

**Ornaments,  
or the role of non-utilitarian goods and activities in human cultures**

The time we are doing our job, we are subordinate to an end which is socially defined, since we are supposed to do something useful for the society of which we are a member. By contrast, during our leisure time, we choose freely our activities. Our purpose in so doing is to enjoy ourselves. Even in the case a leisure activity is useful, pleasure remains the end.

Several flutes of the Stone Age have been discovered in Germany. They are the oldest instruments ever found : 35.000 years old. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin wrote that « As neither the enjoyment nor the capacity of producing musical notes are faculties of the least use to man in reference to his daily habits of life, they must be ranked amongst the most mysterious with which he is endowed. »

It is mysterious from the utilitarian point of view. But it is not if one considers that every human being has a sense of being and that this sense of existing is for us an end in itself. So, in every human culture, one can find, in association with leisure, activities and artifacts the function of which is to express this non-utilitarian status of human being, to demonstrate, in other words, his dignity.

One of the many leisure activities is religious behavior. Considered from a sociological point of view, the religious behaviors reveals useful purposes, such as to reassert social cohesion, to legitimate hierarchy, to provide fertility, or to make things favorable. But it is easy to observe that religious behaviors have also an other function, which is to relate each individual to an horizon of totality and, by so doing, to give some kind of reality to the non-utilitarian dimension of human being. This has been pointed out by Georges Bataille in his book *La Part maudite*. Bataille rightly insists on gratuitous expenses, contrasting them with utilitarian activities.

Under this respect, religion has something to do with aesthetics, even in their most modest aspects : the daily use of ornaments in every culture. Ornaments of all kinds, made of patterns, colors, sounds, gestures and so on. Why animals and plants exist ? There is no answer to this question. Why ornaments exist ? They are as gratuitous as every natural being. If there is an answer, it is that ornaments express something else than the utilitarian side of human

existence. They express at the same time the richness of life and the sense we have to be ends in ourselves. Sure, the clothes we wear protect us physically from low temperature or from the rain. But, as Adam Smith already noticed, they play also a role in the public eye, a role which concerns our social existence : they protect our modesty while displaying our dignity and value.

Now, I would like to give you an illustration of ornaments as a leisure activity and a way of expressing the unconditional dimension of human beings.

Last year, I had an occasion to go to Panama. Along the Atlantic coast of Panama, there is an archipelago of numerous tiny islands. These islands are inhabited by a population of indians, the Kuna. I spent several days in some of these islands. As I could see, the Kuna live in poor conditions. Their villages are a cluster of bamboo huts. To make a phone call, people have to queue up at the post office, where there is the only phone in the village. Despite these conditions, the Kuna strive to maintain their political organisation and their culture.

The only visible artifact the Kuna produce which is specific of their culture is, precisely, an ornament, a kind of embroidery which ornate the blouses the women wear. Technically speaking, it is not exactly embroidery, but rather a kind of appliqué made with pieces of fabric of different colors. Incidentally, one finds the same kind of technique among minorities who live in Laos, for the same purpose of ornate women clothes. These ornaments made by Kuna indians have a specific name : *mola*. The *molos* have come to be appreciated by collectors, and one can see *molos* in several museums around the world. This ornament is made by women during their spare time. It is a leisure activity, or, rather, it was, because, nowadays, many *molos* are made in order to be sold to tourists. Nevertheless, woman go on making *molos* to ornate their blouses, one sewn on the breast and one on the back.

The time I visited the Kuna indians, I bought several *molos* which I brought back to France (see the four pictures).

As you can see, the patterns are precise and the colors well differentiated. As such, each *mola* is as limited as any artifact. Apparently, it has nothing to do with religious rites, since religious rites tend to establish some relation with entities which overtake the limits of the visible world. So, it is not difficult to understand that, by the intermediary of religious practices and beliefs, human beings express a dimension of themselves, the dimension by which their person is not reducible to their limited body. In their own way, ornaments like *molos*, despite their obvious limitations, are able to convey a sense of infinity through the variations of patterns and associations of colors which are practically illimited.

These indefinite possibilities of variations allows each woman who conceive and realise her own *mola* to experience a sense of freedom, to express this freedom and, at the same time, to bear witness for her own singularity. She offers to the eyes of the others a specific source of pleasure, and through this gift, she gains recognition. Recognition of her singularity, and also, since she makes use of a common practice, recognition of her being a member of the community.

In addition of that, by creating a specific *mola*, she participates actively to the indefinite variations which are allowed by the art of *molas*. This doesn't give her a real access to infinity or fullness, or plenitude, or wholeness or absolute. Nevertheless, this provides her with a kind of compensation which consists in the wide range of possible variations she has in mind and of which she knows that they are illimited. This open mental horizon provides a compensation for the limited sense of existing which is inherent to human condition. An enlargement of her mental horizon is also provided by the fact that this art has been transmitted to each indian women by previous generations and that, in turn, they transmit it to the next.

One could make the same kind of comments about artifacts from quite different cultures, such as, for instance, oriental carpets or ethnic jewels. Musical patterns may also be considered as sounding ornaments. In a way analogous to visible ornaments, music entails specific cultural patterns along with individual variations or improvisations. Let us think, for instance, to jazz, or African drums, or classical vocal art in India or in Middle East.

Incidentally, this raises the question of the distinction between ornament and art. According to the Western hierarchy, ornament is not really art, it has only a decorative value. This is partly a prejudice. Actually, the border between decorative objects and pieces of art, if there is one, is quite fuzzy. Let us consider, for instance, the realm of oriental carpets. Among this wide variety, some carpets are highly priced and collected as pieces of art. Moreover, in the case of prayer carpets, one could hardly deny the spiritual import of patterns and colors. Generally speaking, religious places, objects and rites have ever appealed to ornaments.

The role of ornaments I tried to describe is, I think, highly representative of the role of civilisation, or culture in the broad meaning the anthropologists use the word. I will say that one of the main functions of culture is to provide some remedies or compensations so as to avoid a painfull sense of emptiness. Elements of cultural transmission have been discovered among some societies of apes, birds and whales. This reinforces the narrative which presents the development of culture as an adaptation which facilitates the biological life of human beings. Such a view is certainly true, but it is only half of the truth. Indeed, human cultures

must also provide specific answers to the consequences of the specific development of self-consciousness among human beings.

As we know, the duration of an empty time is much more boring for us than it is for other animals. And one can be bored to death by an empty life. Of course, contemplating an open space where an airy mist is floating around can be a source of delight, offering room to expand our soul (I think of some album leaves of the Sung Dynasty). But such an aesthetic space has nothing to do with depressing void and nothingness.

Plants and animals spend their lives, as it seems, in a full adequacy with their environment. Unfortunately, this is not the case for us. Being neither beasts nor gods, the realm of plenitude is out of reach, and anguish is possibly lurking around. Therefore, our activities, our social life and the goods we produce and use - especially during leisure time - are not only required by our biological needs, but also and, maybe, above all by the fact that our sense of existing is highly vulnerable and needs constant support. My point, here, is running on from the paper I have published in 2006 in *Universitas*, « Theory of culture and aesthetic categories », it is a continuation of this paper.

By way of conclusion, I would like to tell you a mythological story which illustrates the role of musical ornament as a compensation for inaccessible absolute fulfillment and unattainable plenitude.

You can read this story in *Metamorphoses* (which means transformations), a book from a Latin poet named Ovid. You can also find the story in a novel from Roman Antiquity, *Daphnis and Chloe* (incidentally, *Daphnis and Chloe* is also the title of a piece of music from Ravel). This is a myth about the origin of panpipes. The god Pan is seduced by a fine young girl. But she is not at all attracted by him, since the body of Pan is the body of a goat. So, far from acceding to the desire of Pan, she flees, running as fast as she can. Pan chases after her and, finally, the young girl throws herself in a marsh where she transforms into reeds (which look like bamboo). And from these reeds, Pan makes his panpipes, « putting together - says the text of the novel - several pieces of reed of unequal length, since their love had not been reciprocal nor equal. »

So, this is the story of an union and harmony which is desired, but which is impossible to realise. And, as a compensation and a remedy for this fatal discrepancy, the object of desire morphes in reeds, and the reeds in panpipes, an artifact by means of which one can create harmonious musical patterns.

This story has made me think of another one I was told many years ago when staying in Vietnam. It is a myth about the origin of something that Taiwanese know well: the betel nut

chew. Once upon a time, two twin brothers were living in a perfect harmony. Up to the time where one of them fall in love whith a girl and married her. The forlorn brother was so sad as to drown himself in the sea. His body, rejected on the shore, was transformed in a tree. So desperate was the married brother that he died in the same way, and his corpse also became a tree. The poor bride in her turn committed suicide. She became a creeping plant of betel which wound around the two trees, embracing them. Somebody thought of enveloping the areca nut produced by the trees in a leaf of betel. So was invented the betel nut chew which warms the heart and is offered as a mark of friendship or even of love.

In this story, the impossibility of a complete fullfilment of desire doesn't come from a discordance between the lover and the beloved, but from the simple fact that nobody can dedicate oneself to only one person in the course of his or her life. I was told an other vietnamese story with a similar plot, a myth which tells the origin of the three stones of the fireplace. It begins with a discord between a couple, the woman flees and finds another man. The first husband, regretful, looks for his wife, finally finds the farm where she lives. The woman hides him in a rice straw stack. The new husband, who is unaware of the first being in the stack, sets fire to it. The woman throw her in the fire, willing to save her first husband. The second husband throw himself in the fire in order to save his wife. Finally, all gone in ashes, one finds just three stones.

The three persons who cannot enjoy unity and wholeness during their life become united when transformed in basic cultural artifacts. The three stones of the fireplace are fundamental for a civilised use of fire in order to cook. They are emblematical of culture itself. So, the story of the three stones is emblematical as well of culture as a palliative or a compensation resulting from an impossible wholeness.

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KEYWORDS

SUMMARY