’s reviews. “Peter Schjeldahl is a great artist,” asserts Peter Finch, himself a novelist as well as a critic, about a collection of art reviews by the famous *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl: “he writes with remarkable tensile beauty and closeness of observation [...] I will never forget [...] the shock of tuning-fork accuracy when I first read his [work] [...] He has the ability to freeze an artist cold in a line [...] with meticulous, writerly precision” (Finch 2019).

rative of the icon as hero, and it permeates critical paeans to high culture icons and popular alike. When reviewers attribute iconic power to an object, they hail its creator as a hero and, in the process, attribute transformative powers to the objects these heroes have made. To be morally sacred, objects must be seen as offering a brave new vision that allows victory over the profane and mundane. To be aesthetically beautiful or sublime, objects must be seen as bursting *de novo*, in their full glory, casting out the dreary and the ugly, astonishing their audiences, and projecting their thrilling light, or frightening darkness, everywhere that the eye can see.

In February, 2008, the *New York Times* principal art critic Roberta Smith reviewed “Jasper Johns: Gray,” an exhibition of 120 of the artist’s black, white, and gray abstract paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Smith (2008a) devotes most of her review to breathlessly constructing and intertwining heroic man and heroic art. She lets us know that, while Johns started at the very bottom, “[h]is desire to be an artist helped him survive a lonely childhood shaped by abandonment by his parents.” Johns “has done little but work” ever since, Smith admiringly attests, “restlessly pushing forward[,] still and ever driven” to create an art of a uniquely “solitary stance and intellectual rigor” that transformed art history, “derail[ing] second- and third-generation Abstract Expressionism and chang[ing] the way we think about art.” It is a “marvelous show,” Smith enthuses, marveling at how it “illuminates 50 years of a life saved by, and lived for, the incessant pursuit of art.” Johns and his paintings are icons indeed.

Three weeks later, Smith (2008b) went back a century to review the same museum’s block buster exhibition of Gustave Courbet. Pairing the French realist with Jaspers Johns, she sacralizes him as another “master of sublime strangeness.” Courbet’s “life story,” Smith informs us, “is a rousing read.” He was “a loner and political radical who shunned the academy, tutoring himself at the Louvre.” He was also brave and altruistic, participating in the revolutionary uprising of the Paris Commune, where “he was in charge of protecting all things artistic, public monuments included.” When the Commune was ruthlessly repressed, Courbet himself came to a “tragic end,” dying “bitter and broken, four years later.” Yet, this tragic figure left a truly heroic aesthetic mark. The “founder of Realism,” he “willfully smashed the tidy boundaries separating established painting genres to record life as he saw it.” In Smith’s concluding peroration, she underscores her claim that Courbet’s work and life were both heroic, and that they were ineluctably intertwined.

More than perhaps any painter of his great painting century, Courbet built elements of rebellion and dissent into the very forms and surfaces of his work [...]. Even at the end he expressed his defiance in still lifes of fruit that seem impossibly large and overbearing, *like him*, and in magnificent trout hooked and struggling against the line, *even more like him* [...]. [G]eneration upon generation of painters have responded to his art and its challenges, but his example of stubborn non-conformity [lives on]. (Smith 2008b, italics added)

* * *

The cultural turn in the human sciences unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s, with the new language of semiotics, the rediscovery of hermeneutics, the eruption of symbolic anthropology, the linguistic turn of Wittgenstein's late work. In the discipline of sociology, these radical intellectual innovations were not metabolized until the 1980s, when the idea of a cultural sociology finally emerged. As this new understanding developed, there were powerful pushbacks against it. Neo-Marxism, neo-Pragmatism, neo-institutionalism incorporated this or that cultural concept, but broadly pushed back against the cultural turn, tying culture to social structure and practice rather than recognizing its autonomy. While strongly cultural sociology has flourished in recent decades, so have new backlash movements. None has been more persistent than the turn toward the object and its reduction to materiality. Icon theory positions itself against this turn, suggesting that, in society, materiality is invested with imagination and enlivened by performativity.

References

- Alexander, J.C. (2008a) "Iconic Experience in art and life: Surface/depth beginning with Giacometti's *Standing woman*", *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (5):1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095213>
- Alexander, J.C. (2008b) "Iconic consciousness: The material feeling of meaning", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (5):782–794. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d5008>
- Alexander, J.C. (2010a) "The celebrity-icon", *Cultural Sociology* 4 (3):323–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975510380316>
- Alexander, J.C. (2010b) *The performance of politics: Obama's victory and the democratic struggle for power*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199744466.001.0001>
- Alexander, J.C. (2011) *Performative revolution in Egypt: An essay in cultural power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Alexander, J.C. (2012) "Iconic power and performance: The role of the critic", 25–38 in J.C. Alexander, D. Bartmanski & B. Giesen (Eds.) *Iconic power: Materiality and meaning in social life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137012869_3
- Alexander, J.C. (2019) "Frontlash/backlash: The crisis of solidarity and the threat to civil institutions", *Contemporary Sociology* 48 (1):5–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306118815497>
- Alexander, J.C., D. Bartmanski & B. Giesen (Eds.) (2012) *Iconic power: Materiality and meaning in social life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137012869>
- Alexander, J.C., P. Kivisto & G. Sciortino (Eds.) (2021) *Populism in the civil sphere*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Barthes, R. (1972[1957]) *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bartmanski, D. & I. Woodward (2015) *Vinyl: The analogue record in the digital age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Benjamin, W. (1969[1935]) "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", 217–251 in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Benzecry, C. (2008) "Azul y oro: The many social lives of a football jersey", *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (1):49–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085158>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Brown, B. (2001) "Thing theory", *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1):1–22.
- Bullitt* (1968) Director: Peter Yates. Solar Productions.
- Burke, E. (1990[1757]) *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coole, D. & S. Frost (Eds.) (2010) *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392996>
- Durkheim, É. (1995[1912]) *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: Free Press.
- Eyerman, R. & O. Löfgren (1995) "Romancing the road: Road movies and images of mobility", *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1):53–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327695012001003>
- Finch, C. (2019) "Painting with words." [Review of Peter Schjeldahl's *Hot, cold, heavy, light: 100 art writings, 1988–2018*.] *The New York Times*, 2 June 2019.
- Gartman, D. (1994) "Harvey Earl and the Art and Color Section: The birth of styling at General Motors", *Design Issues* 10 (2):3–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511626>
- Geertz, C. (1975) "Common sense as a cultural system", *The Antioch Review* 33 (1):5–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4637616>
- Gibson, J.J. (1979) *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Greenland, F. (2016) "Color perception in sociology: Materiality and authenticity at the *Gods in color* show", *Sociological Theory* 34 (2):81–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07352751166648178>
- Gumbrecht, H.U. (2006) "Aesthetic experience in everyday worlds: Reclaiming an unredeemed utopian motif", *New Literary History* 37 (2):299–318. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2006.0035>
- Harman, G. (2018) *Object-oriented ontology: A new theory of everything*. London: Pelican books.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977[1807]) *The phenomenology of spirit*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Holt, D.B. (2004) *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hughes, R. (1980) *The shock of the new: The hundred-year history of modern art*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ingrassia, P. (2012) *Engines of change: A history of the American dream in fifteen cars*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kant, I. (1960[1764]) *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Knausgaard, K.O. (2019) *So much longing in so little space: The art of Edvard Munch*. New York: Penguin.

- Knoedelseder, W. (2018) *Fins: Harley Earl, the rise of General Motors, and the glory days of Detroit*. New York: Harper.
- Kopytoff, I. (1986) "The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process," 64–92 in A. Appaduri (Ed.) *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.004>
- Krebs, A. (1986) "Raymond Loewy, streamliner of cards, planes and pens, dies", *New York Times*, 15 July 1986.
- Lash, S. (2018) *Experience: New foundations for the human sciences*. London: Polity.
- Lash, S. & J. Urry (1994) *Economies of sign and space*. London: Sage.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963[1962]). *Totemism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Loewy, R. (1979) *Industrial design*. Woodstock: The Overlook Press.
- Marquis, A.G. (2006) *Art czar: The rise and fall of Clement Greenberg*. Boston: MFA Publications.
- McDonnell, T.E. (2010) "Cultural objects as objects: Materiality, urban space, and the interpretation of AIDS campaigns in Accra, Ghana", *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (6):1800–1852. <https://doi.org/10.1086/651577>
- Miller, D. (1987) *Material culture and mass consumerism*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Molotch, H. (2003) *Where stuff comes from: How toasters, toilets, cars, computers and many other things come to be as they are*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203011638>
- Pels, D., K. Hetherington & F. Vandenberghe (2002) "The status of the object", *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 (5–6):1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327602761899110>
- Pound, E. (1918) "A retrospect", 95–111 in E. Pound *Pavannes and divisions*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rosenberg, H. (1959) *The tradition of the new*. New York: Horizon Press.
- Ruskin, J. (1906[1843]) *Modern painters: Volume 1*. London: George Allen.
- Smith, R. (2008a) "Jaspers Johns shows his true color", *New York Times*, 8 February 2008.
- Smith, R. (2008b) "Seductive rebel who kept it real", *New York Times*, 29 February 2008.
- Sonnevend, J. (2012) "Iconic rituals: Towards a social theory of encountering images", 219–232 in J.C. Alexander, D. Bartmanski & B. Giesen (Eds.), *Iconic power: Materiality and meaning in social life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137012869_14
- Sonnevend, J. (2016) *Stories without borders: The Berlin Wall and the making of a global iconic event*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190604301.001.0001>
- Sonnevend, J. (2020) "A virus as an icon: The 2020 pandemic in images", *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 8 (3):451–461. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-020-00118-7>

- Steinbeck, J. (1945) *Cannery row*. New York: Viking.
- Taylor, J.C. (1975) "Foreword", 7 in *The designs of Raymond Loewy*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Weber, M. (1930[1904–1905]) *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Willis, P. (1978) *Profane culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Woodward, I. (2003) "Divergent narratives in the imagining of the home amongst middle-class consumers: Aesthetics, comfort and the symbolic boundaries of self and home", *Journal of Sociology* 39 (4):391–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004869003394005>
- Zubrzycki, G. (Ed.) (2017) *National matters: Materiality, culture, and nationalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Figures, artworks, and pictures

Figure 1–10: figures made by Vanessa Bittner; Figure 12: photo by Rogelio Bernal Andreo (2010), Wikimedia Commons; Figure 21: Wikimedia Commons, public domain; Figure 22: Tekniska Museet; Figure 23 and 25: photos by Greg Gjerdingen, Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons licence CC-BY-2.0; Figure 24: Wikimedia Commons, public domain; Figure 26: photo by Pi.1415926535, Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons licence CC-BY-3.0; Figure 27: photo by GPS 56, Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons licence CC-BY-2.0; Figure 28: photo by Christopher Ziemnowicz, Wikimedia Commons, public domain. All other images are public domain.

Author

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University. Developing, with students and colleagues, research programs in cultural trauma, social performance theory, and civil sphere theory (CST), he has recently co-organized such volumes as *The Nordic civil sphere* (2019), *The civil sphere in East Asia* (2019) and *Populism in the civil sphere* (2021). Building on work from a decade ago, he is currently developing a research program on iconicity. His most recent book is *What makes a social crisis?* (2019).