

# The Functions of Things

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The following paper deals with the problem of the functions of things in a traditional culture. Based on material on the Eastern Slavs, particularly Russians, it considers a life “scenario” of things by introducing a concept of semiotic status of things. It will be shown that the status is dependent on a context of functioning. Particular attention has been given to informational aspects of things and their functions in ritual context. A distinction is made between the capacity of things to symbolise “one’s own” and “alien” concepts, to function as mediators between these two worlds and, on the contrary, to block the communication channel between them.

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## The “Birth” of Things

Fundamental peculiarities of the functioning of things in an archaic culture reveal themselves already in the process of their manufacture. Ample evidence, particularly myths of craft origins, points to the fact that, in creating a thing, man in a certain sense repeated those operations that in the Beginning could be performed only by the Creator or Creators of the Universe. Thus, man continued the demiurge-initiated task of world creation, having assumed the challenges of not only replacing natural losses but also further filling-in and embodying the world. In this way the process of creating things entered a cosmological scheme. It is no surprise that the technology of manufacturing things referred to the sphere of sacred knowledge. Specific attributes, faculties and knowledge were ascribed to the specialists (smiths, potters, builders, etc.) in almost all cultures, serving as a basis for their segregation (cf. distinctive castes of craftsmen in Ancient Orient). Among those specific traits one surprisingly stable aspect has engaged our attention: the power and might of the specialists were seen by the rest of the society as falling outside the scope of the craft. Due to their knowledge, they gained the ability of communi-

cating with those powers which might affect people’s destiny. We could say that they were attributed with proficiency in a language difficult for others.

Apart from this, the specialists were not only proficient in the specific language, but also controlled the communication channel between the world of man and the world of nature, acting as peculiar mediators. Phenomena related to the outer world are likely to have had, for bearers of an archaic and traditional society, a status other than that which it would have for us today. Whereas we are used to treating them as phenomena and not objects, for an archaic man, rather, they are subjects. The case in point is radically different types of attitude of man toward the world around him. In the first case, the “Me–It” scheme is realised, and the “Me–You” scheme in the other. The attitude of the first type correlates with scientific cognition. The second type of attitude emerges when man can understand another living creature (Frankfort et al. 1967: 5; cf. Averintsev 1977: 40). Strictly speaking, in the latter case there is no generalised relation with the other, no less living creatures than man himself. Such an understanding of the nature of relationships between man and the environment does not necessarily mean a return to the “animistic”

and “personalistic” concepts of different sorts. For the man oriented toward a traditional world perception, an “animated” world does not exist, since there cannot be an “inanimate” one in principle (Frankfort et al. 1967: 6). The situation in which the outer world is full of living creatures of another, non-human nature, suggests an understanding, provided there is a dialogue. A constant and extremely emotional dialogue between man and the natural environment presents another trait of traditional culture. This is especially profound in different strategies of the exploration of the outer world. While modern technological thought and production aim at the conquest of the outer world, a tendency was inherent in traditional (and more so, in archaic) culture to collaborate with it, and to adopt its “responses” with the aim of achieving mutually beneficial results (Toporov 1983: 230). This “partnership”, the perception of an inseparable connection, the striving to act in unison with and not counter to nature were seen as a pledge of success in every activity.

This attitude toward the natural environment determined peculiarities of the procedure of selecting materials for the manufacture of things. Notions of the categories of the “suitable” and “useful” were quite different from ours. To be suitable a material should meet not only physical but also symbolic requirements (cf. “... the reasons why different societies choose to utilize or reject certain natural products and, if they do utilize them, the modes of employment they choose depend not only upon the intrinsic properties of the products but also on the symbolic values ascribed to them.” Lévi-Strauss 1972: 95). To some degree, it is necessary that a material should fit in a universal classification of surrounding phenomena which correlates with such concepts as life, happiness, purity, etc. D.G. Redder (*Kultura* 1976: 247) states that

“in the manner of concepts of high merits of man situated in the centre of the Universe created by God or Gods especially for him, the classification of plants, animals and minerals was made. Good or evil done to the people were recognised as the main characteristic. Certainly, these indicators were frequently of an unreal, magical character. Malachite, for instance, was con-

sidered a sacred stone because it has a colour of life (green), and quartz, with its colour reminiscent of a desert, used to be declared profane and rejected.”

From this standpoint it is extremely significant that, for example, the reasons why the Bronze Age came earlier than the Iron Age were of not a technical (bronze is more difficult to cast than iron) but of valuational character: bronze is likely to have been widespread in the ritual sphere (Ivanov 1983: 89–90). Numerous examples can be offered of non-use, for practical purposes, of plants, minerals, wood, animal species, etc. simply on the grounds that they were correlated with a negative paradigm of meanings. At the same time, an “individual” approach to the choice of the material for the prospective thing turned out to be essential, in which process the foreground was taken by extra-utilitarian considerations, for each phenomenon had its own particular features as dictated, for example, by a place, coloration, condition and the like. (Cf. “If a larch-tree or a pine tree or an aspen grows up on an ant-hill, [they] make a trough out of it in which livestock are fed: a good offspring may happen. If the tree is too short to make a trough from – [they] break off its branch and stick it in the yard – for good offspring.” Vinogradov 1918: 19–20)

Surprisingly detailed classifications of plants and animals in different archaic cultures are well known. Properly speaking, such classifications present one of the results of that dialogue between man and nature mentioned above. It is their characteristics (hierarchical nature, volume, etc.) that allow them to be considered as specific developments of the initial classification which was designated by the myth and ritual of creation. In this connection, we cannot but cite a remark by C. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 9) that all those animals and plants are known to early man not because they are useful. On the contrary, many of these are considered useful due primarily to their already being known, integrated into a unified, global classified complex which helps man orient himself within the environment (Toporov 1982: 29–30). Basic materials for necessities (metals, clay, wood, wool, etc.) possessed a special status: it was these

that served as the initial resources for the creation of the world and man himself (cf. Caucasian myths of forging man and the world; making man of clay in the mythologies of Ancient Egypt, the Dogons of Western Sudan, and in Chinese myths; the construction of the world by divine carpenters in Rigveda; the creation of the world by the “weaver”, Neit, of Egyptian myths, etc.). The principal participants in the technological process – man (who assumed the functions of God) and the elements (fire, water and air) – duplicate in fact the participants of the cosmological act of creating, causing the world to emerge.

The rules governing the creation of the world formed the basis for primitive technology. The principal schemes of world creation and material production are one and the same: 1) the introduction of space and time indicators: light and darkness, day and night, top and bottom, skies and earth (cf. compulsory space and time limitations in manufacturing things); 2) the selection of material; 3) the transformation of the material with the help of natural agents (water, fire, air); 4) the “animation” of the created. We shall dwell on the latter two.

Scholars of ancient industries (forging, pottery, plaiting, weaving, building, etc.) tend to notice repeatedly the “excessiveness” of the technological processes, i.e. the presence of a multitude of operations that, from the modern point of view, had no impact on the final outcome. Besides, the technical methods themselves had not only technical significance (cf. as an example, taboos on sewing, spinning, scutching flax and warping during the wake: “You will sew grandfathers’ eyes”, “You will block up the eyes of forefathers”, etc.).

These operations derived a name of the “rites accompanying...”, for instance, the manufacture of pottery. Not infrequently they were simply ignored as non-obligatory supplements to rational processes. Nevertheless, there are grounds to argue that it is the ritual that gave birth to technology rather than having served as a mere “accompaniment” to it, a wholly useful object resulting from a ritual was thought of as a sequel of the validity of the initial scheme, as a substantiation of its fruitfulness. In other words, the correlation between practi-

cal and symbolic aspects of material production was just opposite. Practical suitability of things was determined, among others, by the correspondence of two rituals – creation of the world and manufacture of things.

The point of what preconditioned the choice of the form of things – either their functional purpose or a mythological concept – has not been finally established. It is clear that the form of a thing always corresponded to one of the phenomenal forms known to man from his natural environment. And this correspondence was far from being arbitrary. By giving things, for example, forms of animals, man thus endowed those things with properties and outlines of the animals. The same effect was also achieved through the ornamentation, effigies – all that we refer to as decorative design. In any case, properties of things, including practical ones, are directly dependent on *what* is depicted on them or *what* they depict themselves. That is the reason why the design of things made no allowance for imagination. It was profoundly pragmatic and not facultative as in modern culture. “For an artist of modern differentiated society there are no limitations in choosing motifs for decorating a thing; they can be drawn from cultures of all times and all peoples. The surface of a thing is regarded as freed of any semantic connotation, it is similar to a canvas stretched on a sub-frame. For primitive and traditional craftsmen the “decor” of a thing and the very thing, as well as its purpose, were linked together in a special way. One of the goals of decorating things is to give them a special strength. According to M.-P. Fousche, an Australian boomerang was believed to be capable of hitting the target only if ornamented (Antonova 1984: 49). This notion was widely spread: for example, in the Russian North spinning wheels otherwise ready for use were not used or considered suitable until they were decorated. More precisely, it has to do not with the decorating of things in a common sense, but with endowing them with necessary (as well as practical) properties, with their animating. Only in this event does a thing start to function both as a useful item and as a wholly living phenomenon with strictly individual properties. “Things are endowed with the same property as the

humans or natural phenomena – “character”. What the function of a thing is for us, is the manifestation of the thing’s own, inherent features for a man thinking mythologically” (Antonova 1984: 30).

A newly made thing has to pass a test of a sort. It should be noted, that the category of “new” occupied a special place within the system of hierarchical concepts. The ritual value of new things was considerably high. They were incorporated into the structure of many rituals (cf. the role of fresh flour in calendar rites; of new linen in family ones, etc.). As is known, there were specific rituals of making things which were used only when new and exclusively for symbolic purposes (the so called everyday things). At the same time, new things were handled prudently. This can be explained by several reasons. Firstly, until they are put in extensive use (both practically and ritually), new things are to a greater extent part of the sphere of the alien (unexplored) and not the human. Secondly, it is unknown to what extent a newly made thing corresponds with the sacred prototype (not only by appearance but also by inner properties). The procedure and character of the test of new items as exemplified by dwellings are considered elsewhere (Baiburin 1983). It would be appropriate to note one circumstance here: if unsatisfactory practical properties were found, a man would not have been inclined to see the reason for this in the quality of the material or the technical aspect. For him it meant only that the ritual of creating the thing did not correspond with the protoritual. The discrepancy was seen first of all in symbolic operations, since it is they that determine practical properties, and not vice versa. Such things with a defective set of properties were not introduced into the world of man. Moreover, they became the focus of powers hostile to man (cf. notions associated with new but abandoned houses).

A satisfactory outcome indicated the emergence of a new thing with the structure of functions we are not accustomed to. Such a thing, apart from practical significance, had a wide spectrum of symbolic functions and presented a model of the world, being probably perceived as a living being with its specific

features. That is why the words of E.V. Antonova (1984: 30) seem to be correct: “...from the standpoint of mythological thinking a man-made thing is identical to all the rest of things in the world. It came to the world in the way identical to the one which had led to the emergence of the earth, heavenly bodies, animals and man. Like other things, it was endowed with properties of a living creature. The thing seems to be inseparable from the world, it represents the world itself and not its reflection”. After this brief description of the principal scheme of the “birth” of things we shall proceed to examining the “life” of things and the specifics of their functioning in an archaic society.

### “Thing-ness” and “Symbol-ness”

The above discussion of specific features of ancient technology has a direct relationship to the problem of the functioning of things. The integrity of an archaic culture, coupled with the absence of specialised tools to ensure the circulation of information within a society, was responsible for each element of culture being used far more completely, accurately and extensively than in modern society.

The cultural significance and value of an archaic and traditional thing were essentially higher than those of a modern one. Apart from universal practical requirements set up for things in all times, they had to meet extra-utilitarian needs as well. In other words, things were “set in motion” in a practical respect and were used extensively in a game of meaning along with other elements of culture, which, like things, were used not only for their “immediate purpose” but also as signs of social relations. There is a lack here of the specialisation of sign systems, the division into the world of symbols and the world of things which is so typical of contemporary society. Here things are always symbols, just as symbols are things.

As semiotic tools, not only language, myth and ritual are used, but also the utensils, economic and social institutions, kinship systems, dwellings, food, clothing etc. All these cultural symbols share a united and common structure of meanings, due to which fact chains of various

correspondences are possible, for example: utensil – landscape element – bodily part – unit of social structure – time of year, etc. Such a surprising unity of substantially different phenomena in the archaic perception of the world made it possible for scholars to claim the idea that an archaic culture represents an integrated semiotic system, with each of its elements correlated with all other elements, and all of them “participating in a common all-inclusive metaphor” (Segal 1986: 39).

The unity of the symbolic and practical which is inherent in all man-made or man-used things, and their principal ambivalence, have given rise to the formulation of the notion of the semiotic status of things which is necessary, in our opinion, for a more adequate description of the functioning of things in cultures of various types (Baiburin 1981: 215–226). The fact is that the widespread scholarly division of phenomena of reality into the world of facts and the world of symbols (Lotman 1970: 14) is rather conventional, as there are always intermediate objects. To those elements of “material culture” relate. When entering into a semiotic system (for instance, into a ritual), they function as symbols, when falling out – as things.

In other words, such phenomena may potentially be used both as things and symbols. Depending on what properties are actualised (“thing-ness” or “symbol-ness”), they gain one or another semiotic status, i.e. occupy a certain position on the scale of the semioticity of phenomena, artificially introduced by man. Thus, the semiotic status of things reflects a concrete correlation between the “symbolicness” and “thingness” and correspondingly between the symbolic and utilitarian functions. Its value is in direct proportion to “symbolicness” and in inverse proportion to “thingness”. For the things comprising the material world of man it ranges widely, from minimally expressed symbolic features, when semiotic status tends to zero, to symbols-things proper with a maximum semiotic status. To give a simple example, the well-known element of the Russian oven, the shutter screen was used in two ways – for its immediate purpose and for a ritual purpose (cf. for instance, role of the shutter in the maternity, marriage and burial rituals; in the ritualised

situation of searching for lost livestock and the like, where it symbolises an entrance to the afterworld with all the variety of meanings pertaining to this image). In the first case, this object functions as a thing and has minimum semiotic status; in the second case, the same object is a symbol, that is, has the highest semiotic status.

Man is constantly involved with the determining of the semiotic status of surrounding things. This is particularly evident in common views on how significant and prestigious one thing or another is, that is, how capable it is of symbolising something more important than the thing itself. As any classifying activity of a universal character, the process of determining a semiotic status is automatic and occurs, as a rule, at a subconscious level. As an instance of the perception of the semiotic non-equivalence of things, we can consider the still employed scheme of distributing objectivised elements of culture between the spheres of so called “material” and “spiritual” culture. The fact that some things are included in the sphere of “material culture” while others (no less material) are in the sphere of “spiritual culture” testifies primarily that a different semiotic status is attributed to each of them. Obviously, the things related to the sphere of “material culture” are regarded as having a low semiotic status, when the objects included in “spiritual culture” are endowed with a high semiotic status. From this point of view, “material culture” can be understood as a zone of reduced semioticity, and “spiritual culture” as that of elevated semioticity. But it should be noted that in this case an average, “normative” semiotic status is determined, built up with estimates of our experience in operating such things. It is demonstrative that each time the “material – spiritual culture” dichotomy is used, a number of objects are found that fall in neither of the spheres. An essentially similar situation can also be observed when more differentiated morphologies of culture are employed

Based on the concepts of an “average” semiotic status, the entire world of things might be placed on a scale of semioticity through conventionally marking three zones on it and classifying all objects into three unequal groups.

The upper part of the scale would be occupied by things with a constantly high semiotic status. Those may comprise, for example, masks, amulets, personal decorations, etc. In fact, these are not “things” but symbols, for their “thingness”, and utility tend to zero (in any case, from the modern point of view), while “symbolicness” is most profound. Such things are usually indisputably related to “spiritual” culture.

In the lower part of the semioticity scale there would be objects with a constantly low semiotic status, i.e. things devoid of “symbolicness”. This group of things can be mentioned only as applied to contemporary culture, since, based on the above specific features, the functioning of such things at earlier stages of culture is unlikely, although it is this group of things that should have comprised a sphere of material culture.

Between these two extremes of semioticity the whole scale would be occupied by the main group of things which can be used both as things and symbols (cf. for instance, symbolic functions of clothing, dwelling, utensils, food, etc.). Strictly speaking, it is only with regard to this group of things that there is any point in applying the concepts of semiotic status and scale of semioticity. Only they are things of full value. The objects conventionally referred to in the upper and lower groups are not things (i.e. do not possess the necessary integrity of symbolicness and thingness), or we have insufficient evidence to speak of their actual functioning. Therefore, it would be more correct to speak not of the three groups of things with “normatively” high, average or low semiotic status, but of which status a certain thing has in a certain context; for the same thing in another context may have a completely different degree of semioticity. This constant changing of a thing's status, and the very possibility of its use for maintaining both biological and social being, are seen as the fundamental feature of the functioning of things in the early stages of human history.

The assessment of the semiotic status of things depends considerably on the position of a scholar who may be far removed from the real picture of the functioning of things in time, space and cultural context. At the same time,

the semiotic status of one and the same thing can change significantly in time, differ for different ethnic formations and vary depending on the situation.

When considering diachronic aspects of the functioning of things an account must be taken of the following circumstance. Since the time of Taylor, Frazer and Durkheim, a contemporary scholar of the archaic world's perception begins by strictly opposing the practical and the symbolic in various ways: rational – irrational, functional – aesthetic, utilitarian – extra-utilitarian, etc. In fact, all our attempts to classify phenomena as rational and irrational are governed by a primitive scheme, whereby there are two opposite types of activity, with regard to both purposes and results. One of those produces practical effects, i.e. is aimed at satisfying the material needs of man.

The other type of activity is oriented toward extra-utilitarian (irrational) values of a symbolic nature. This activity is usually considered not only as secondary, additional to the first one, but also as non-obligatory or facultative. Such a viewpoint has become established so firmly that neither the correctness of spreading this opposition over archaic forms of culture nor even the “genuineness” of mere pragmatics are doubted. But has this division made sense at all times? Is what we now call the symbolic, extra-utilitarian and even irrational really so non-obligatory?

This paradox is known to many historians of culture. Its essence is that the most economically primitive tribes had a very complicated social organisation and an extremely developed system of rites, beliefs and myths. The strenuous efforts of those tribes were aimed, strange as it may seem, at increasing material stability and not at the extra-utilitarian sphere; they attempted to follow closely all the rites and prescriptions which were seen as a token of the collective's well-being and the essence of its existence. Why is it so? Any society fights to survive. To explain this, as is accepted among scholars of religion, by a distorted perception of the world or by a fatal delusion, would make sense only if the picture given pertained to an individual society. But since such an attitude to material production was inherent in almost

any primitive society, it is hardly appropriate to speak of an accidental delusion. In this connection it is possible also to refer to a long-noted peculiarity of human culture. In the course of its history humankind detached the best people for the non-practical, extra-utilitarian activity (Lotman 1970: 3–4). And if it is so, “it is hard to assume that it lacked an organic necessity, that humankind would systematically give up the vitally necessary for the facultative. It may be assumed that while for the biological existence of an individual man it would suffice to satisfy certain natural needs, the life of a collective, as such, is impossible without a culture. For any collective, culture is not a facultative addition to a minimum of life conditions but rather an indispensable situation without which its being is impossible” (Lotman 1970: 4).

In fact, the existence of the second, social, or symbolic pragmatics is the point. When in the “practical – symbolic” scheme we are based on the presence of one sort of needs – “utilitarian”, then, in the connection with the above ideas, needs equally important for a man’s social life can be of two types – utilitarian and symbolic. The main difference between them is that the former necessitate an immediate satisfaction and cannot be amassed while the latter reveal a capacity for accumulation.

“They represent an objective foundation for an organism to retrieve extra-genetic information. As a result, two types of attitude of the organism toward introduced alien structures emerge: the first ones transform themselves immediately or relatively quickly into the structure of the organism itself; others are stored with their own structure preserved or somewhat curtailed. Whether we deal with a material accumulation of objects or with a memory in its short or long-term, personal or collective forms, in fact, we face one and the same process which can be defined as a process of increase of information” (Lotman 1970: 5).

So, it can be stated quite safely that there are two sorts of pragmatics: utilitarian and symbolic. It is important to stress once again that the two pragmatics are vitally important when we speak of the social aspect of human activity, and

in this sense symbolic pragmatics are as “practical” as “utilitarian”.

The recognition that symbolic pragmatics are vitally important is the first step toward a revision of established schemes of interpreting an archaic culture. Strictly speaking, this statement is of a universal nature, since it can be applied to any social formation, both archaic and modern. Differences, and rather profound ones, lie in the sphere of predominant orientation toward this or that type of pragmatics, in methods of organising the utilitarian and symbolic activities, and in the nature of their correlation.

The overturning in world perception (transition from cosmology to history) whose characteristics are becoming clearer now, is likely to have been associated quite closely with the re-orientation of man and the collective towards the other type of pragmatics. The “straightening” of time and the perception of its irreversibility was accompanied by a global restructuring of cosmological principles. The foreground of life worthy of being described, is taken by man with his needs, concerns and everyday deeds. While in the cosmological age the purpose and sense of life were seen in a ritual and routine existence that filled in intervals between rituals, the historical world perception, along with the seeds of scientific vision, was oriented primarily not toward symbolic but practical values. Of course, this is not to say that one type of pragmatics was replaced by the other. They have co-existed for ever. We can speak only about prevailing tendencies and appraisals. Whereas for primitive man utilitarian pragmatics were just a required condition for performing paramount, sacred objectives, modern man is inclined to go too far in the direction by regarding symbolic activity simply as an appendix to the main economic one.

The extreme rationalism of a modern, primarily scientific perception of the world, has trained us to a firm belief not only that symbolic activity is secondary, but also that the clear division between the utilitarian and symbolic aspects was always there. However, this is not true even with regard to contemporary culture. As was stated above, many things of utilitarian purpose have also additional (aesthetic, pres-

tigious) significance. It is incorrect to speak about a dichotomy of the utilitarian and symbolic with regard to phenomena of archaic culture, especially when we use oppositions such as "rational – irrational".

Where are the criteria for distinguishing between the rational and irrational? By granting such a division, we start from establishments of our own culture. But it is known that the internal and external viewpoints on rationality may differ. What is seen as rational from the point of view of one culture may be regarded as irrational from that of another. Those scholars are definitely correct who think that every society considers the main manifestations of its social life as rational (Chernykh 1982: 10). In other words, such a division is always subjective. But the matter is, whether it is at all possible to operate such oppositions in regard to an archaic culture? Even if yes, this inevitably leads to a negative answer. The same can be said with regard to other antinomies with which we are used to describing not only our own world but also the world of primitive man (Frankfort et al. 1967: 13). Turning back to pragmatic orientations at early stages of culture, it should be noted that the correlation of "thingness" and "symbolicness" does not suggest the posing of the question of "what is initial and what secondary" due to the fact that these two properties are complimentary (as left-right, top-bottom, etc.). This circumstance requires a prudent treatment of the hypotheses in accordance with which the origins of things are connected exclusively with practical or exclusively with symbolic needs of man. The thing becomes a fact of culture only when it meets both practical and symbolic requirements. In this connection, for instance, an idea of A. Leroi-Gourhan (1965: 139) seems to be absolutely correct, that only when a dwelling is ascribed a symbolic meaning can one speak of it as a specifically human form of exploring the environment (as opposed to the "perimeter of safety" which exists among animals).

The segregation of different types of human activities from the syncretic system, and their specialisation, were accompanied by a decrease in the role of sacred beliefs and correspondingly by an increase in the relative significance of the productive and instrumental aspects of these

activities followed by significant changes in the structure of semiotic systems used by a society. The boundary between semiotic and non-semiotic phenomena becomes clearer. The semioticity of things in contemporary culture has decreased sharply, and for many of these things it is no longer an obligatory property.

Let us attempt to consider more closely an informative aspect of the functions of things. In his pioneer study on functions of folk costume, P.G. Bogatyrev showed authoritatively that any thing in "folk" everyday life has a whole spectrum of functions: practical, social, aesthetic, magical, regional identity and several others (Bogatyrev 1971: 297). Depending on the situation, these functions fall into one order or another: some of them increase, while others remain in the background. For example, in daily life practical function dominates, followed by (for folk clothing) the social, aesthetic, and regional identity functions. Another hierarchy of the functions is typical of a festive occasion: the festive, aesthetic, ceremonial, national and regional identity, social and, finally, practical, certain elements of a festive garment lacking any practical significance. In other words, depending on the situation the whole structure of functions changes to cause a qualitative shift in the functioning and perception of things: having remained the same, it nevertheless becomes different. This effect of "differentness" of things was labelled by P.G. Bogatyrev as a "structure of functions", which "cannot be deduced from all other functions that make up the structure in general" (Bogatyrev 1971: 357). In his defining of this function and in pointing out its proximity to the functions of national in regional identity (our people, our social group, our dress), P.G. Bogatyrev was close to an acute but still unexplored problem of ethnic symbols, ethnicity and ethnographicity.

It is fundamental for the structure of functions to distinguish between the energetic (practical function according to P.G. Bogatyrev) and the communicative aspects. It is a result of the segregation of the communicative aspect of things that gives the entire collection of functions, apart from the practical which is the only one to represent an integral and further undivided energetic aspect.



The energetic and communicative aspects of things correspond with the notions of “thingness” and “symbolicness” which we have used in describing semiotic status. With regard to the structure of functions proposed by P.G. Bogatyrev, the semiotic status of a thing is directly dependent on the place it occupies according to the practical function. To describe, in turn, the informative characteristics of things it seems useful to conditionally distinguish between two forms of their functioning – everyday and ritual. In the first case, a thing functions as a text, and in the latter as a symbol. What does this mean?

## The Thing as a Text

Properly speaking, it is this aspect that was described by P.G. Bogatyrev in terms of function. When we speak of a thing as a text, we mean all the information which is communicated by things; more specifically, that which can be “retrieved” from the things themselves in a usual situation, for instance, by an archaeologist or a museum curator. What sort of information could we obtain?

Firstly, information on what class of things (utensils, decorations, etc.) this thing can be related to. Thus, the functional purpose of the thing can be determined approximately.

Secondly, information on what makes it different from the rest of things in the class, i.e. its individual features and purpose. The latter is of special significance in those cases in which the thing with known practical purpose happens to be found in a context which makes us suppose that the thing might have been used for other purposes (for instance, tools in burials).

Thirdly, if the given thing is comparable to many other things of the class by its formal traits, the technique and especially decoration used, we can make an assumption of its belonging to an ethnic group, archaeological culture or style. When a thing is purposely made and used as a sign of one’s culture (ethnicity, ethnic group, etc.), its functional aspect becomes narrower and its semiotic status becomes higher.

Fourthly, one can speak not only of a historical dating of things but, no less important, of its relation to historically different models of cul-

ture, when possible. The life of things and their semiotic destiny have never been the subject of investigation. If we try to imagine a synchronous section of the object level of culture, we shall have a colourful picture of things. Some are already extinct and are not used for their immediate purpose. Still others may be used as a “memory” for prestigious, ritual and other purposes. A third group may function actively, while the rest are only in the beginning of their unpredictable life. In general, old things have a paradoxical destiny – they are either destroyed or gain the highest semiotic status to be used exclusively for symbolic purposes. New things have not occupied a place (and possibly will never do so, which is also very significant) in the culture. The historical value of all these things, as well as the volume of their historical and cultural memory, differ considerably, and the more precise our knowledge of this aspect of the life of things, the more informative the things are, for they represent the most reliable channel which connects us with the past.

Fifthly, a thing can tell not only of its maker (and, correspondingly, of the level of technological development and methods) but also of its owner, his/her preferences, tendencies and orientations. In these terms, the most demonstrative element is clothing. By it we can judge the gender, age and social status of the owner. But these features are demonstrated by any dress. Its informational capacity increases sharply only when clothing points to the listed universal (and therefore uninformative) indices of any society and also to secondary features of social organisation (for instance, a costume of a herder, a smith and other sub-cultural associations; it is these features that are typical of the Moravian costume described by P.G. Bogatyrev). It should be kept in mind that many things, especially at later stages of cultural development, may be used as signs of prestige and not for their immediate purposes. In such cases the usefulness of a thing and its practical purpose shift to the background or are not taken into account at all.

Finally, there is a specific class of things whose value is intrinsic, in their existence. They include paintings, works of folk art, architecture, jewellery, etc. Contrary to other things,

their value but grows over time. Becoming older, they grow in significance. Things valuable in themselves represent a rare type of signs – they denote themselves and not something external. Even if they were supposed to function as symbols, they are not so in reality, for they “refer” to themselves. Their significance is “much broader than the thing itself and it bears an infinite character; simultaneously, this significance is oriented toward the very thing and only toward it” (Segal 1986: 41).

## The Thing as a Symbol

In considering a thing as a symbol, we “read” the upper surface layer of information. The innermost significance of things reveals itself in the ritual and ritualised situation. This significance does not come from the things themselves. It can be detected only by turning to the sources external to things.

If a thing functions or may function in everyday life as a text, then in a ritual it also may be used as a *symbol*. It should also be kept in mind that in a traditional society everyday life is ritualised to a considerable extent and has a system of connotations in common with a ritual. That is why the everyday use of things implies their being used for utilitarian purposes.

All the information which may be obtained from the everyday state of things, takes the background in the ritual and ritualised situations. In a ritual, the semiotic status of things increases profoundly. This effect takes place due to the fact that in a ritual all customary characteristics of things change, and so do their *pragmatics*, *semantics* and *syntactics*.

What is the purpose of things-symbols in a ritual? Before answering this question, we should say a few words about the general tendency of ritual. As noted above, the type of culture for which a ritual is the main tool of regulating behaviour of man and a collective, can be characterised by its integrity and unity. This means that any phenomenon within any one sphere causes changes in other spheres. For such a culture the division of the world into one's own, explored sphere and the alien, or unexplored, is fundamental, the latter being a concentration of powers beyond the control of

common means (gods, ancestors, etc.). Any violation of the order is followed by a change in relationship between these two worlds, as well as the existing *status quo*. The lost harmony can be re-established with the help of a corresponding ritual. From this standpoint, the ritual is a particular mechanism of balancing. In order to achieve the desired equilibrium, a contact is established in the ritual between one's own sphere and the alien, since the violation is more often regarded as a consequence of the destructive powers of the “alien” sphere. In other words, the ritual embraces a new “agreement” and thus a world order is re-established which corresponds to the initial sacred pattern.

Ritual is a unique and universal means of both the re-establishing of harmony and the test (control) of the correspondence of the variety of links to how it was “for the first time”. Naturally, the solution of such a complicated task is impossible without the mobilisation of all means of expressiveness in the possession of the collective. According to V.N. Toporov, such a “parade of sign systems” in the ritual is necessary to give it maximum effectiveness in re-establishing lost equilibrium and control over the world.

To achieve this goal, the ritual aims at necessarily re-establishing the world in its unity and integrity. It is this that all symbolic means used in the ritual are levelled at. Every “language” used in the ritual (words, gestures, actions, objects, landscape parts, etc.) seems to have had its own specialisation, i.e. transmitted certain information about the world. The language of things is likely to have been used primarily for expressing the ideas, concepts and values which could not be expressed as adequately in other languages, including that of words. Such “inexpressible” ideas include the concepts of “alien” and the concepts of such paramount life values as destiny, well-being, fertility, posterity, etc. All these concepts gained, through object symbols, a concrete and tangible form. It was possible to literally touch them by hand, and, in the event when they objectivated powers of the alien world, to establish necessary relations with and a control over them.

This function of things was called by V. Turner (1975: 15) a *revelation*. In comparing the

revelation with divination, another method to “make visible” what is covert, he writes that *revelation* is the disclosure, under the conditions of a ritual and through symbolic actions and means, of all that cannot be expressed and classified with words. Thus, divination represents a method of analysis and a taxonomical system, while revelation is an envelopment of experience in general.

Such observations are in conflict with the wide-spread point of view on the synonymous character and inter-dependence of ritual symbols and the corresponding “languages” (Tolstoy 1982: 57–71). It is likely that there is every reason to suggest a particular specialisation of semiotic systems used in the ritual for transmitting certain information. For example, in some regional traditions the denial of match-making employs exclusively an “object language”: the match-makers are handed a watermelon (or a pumpkin), sourdough is loaded on their wagon, etc. On the contrary, such a specialisation has limitations of using other languages. The same suggestion can be formulated in a different way: every “language” has its strong position in the syntagmatic structure of the ritual, where it possesses the priority right to code information. For example, the theme of farewell to girlhood in the Russian wedding is realised primarily in songs and lamentations, and the fact of chastity (or non-chastity) is transmitted predominantly through object symbols. All other “languages” into which the information is translated (or can be translated) would have a secondary role (translations of the original).

Thus, the hierarchy of “languages” in the ritual is variable. It has a profound situational character. In some strands of the ritual object symbols dominate, in others – verbal symbols, while in a third – mental images, etc. Despite the accepted axiom stating that the choice of a language (code) is not dependent on the transmitted contents, it is the contents actualised during the given fraction of the ritual that are most likely to determine (or even assign automatically) the usage of a certain manner of expression. It is too early to speak about whatever correlation between the character of information and semiotic systems may be employed

in the ritual, but as to object symbols, in the context of the ritual they are most “adjusted” to denote the states (status) of characters or to express the most general ideas (lot, fertility, wealth, one’s own, alien, etc.). This results in their characterising, determining function. At the same time, a verbal language is more often used when ideas of passage from one state to another are actualised, that which, as a rule, is accompanied by a change of characteristics. But similar observations need to be considerably elaborated, which implies a special investigation in this direction.

The main opposition of the ritual (one’s own – alien, in various modifications) and the task of relieving the strain between these two worlds preconditioned the usage of things for the following purposes:

First, with their help both the “own” and the “alien” are symbolised. In principle, any cultural symbol (i.e. a man-made object) relates to the world of man and denotes this world. Nevertheless, in every tradition there is a set of things that are used in the ritual exclusively with this aim to embody the idea of “own” to a greater extent than the rest. As a rule, those are the objects which are placed in the centre, inside one’s own world: in the house, in “the red corner”, by the hearth or in another sacred (and the innermost) place. It can be the very hearth, a loaf of bread baked on it, charcoal, litter, etc.

Contrary to this, objects used in the ritual for denoting the “alien” are usually placed in the periphery of the man-explored space or on the boundary between the “own” and “alien”. And, since this boundary is not absolute, elements of clothing, parts of the house (walls, windows, doors, chimney), as well as off-centre constructions (bath, fence) may be used as a border line. Another class of objects frequently used for the same purpose are objects newly made and not completely introduced into the “own” sphere, as noted above, as well as old broken and therefore partly “own” objects.

The other and most well-known function of things in ritual is to be an instrument of connecting the two worlds. The use of things as mediators is based, with all probability, on the

known duality: on the one hand, any thing belongs to the world of nature (material for their production comes from there); on the other hand, it has been subjected to special operations, bringing it from the sphere of the natural to the sphere of the artificial, man-processed and therefore integrated into the culture. By the way, it is this circumstance that can explain the presence of opposing meanings of things with the function of ritual symbols, as described by V. Turner and other scholars. Maximum mediative capability is typical of the so called universal sign complexes: the cross, an object symbolising the world tree, temple, etc., which lie next to the sphere of "another" and possess a paramount modelling function.

Finally, an opposing function of things-symbols should also be noted. It consists in the fact that they "bar" or block the communication channel between the "own" and the "alien". It is this function that the so called amulets perform to demarcate a symbolic (and therefore the most effective) boundary between humans and the powers of the outer world. In the process, the link between these spheres gains a regulated character, and a possibility of control over it by man emerges.

We have merely touched on some issues of the pragmatics of things. The semantics and syntactics will be examined in another essay.

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