

EVERYDAY DESIGN PRODUCTS AS SOCIOCULTURAL ELEMENTS AGAINST CLASSISM

Epiphanies



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Abstract

This article proposes a solution to classism through the symbolic (and eventually physical) disappearance of certain everyday products that function as markers of social status. It argues that design is not only useless in many cases, but that its greatest current utility is to perpetuate social discrimination, surpassing even language. Using everyday examples, it attempts to demonstrate how objects unconsciously activate classism emotionally (Bourdieu). The central proposal of this document is, broadly speaking, the disappearance of marker objects: eliminating or neutralizing those products whose primary function is to signal class differences. As an alternative, it is suggested to create social markers: identical, affordable, unbranded, and widely used objects that prioritize functionality over status. Moderate (transforming symbolic meaning through cultural campaigns) and radical (physical elimination) positions are discussed, citing real-world examples. The research exercise posits that it is possible to reduce classism if society collectively prioritizes the disappearance or neutralization of certain objects that, beyond their functional value, have an excessive value in social status.

————— ICONEMA —————

Design, Uselessness, and Classism

In the years when many of us believed the COVID pandemic was the beginning of the end of the world, I resumed, to nurture my emotions, the routine of listening to music while walking; I also exponentially increased my procrastination on social media. In one of those sad moments, I glanced at a headline that read “Design is Useless.”

As an industrial designer by training, I was more interested in knowing if it was just a catchy phrase for scrolling addicts, or if there was an article that discussed why design can be useless. I was surprised to see that it was an interview with Philippe Starck, a designer who has achieved what every creative dreams of: “being rich in his lifetime by selling his creations.” Sadly, it was indeed a catchy phrase. What Philippe was trying to convey with that phrase was the idea that every object yet to be designed is based on a good pre-existing design, and that, in a way, the sad reality is that it's no longer truly necessary in the world of consumption. Its existence, then, lies in the whim of the creative mind and not in a real need demanded by society in general. Although interesting, his position was more an approximation of the banality of design than of actual uselessness, and although these are related sentiments, the uselessness of things has always been a topic of greater interest in my studies.

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I think that a significant portion of what has already been designed and what is yet to be designed is useless, a uselessness aligned with Francisca Viveros Barradas's philosophical concept: any social problem with which certain objects are involved is rarely diminished or solved by their mere existence; quite the contrary.

The Utility of Design

At the other extreme of this study, one of the most important uses of design is that it is an optimal means of achieving social discrimination. Perhaps only language is a more effective weapon than design for these purposes.

For example:

- A cheaper pencil than your classmates' in kindergarten.
- An elementary school child knows, in a way, that a pair of knock-off sneakers on their feet, in a row full of Nikes, Adidas, and Reeboks, determines their place in the group.
- Not having a good cell phone in high school.
- ...
- ...
- Not being able to afford dentures in old age. Sitting at a table with friends who could afford them.
- Being laid to rest in a humble coffin and having people at the wake talk about it.
- Resting in a Mac'Ma box and not a silver urn and having people talk about it.

With this simple exercise, a dialectical response should lead us to think that the maximum utility of design, on its own, in supporting the reduction of discrimination could be **DISAPPEARANCE**; the disappearance of the object used in the

discriminatory system could influence the reduction of the harm done by the system itself.



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Classism manifests itself at all socioeconomic levels; it is a war without borders, with shots fired upwards, downwards, and within all layers of society. This is due, among countless variables, to the fact that classism manifests itself comfortably within our daily cultural practices regardless of our place in society: how we are supposed to dress, how we are supposed to speak, what we are supposed to buy and where. It is a constant struggle between achievements that lead us to be included or excluded in a world where reality can be superseded by the perception of the group being evaluated. One only needs to review the studies of "green bubble discrimination"¹ in the United States to understand that perception is everything.

Bourdieu² (1984) helped us understand that the way we consume what we think we like is carried out in an "almost unconscious" act. One of the worst demons of classism is that not all of us who apply it are conscious of doing so (I include myself because the group of humans who have unconsciously exercised classism at some point in their lives is 100%). Almost without realizing it, people walk differently and feel differently when they wear a suit; in childhood, telltale rosy cheeks appear the day we arrive at school with new sneakers. The object is emotionally activated without permission, but the complexity lies in the fact that emotional activation does not distinguish whether the object is worth \$10 pesos or \$100,000. It goes beyond Piketty's³ (2014) explanation of perpetual economic gaps and their implications in society; discrimination occurs beyond the price of objects.



The research starts from the well-studied premise that things are not neutral (and neither are non-things, as the controversial philosopher Byung-Chul Han would say), their symbolic weight is an essential element within all models of discrimination, and that by analyzing their role, one can seriously consider the idea that their total disappearance (even if initially symbolic) is a viable path to reduction of the problem under study. A thorough investigation to scientifically substantiate this hypothesis will take time, but starting a conversation around the topic is never a bad start.

Classism and its historical structure in México

Classism in our territory cannot be studied without considering its historical legacies, the system of Purity of Blood,⁴ established by the Crown of Castile, arrived in America and mutated into the complex Caste System, a way of institutionalizing and giving legal basis to discrimination in the newly conquered society. This system was introduced with such force that, even after the territory's independence, the system for assigning value to people was not modified. The lineage of blood and skin color of the conqueror, their way of dressing, speaking, and thinking continued to be a measure of status in the new country.

The change was simply scalable; the Creole segregation model was suddenly revealed at its peak when they became native citizens of the new country, but with physical characteristics and a consumption pattern similar to that of the conqueror (their parents, their economic and political standing).

They saw miscegenation as a new threat to their status, especially in the mestizo who managed to acquire the same physical characteristics.

The solution was clear, and it has been used in all cultures of the world, including those conquered in America: limit or prohibit access to specific products and goods (Design as an ally in the continuation of segregation in a new nation).

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Today, in a world seething with so many social movements seeking greater equality, segregation through everyday objects is intrinsic and unalterable in our routines. Society disguises itself depending on the event it attends; dress codes may have different complexities than in the colonial era, but they are based on that past.

While not the most important aspect of this document, if we revisit the exercise of creating a dialectical response to the problem, we could achieve a first step: making all currently segregated products and goods fully affordable, to move on to the symbolic proposal in a second step: that all products and goods that currently segregate cease to exist.



Starting from scratch.

By delving deeper into the abstraction of physically eliminating an object as a solution to a social problem—in this case, reducing classism—another related and fascinating theme inevitably emerges: **Starting from scratch.**

This concept was delicately addressed in the 1970s by John Rawls⁵ in an experiment called The Veil of Ignorance. The premise was simple: the contestant had to design the laws and foundations of a new society from scratch under one golden rule: you had no way of knowing what your position would be in it; you know nothing, not your social class, not your gender, not your biological or cultural ancestry, not your level of health, nor your ethical or moral values, nothing, **zero.**

By having this “zero veil,” Rawls argued that the contestant would intuitively choose fair and equitable laws and foundations, with two paths that were most frequently repeated in the experiment:

1. The contestant would grant the greatest possible freedoms to all of society, protecting themselves in case they discovered that removing the veil would not be so favorable.
2. They would allow a breach of equity if it benefited the most disadvantaged part of society. The concept of starting from scratch erases to achieve improvement, in the same way that an artist repaints the canvas white; the ideas are clear, it simply requires a restart. Our postulate adds this path: that we would have the capacity to ignore our place in a society started from scratch.

The concept of starting from scratch erases the past to achieve improvement, much like an artist repaints a canvas white; the ideas are clear, it simply requires a fresh start. Our premise is further supported by this approach, which suggests we have the capacity to disregard our place in a society that has begun anew.



Within the complexity of proposing a symbolic or philosophical solution, it is concluded that it will always be easier to eliminate one or more elements than to modify the society in which those elements are found from its foundations or start from scratch.

Solutions

New Everyday Objects as Social Markers

Two centuries ago, Thorstein Veblen⁶ (1899) spoke of how we, as users, access material goods not necessarily for their utility but as a vehicle for communicating status differences between the object's possessor and others. Objects are analog and digital markers (phosphorescent in color), signaling achievements in CAPITAL LETTERS; they are gold, silver, and bronze medals around our necks. And these markers are cumulative. 87 years after Veblen, Arjun Appadurai⁷ would revive the argument that objects have their own social life; they are valued more for their meanings to society than for how efficiently or necessarily they solve a problem.

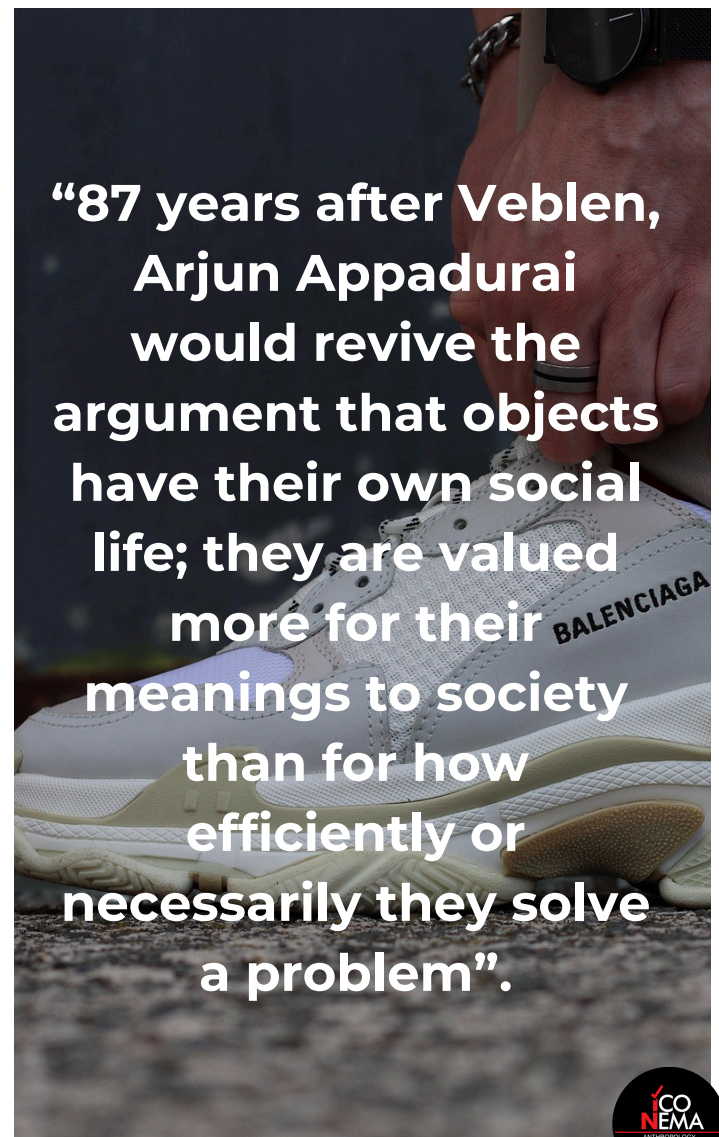
→ If an entity (person, brand, medium) with sufficient social persuasion power could introduce into the formula of social markers an object that evoked a widespread sense of belonging and marked the entirety of society, and this new object were affordable and available to everyone, it could be antagonistically evaluated as an erasure, a process of de-marking.

Like the vaccination mark on our arms, most of us have it and forget about it, it fades.

a) A social de-marker could belong to or be manufactured by different brands, as long as it was identical, had the same price, and did not contain the manufacturer's brand in its design. If the object costs the same, the price must be within the affordable range of its society.

b) If we all have the same object, its functionality regains priority, and the language of arrogance, envy, and status that previously took precedence over its use itself vanishes.

c) If the demarker manages to interact with and neutralize other lines of discrimination, such as gender, skin color, ethnicity, the erasure is more complete.



Closing Discussion

Three main categories of objects that reinforce classism in the national context were identified, and which, due to the way they operate in society, are the most important to challenge.

1. **Visible Consumption Objects:** National and global products with high social penetration and/or high-end status. These are all those whose function/utility cannot be separated from the brand and its commercial symbols.

- Could you sell a pair of Nike sneakers at the Nike price if you removed everything that links them to the brand?

2. **Restricted Access Objects:** These are one of the groups of greatest interest in research. They are secondary products that are usually found between the main object and the user, such as high-end memberships to a bank or social club, university badges, and badges of exclusive private groups. Reserved spaces within specific facilities (airport waiting areas). These are all the elements that contribute to a hierarchical structure of exclusion, designed to make it easier for individuals marked by these objects to climb the social ladder, and for observers to be aware of this.

3. **Local symbolic objects (not included in the current study):** The way we speak, the accent we use, our overall physical appearance, and our general physical and emotional demeanor.

- How can we ensure that our accent in an interview is not a marker of acceptance or rejection?
- How can we ensure that, in a global and hyperconnected world, skin color or physical build are less significant markers?





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If this postulate is adopted by a moderate wing within the movement that embraces it, the conclusion is reached that the symbolic disappearance of "marker" objects cannot truly imply their physical elimination, and that efforts should focus on simply transforming their meaning within the society in which they interact. The symbolic disappearance would likely operate through cultural campaigns that help recover the importance of an object's functionality beyond the brand that manufactures it.

However, when the idea is considered by more radical groups, within the chaos that an extreme movement can entail (always separated by a tiny membrane between radical intellectual struggle and the authoritarianism of a fascist movement), the consensus is that most of the proposals or movements that have sought to solve the problem of blind consumerism, the banner of disposability, instant gratification, and fleeting consumption,⁸ and which have remained only theoretical, fail or are never implemented.

We must find a balance between both paths. For example, if we could transform the symbolic message through the same hegemonic companies within the consumer sector, it's possible to generate changes in social perception. The next enemy to overcome would be the utopia of total affordability within the consumption of basic necessities in society.

Is it possible?

Yes, and the example I'm sharing comes from one of the companies I criticize most as a designer: the Apple MacBook Neo,

priced at \$12,900 MXN, recently released in 2026. Beyond the fact that it's a marketing ploy and belongs to a huge catalog from a company that embodies all the problems mentioned in this piece, Apple has demonstrated its ability to manufacture a mid-range computer at an affordable price.

While it's not their primary goal, the company with the largest market capitalization in history has a product that generates profits, and at the same time, for the first time in decades, has set a realistic price for the product in proportion to its social utility—a price below what its reputation would otherwise justify. The next step, if it were part of our experiment, would be to stop using their brand on the product and see if consumption remains unchanged; however, we still need to gather some historical data.

Mantra: Yes, it is possible.



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Yes, it is possible.

I would like to close this article by sharing one last example: the social group of military personnel, solely from the perspective of their uniform and work equipment.

When a soldier is quartered, they temporarily part with their personal belongings, which may bear various markers we have discussed. They are then issued a uniform kit and work equipment. Although these new items are of various brands, all soldiers of the same rank have the same items; there is no distinction within the group. Rank does not imply economic status, but rather temporality and achievements within the studied social group. And although it operates within very specific physical limits, the markers of external objects are effectively suspended. One could say that the postulate within this group would pass the feasibility test of the symbolic disappearance of personal objects through temporary substitution.

It is a small social experiment that achieves a good result in real-world situations, with an observable timeframe; it was not necessary to use a punitive process or prohibition of objects to achieve it. But it has shown that, currently, in controlled experiments, the postulate is viable.

Ultimately, classism is a deep-seated phenomenon with countless countermeasures; it requires collaborative projects, working simultaneously and with multidimensional solutions. It can only be achieved in the long term through social collective action, and if anything is required, it is the will to begin, to move from theory to practice in order to see the results firsthand.

References

1 en Estados Unidos existe una marcada estigmatización social entre jóvenes hacia quienes no usan iPhone, fenómeno conocido como "discriminación de la burbuja verde", más allá de que existan celulares Android del mismo costo y nivel tecnológico.

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