

The Signification of Objects in the Context of a Critical Examination of Technological Civilization: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

Although the human-made environment is actively present, the limits of its relation to the broader social evolution may not be clear. In this article I shall attempt to describe some aspects of the dynamics of the human-made heritage of objects, as it has been formed by the changes in the way we perceive of material evidence in modern society. My aim is to pinpoint some critical aspects that highlight the expansion of the 'cultural state' and the change in our beliefs concerning the role of human intervention in the management of the past. I argue that today a critical examination of the technological civilization requires an interdisciplinary approach based on the interpretation of the social dimension of human-made heritage of objects.

Key Words: Human-made Heritage, Technological Civilization, Critical Theory.

1. Introduction: Human-made heritage and material civilization

Material constructions have a limited 'life', a particular endurance. The replacement of an old structure by a new one is an inevitable condition that coincides with the stable and continuous flow of life, which does not remain the same but continually goes through changes and transformations. Thus, every attempt that has to do with the questioning of this affirmative statement can be characterized as an act of conservatism. This matter is emphatically stated in industrially and economically developed countries of our planet. At the same time, at least since the 1970s, there have emerged controversial forces that tend to take into consideration the prerequisites for *sustainable development* and even more to challenge the general concept of *social progress*. Such concepts cannot be defined outside their social and historical context. Furthermore they are connected with economic, political and ideological terms¹. In this context, the automatic, uncritical succession of the old by the new is definitely not an innovative and creative action. There are many parameters that have to be considered in order to come to these conclusions, even if we examine specific 'old constructions'. The concern for an old human-made structure, the struggle against time passing by and against the alteration of the whole human artifact, is a particularly complicated process, which precludes simplifying and aphoristic judgments. What is needed is a justified account of a series of constantly expanding factors that acquire different significance in different eras and societies. We turn backwards, and this turn is not considered as a regression or as an act of conservatism, but as a crucial attempt of special significance, which is adopted by the most progressive parts of modern societies in the whole world².

The objectivity of the world, its character as independent from human activity, and the human condition are interwoven. Due to the fact that human existence is a dependent one³, it would be impossible without things; accordingly, things would turn into a sum of meaningless objects without the determinative elements of human existence (Arendt, 1986: 22). Whatever remains for us from the previous inhabitants, either made or ascertained by them, is included in what we call heritage (or historical heritage), natural or human-made⁴.

¹ See Quintanilla, 1998; Marx and Mazlish, 1996; Nisbet, 1980; Laudan, 1978; Hegedüs and Márkus, 1973

² Moropoulou, 2000; Jokilehto, 1999; Lowenthal, 1998; Zivas, 1991; Kontaratos, 1986; Binney, 1984; Bouras, 1975.

³ People are dependent beings because everything they come to grips with is immediately being transformed into a condition of their existence, i.e. it acquires the character of a condition of human existence.

⁴ The term *heritage* consists of the natural and human-made heritage. By this distinction, we basically appeal to one of the main parameters of human nature: the parameter that characterizes human species and distinguishes it not only from its

This transmission is a fact that inevitably happens and will continue to happen, without the interference of any intruder. Furthermore, its recipient is humanity as a whole. In the first place we can not choose what we shall receive from the past as heritage, neither can we disclose from our descendents, or take in another world, the elements that constitute the material reality that surrounds us. The active presence of material elements of the past is the indubitable fact of their continuous existence. This also emphasizes their ability to be recognized as ‘living’ elements of an era that no longer exists. On the other hand, the presence of the past through written historical references and through subjective interpretations and views is sometimes vague and cannot actively describe an era. Historical eras are characterized by their material civilization through particular levels of development and obvious changes in the way of life. These changes affect the social web and have a certain impact on the living standard of the majority of the citizens.

The historicity (historical consciousness) of human beings and their environment will inevitably lead them to the past (Hering, 2000: 199). From the numerous elements of the past, some of them find a place in memory while others don’t. Our past ‘presents itself’ as empirical evidence in the form of buildings, machines, works of art and other tangible documents. Which of those elements will be included in the corpus of history and will thus become the past of the generations to come is a matter that concerns not the past per se but our knowledge about it. Human, the first register, ‘interprets’ and ‘categorizes’ the past and finally decides to maintain certain elements of it. There are indeed a ‘real past’ and a ‘historical past’⁵. The extent to which they are interwoven and whether the ‘historical’ past tends to be ‘real’ are issues related directly with the management of material evidence of past eras.

2. Historical dimension and social reality

The historical dimension of a situation, of a fact or a phenomenon, contributes to the formation of its cognitive content (part of the ‘truth’ we try to discover) and, up to a point, directs us when we express a view, formulate a belief, or make a judgment about it. The historical correlation of the factors that move societies from one stage of their development to the other, apart from its meaning for History itself, is often connected to the creation of the specific frame which will makes research in other scientific fields possible, efficient and even gainful.

All things are defined by means of the past. The time that has passed since their creation, characterizes their whole historical course. The time sequence forms the reality of everyday life of every social formation, while, at the same time, the way we interpret the relation between the triptych ‘past-present-future’ changes. Since ancient times, this relation was considered in accordance with that of biological life. Everything was believed to be moving like the unstoppable periodic repetition of the sun’s rise and set, the summer and winter, birth and decay. For Herodotus and Thucydides, whatever happens shall not escape the model and the character of past and present facts. Herodotus’ concern was to point out what had happened, so as the memory of the past among people shall not ware off and great deeds shall never cease to be recognized. In Thucydides, the religious background and the epic characteristics of Herodotus’ historiography are replaced by the strict research of the actual historical sequence of events. For Thucydides, History was a sequence of political struggles caused by human nature. Since human nature remains unaltered, what happened in the past shall take place again in the same or similar manner.

This view of the cyclical movement of history is replaced by the teleological view, by the faith in a final cause through the definite fulfillment of the Promise. In this period, the development of different civilizations is not based on the dynamics of people but on already known, ‘successful’ practices, i.e. practices that have been passed uncritically over generations and whose usefulness for everyday life makes them crucial to the whole social system. Material civilization has not yet acquired the characteristics of a system that can generate new attitudes and ways of life, except of a kind of ‘immature technical evolution’. The preservation of each era is focused now on specific material objects used for worship purposes in the context of an irrational dominance.

natural surroundings but also from other forms of organic territory. That is to say that it has the ability to examine the natural environment where it lives in a broader –from a quantitative point of view– way and in a qualitatively more complicated manner than other species of nature, by using its intellect and memory. By distinguishing between natural and human-made heritage, we pinpoint human’s ability not only to construct but also to create. The human-made heritage can be divided into the heritage of objects and that of ideas. These categories define two different worlds: the real world of objects and the immaterial world of ideas.

⁵ See, for example, Fowler, 1995; Lowenthal 1997; Leyden, 1984; Waters, 1955.

This general scheme outlines the formulation of the first tendency concerning the relation between the triptych 'past-present-future' and the evolution of material civilization that prevailed until the Middle Ages. An uncritical, elementary documentation is enough to transfer a reality that is to come without being determined or caused by man. The fulfillment of the goal of History would mean its end, its transformation into Theodicy.

Renaissance reestablished the human-centered view of the world and the primacy of Reason. During the Enlightenment, when modern historiography was established, the relation between past, present and future acquires an essential, active character: the examination of the past and the configuration of History in favor of the present and the future are considered to be key factors for social progress. The term 'philosophy of history', first introduced in the 18th century, reveals the shift of interest towards a scientific⁶ view of the past. In the context of such an approach, special emphasis was put on the interdisciplinary role of history, i.e. the necessary cooperation of historians and scholars from other disciplines, while the issues under investigation (truth and fact in history, objectivity, historical explanation and interpretation) remain open until today and have never ceased to occupy the thought of scholars from different disciplines. This recognition was characterized by the emergence of History as an independent discipline and was expressed by means of two statements: 1) what has happened must be explained in relation to the moment that it took place and 2) its explanation demands the establishment of a discipline that uses rational procedures.

When the past and its material evidence start to be documented, History begins. The dividing line between prehistoric and historic times coincides with the moment when people started to care for the past and, at the same time, for their own future (Carr, 1991: 142). History is not just the sum of the instances, facts, operations and relations that constitute the past and exist objectively (i.e. independent from our awareness, knowledge and thought), but it is also the sum of the descriptions, explanations and validations that modern or latter thinkers made about them (Veikos, 1987: 15). The crucial point that emerges when we refer to the material version of the past is that it allows us to claim that 'what has really happened' is *not* definitely lost. On the other hand, historical objects – material evidence is not obvious and univocally defined, neither do they evoke universal and definite judgments⁷. However, they are still an irreplaceable given that can transform firm views and beliefs, providing another important argument to those who claim that what historians are looking for does actually exist (Hobsbawm, 1998: 10). This approach is connected with the shift of history towards philosophy, with the 'demand' for a 'socio-history' which resists the spatial, one-dimensional definition of historical objects and seeks to promote its socio-cultural orientation through the critical examination of historical evidence. History changed its position towards the evidence, as Foucault stresses (1987: 14).

Its first duty is not interpretation, neither is it to determine whether what it says is true or not and what is its expressive value, but rather to examine and elaborate: it organizes, arranges and divides the evidence into levels, distinguishes between the proper and the improper, defines unities and describes relations. Evidence is no longer the inert matter by means of which History tries to reconstruct what people said or did. History seeks to determine unities, sets, series, and relations. History, in its traditional form, attempted to make the monuments of the past 'remember', to transform them into evidence, and to make these traces of the past 'talk' or reveal something else than what is attributed to them. Nowadays, it transforms the evidence into monuments, reveals a series of tokens which now must become readable, must be organized, must be grouped together and correlated. In the past, archeology, as a cognitive discipline of speechless monuments, of inactive traces of objects with no reference, tended to become history and acquired a meaning through the 'restoration' of historical discourse. Today, History tends to become archaeology – an internal description of the monument (Foucault, 1987: 16, 9-31).

3. The 'invention' of memory, its neglect and its contingent or elective use

Memory is a key concept when we talk about human identity and its continuation.

⁶ It is Marx's work that brings into scientific thought the 'continent' of history. For Marx, each type of society is a structure that consists of certain objective levels (economical, political and ideological), while the economical one has the predominant role. The social and political level are not a mere expression of the economical but they have a relevant autonomy. The Marxian 'material perception of history' connects the new spirit, imposed by the scientific development, with social emancipation and combines the historical thought with citizen's everyday active participation.

⁷ Even the most helpful archaeological findings 'talk' only when the right questions are posed, as Bloch characteristically states. See Bloch, 1994: 88.

It is open in the dialectic of oblivion and remembering, vulnerable to those that try to ‘use’ it, but in any case a useful guide in considerations that reckon and respect the human factor. In light of the above discussion about the ‘real’ and ‘historical’ past, we should state that memory, which relates to a testimony of previous situations, allows us to overcome the difficulties when we try to approach the ‘real’ past in a more satisfactory fashion. For, we should not forget that we remain in the material version of every society’s past that does not alter suddenly. Artifacts, as forms of memory, are passages through the autonomous complexes of everyday empirical experiences. These experiences determine the field of subjectivity, the inherent ‘weakness’ of human existence to see, to hear, to listen, to feel in a unique way and thus to create its own memory. If it were possible for us to speak of a more objective ‘coupling’ of the past and the present through the field of collective memory, we would argue that the human-made heritage of objects help us towards this direction, so long as we accept to take part in a meaningful discussion concerning the question ‘what does it mean to remember?’.

Let’s try to formulate three observations in order to answer the previous question, observations for which the material supplies are crucial points of reference. First, if remembering means that we have a past (and where does this past begin?), then we try to validate our present status in relation to facts and situations that happened a long time ago. Thus, by means of a relevant interpretation, we may get to the point of inventing elements in order to describe facts that never happened, to ‘call’ modern constructions ‘monuments’⁸. Second, if it means that we have to pinpoint all those elements that constitute the course of our life and convey them to the next generation, then we must set aside any national ‘pride’ which is based on fragmentary and incomplete interpretations and we must try to enrich memory by highlighting its crucial role in human understanding and in view of difference. Third, if remembering means that we just bother ourselves against our other occupations then we may conclude that we need not discuss with other, older people (who tend to talk about their past) or even to assume that we can do anything on our own.

Since the past cannot be wholly preserved, memory is at the same time destruction and preservation, i.e. it is a choice. To preserve without selecting does not mean that we contribute to the operation of memory; we just file. Memory, as a social process, is related to material civilization (and furthermore to material culture) since permanence and change, conservatism and innovation, tradition and avant-gardism are defined empirically through everyday, formal and scientific discourse that are formed during the process of decoding and representing material evidence. This fact is related not only with what has happened but also with the way it has been attributed to the so called ‘public opinion’. Memory plays the role of a reservoir from which we can collect elements for reference, comparison, emulation and interpretation of various actions for various purposes.

Modern era, especially the 21st century, seems to ‘leave behind’ past situations, to move forward without appealing to the past. It prefers to demolish rather than preserve, refrains from giving a new lease of life to material forms of the past. Modern societies get ‘carried away’ by the uncontrolled change in the conditions of living through situations that disable any actions which respect the particular character that made societies unique, as it happened in previous times. Uniformity, mass production and the neglect of aesthetic features that arise from the recognition of distinct timeless elements of a civilization, lead towards oblivion and pervert certain elements that are crucial for its continuance. One of these elements is memory. Leroi-Gourhan argued that memory is not a quality of thinking but the background on which the various actions are registered. In this context, he speaks of the ‘specific (spécifique) memory’ in order to define the stability of the behavior of animal species, the ‘ethno-cultural(ethnique) memory’, which ensures the reproduction of behaviors in human societies and the ‘artificial (artificielle) memory’ that secures, without appealing to instinct or reflection, the reproduction of the chain mechanical deeds (Leroi-Gourhan, 2000, vol. II: 17-18). The theorization of the new tokens of science and the attempt to adjust them to social sciences by means of cybernetics contributed to the expansion and to the metaphorical correlation of other operations with conscious human memory. In view of Leroi-Gourhan’s categorization, we can conceive the incompatibility that occurs today when we use the term memory in order to refer to a mechanical operation which obeys to a particular –always developing– algorithm, in the *one dimensional* storing ‘ability’ of a machine, in the ‘memory’ of a computer.

⁸ See, for instance, Rothman, 1994.

4. The theoretical frame for the management of the human-made heritage of the objects

In the 19th century, the architect Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet Le Duc and the painter and art critic John Ruskin would establish the theoretical context concerning the relation between society and human-made heritage of the objects. Viollet Le Duc's ideas never ceased to affect modern theory in the field of protection and restoration of heritage, while some aspects of Ruskin's theory still limit the interventions to the built environment.

Ruskin, referring to the role of the craftspeople in relation to his/her creation, focuses on the emotional binding between object (work of art) and subject of creation (creator/creatress). This relation supersedes the norms of mental precedence, of the submission of the inanimate material object to the human tendency for change and replacement of an old structure by a new one. He praises the incomparable features of a piece of art made by a human with his/her whole heart (Ruskin, 1989: 169). Ruskin always has in mind the traditional craftspeople's skill which is compared to mass machine production that undermines human labor.

In 22 March 1877, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings is founded⁹, aiming to preserve the integrity of the built environment against the destructive, according to its members, restorations. Among the founding members of the society was Ruskin, for whom buildings should be preserved as they stand, since restoration is disastrous¹⁰. It is a disaster that goes along with the false description of the construction that is destroyed, and which retracts its authentic form. For Ruskin, it is impossible to restore anything that used to be magnificent and beautiful, as it is impossible to resurrect a dead person. Ruskin continuously stresses that the monument is a creation that belongs only to his/her creator. We can enjoy it, we can admire its remnants, but we don't have the right to intervene in any way to its course of 'life'. Its value lies in its authentic form and every intervention is opposed to its 'nature'. Like any living creature, the monument makes a circle which consists of its birth, its growing, its ageing and its death. This process shall last, but the end is due and we must accept it. Ruskin's view of the value of the monument is connected, in one way, with Walter Benjamin's notion of the *aura*¹¹.

Viollet Le Duc, in contrast to Ruskin's theory, argues that we ought to intervene to the elements of the human artifact. He formulates general principles concerning art¹², and combines theoretical work with the practical application of his ideas in particular monuments¹³, suggesting a method of protection of the built environment. Our first concern, as Viollet Le Duc argues, should be to secure 'survival' of the buildings and the other elements of the human-made heritage so as to succeed to preserve not only their outer appearance but their total form also. Before any preservation, we must examine the age and the form of each part of a construction, i.e. we must register its creation, taking into consideration the latter reconstructions and additions. His definition about *Restoration*, a key concept for *Monuments Conservation*¹⁴, is characteristic: to restore an edifice means neither to maintain it, nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to reestablish it in a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time (Viollet Le Duc, 1996: 314).

The above problematization points at the confrontation between artistic creation and technical/technological development. Therefore, I will continue my article referring to Critical Theory and to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Frankfurt School criticizes Modernity by emphasizing the twofold scheme that lies at its core: technology – civilization/culture, i.e. the relation which essentially affects the development of modern societies. This approach shall lead us to the description of a philosophical frame concerning the critical examination of technological civilization.

5. The culturally reformed built environment through the 'predominance' of technology

In technique, Adorno recognizes an essential role in the formation of the social reality and in the 'reading' of artistic creation. ‘

⁹ About the Society, see Jokilehto, 1999: 184-7.

¹⁰ 'Restoration is the worst manner of destruction' (aphorism 31), see Ruskin, 1989: 194.

¹¹ See, Kokkinos, 2006: 290-291.

¹² For Viollet Le Duc, art is the form of a thought, its source is fantasy and its means of expression is the mimesis of nature. See Viollet Le Duc, 1987 (vol. I) : 24-25.

¹³ A characteristic example of Viollet Le Duc's practice is the preservation of Notre Dame.

¹⁴ See, Kokkinos, 2004: 220-227.

Artworks are enigmatic in that they are the physiognomy of an objective spirit that is never transparent to itself in the moment in which it appears' (Adorno, 1997: 128). At the same time, human beings create art through technique; in this way technique has a constitutive meaning for art. Moreover, although no work of art is just the sum of its technical elements, for Adorno it is technique that is the key factor in deciphering art, leading us to the core of the works of art. An essential presupposition of thought, and thus of philosophy, is its emancipation from the object. However, nowadays the role of the various technological achievements, that must be complementary in all social activities, tends to become central. The thinking subject submits itself to the machine by admitting that the only way to fulfill his/her many needs is by using the repeated mechanical operation. The irrational structure of society which goes along with its 'evolution' does not differentiate the dynamics of human thought from the mechanical way of production. In this context, many edifices transformed in the course of history into art, while previously they were not art, and others, that used to be art, cease to be. For, art, as a product of historical process, is interpreted and defined in relation to what is not art. The subject of reality is not identical to itself, and non empirical, but it changes through history. It is the social environment which determines its position in the value scale of each society. Today we speak of works of art even when we refer to fractal objects. On the other hand, the difference between works of art and the empirical world, the character of their appearance, is formed in the relation they have with reality and, according to its tendency to resist reality, against it. Thus, if the artist would like to eliminate his/her reference to reality, he/she would abolish the premise of artistic creation per se (Adorno, 1997: 103)¹⁵.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno refers to the 'parody of aesthetic semblance' (Adorno, 1997: 17), an issue that is interwoven with the notion of 'cultural industry'. The value of many products, through mass production, has become dubious and is replaced by the subordinate enjoyment of a kind of prestige to the consumer, i.e. to the enjoyment of the product as a commodity per se. The product of technique, the technological object, is presented today as the outcome of a 'normal' process. However, in many cases and in order to create a product, illegal and manipulating means have been used. The domination of the 'civilized' world against the majority of the society tends to become rational, to seem as the only solution for the overwhelming impasses of the West (the sole part of the planet, according to many people). In this context, aesthetic issues are reduced in the hierarchy of common action because there are more emergent needs to be satisfied. Modern age moves and exploits this same mechanism by ignoring, aphoristically, the tradition and the human-made heritage of objects. Tradition is not to be generally and abstractly rejected, but it must be criticized in a non simplifying way and always in accordance with the standards of the present. Nothing must be adopted uncritically, just because it exists and it used to be valuable, and nothing is outdated just because it is the byproduct of another age. '[T]ime alone provides no criterion' (Adorno, 1997: 64). At the same time, the *New* product seems to be the aesthetic feature of broad reproduction, along with its promise for indefinite abundance¹⁶. In a society where the creative spirit's diachronism is disputed, and where every reaction against art seems confused, art breaks into reified cultural heritage and into hedonism which consumer gets from the continuously changing *New* object. People nowadays does not have the time to become acquainted with his/her creation, which is disdained by a new creation, and constantly plans or expects the replacement of an object by another one that does not differ essentially from the previous one. Social reality precludes the category of the older constructions, since there is no time for the 'dialectical establishment' of any object. The ephemeral and without any aesthetic refinement product determines the modern way of life.

In view of its contribution to the notion of the *Beautiful*, Adorno's claims about the constructed environment are essential. According to Adorno, the internal changes that this notion underwent in nature are reflected in the fact that 'only in the course of the nineteenth century this concept was enlarged by a new domain: the cultural landscape (Kulturlandschaft), an artifactitious domain that must at first seem totally opposed to natural beauty' (Adorno, 1997: 64)¹⁷.

¹⁵ In this point Adorno suggests: "...Art is indeed infinitely difficult in that it must transcend its concept in order to fulfil it; yet in this process where it comes to resemble realia it assimilates itself to that reification against which it protests'.

¹⁶ Since the 1970s the emergence of disposable products and the well known belief that "it is more economic to replace the old structure rather than to preserve and repair it" contributed to the devaluation of old constructions and in the 'idolization' of the 'new object'.

¹⁷ We must combine this notion with that of the *Gestalt*. According to the definition of Gestalt, which comes from psychology, a whole is more than the sum of its parts. Adorno does not refer to the notion of *Gestalt* at this point but later on.

Historical patterns usually connected to their geographical environment with which they have some resemblances due to the same construction material (i.e. stone), are considered to be beautiful. Such patterns are not based, like the works of art, on a central morphological law, since they are barely planned as a whole. However, historical patterns are not intact, a quality that common sense attributes to the notion of beautiful in nature. At the same time, culturally reformed landscapes reflect history through their expression. Historical continuity gives them a certain form and unifies them dynamically. And, as Adorno states, ‘without historical remembrance there would be no beauty’ (1997: 65).

For Marcuse, the society that seeks the transformation of nature, which is achieved today especially by means of technology, alters the basic principles of domination, which changes its form. Thus, society replaces the personal dependence (the slave’s dependence on the master, the bondslaves’ dependence on the atheling, the nobleman’s on the king) by a form of dependence of an ‘objective world order’ (economic laws, the market etc.). In this context, technology becomes the main agent of objectification (Marcuse, 1971: 155-177), since technological thought enters into nonmaterial, mental activities. In this way, power seems to lose its exploitive and oppressive character and becomes ‘rational’. The criterion of the rationalism of power is the preservation of a system that bases its legitimacy on scientific/technical progress.

Marcuse’s contribution as to the discussion of mass culture and aesthetic theory is crucial. In *Eros and Civilization* (1981) he speaks in a total, aphoristic way for the necessity of ‘great art’¹⁸ that can contribute to the establishment of a different kind of society. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1974) and especially in his latter work, *Aesthetic Dimension* (1998), Marcuse, referring to the necessity of a radical political action that shall transform the wretched reality, summarizes his problematization in favor of the precedence of aesthetics. He does not hesitate to argue that art questions the monopoly of established reality to determine what is ‘real’, by formulating a phenomenal world which however is ‘more real than reality itself’. Art, for Marcuse, has its own language and reveals reality only by means of this language. It has its own dimension of affirmation and negation, a dimension that cannot be synchronized with the dimension of mass production. All authentic works of art are revolutionary, i.e. subversive; they criticize the established reality and reveal the image of emancipation. The aesthetic form and the internal coherence of artistic creation constitute the dimensions of truth, criticism and the promise of art. That means that, while art is inevitably a part of what exists, and it criticizes what exists only as a part of it, at the same time this contradiction is preserved and overcome through the aesthetic form, which gives the power of alienation into the everyday experience¹⁹. Thus, a new ‘consciousness’ and a new conception arises in the context of reality, a form of which is art.

An object functions in an aesthetically way when it causes tensions, when it ‘communicates’ with the limits of the senses and those of cultural data and patterns, when it offers a version of reality and when it doesn’t recognize preconfigured intellectual patterns. In order to be accepted, the aesthetic object, either a result of personal or collective action, being singular or plural, it presupposes certain conditions in various levels of social and cultural life, conditions that stress the importance of human participation in the process of its production. Today this participation declines; it is reduced to the passive management of mechanical functions towards a result that is known in advance. The multiplicity of artifacts, the ‘democratization’ of material culture by means of technical reproduction, made works of art available to everyone. However, mass production has reversed the main preconditions of artistic creation. The authentic is no more an object of admiration, a source of inspiration and awe. Now there exists the copy of which ‘quality’ (its relation to the original) constantly improves. The originality of an artifact depends in something more than the sum of its elements: from its mechanical strength to its value as historical evidence. Since the latter is based on the former, through the predominance of the ‘copy’ and through the cancellation of authenticity, the value of historical evidence is also postponed. As Benjamin characteristically mentions, what decays in the era of technological reproduction of the work of art is its *aura* (Benjamin, 1978: 15).

¹⁸ Marcuse focuses on Samuel Beckett’s work –a prominent thinker for the Frankfurt School to whom Adorno wanted to dedicate *Aesthetic Theory*– or argues that the medieval cathedrals represent the dimension that resists the established principle of reality, referring to ‘Great Art’.

¹⁹ The aesthetic transformation is achieved by a reformation of language, perception and understanding, so that they reveal the essence of reality in its appearance: i.e. the suppressed abilities of man and nature. Thus, the work of art re-presents, and at the same time criticizes, reality.

The technique of reproduction, as opposed to the preservation of the original, detaches the product from tradition, because this uniqueness of the work of art is to be identified in its incorporation in the web of the latter²⁰. Constantly increasing the number of copies, the new 'technological state' replaces the one and unified presence with mass domination, it enhances consumption in a world that could not be based solely on the laws of industrial mass production.

6. Conclusions

In spite of the immediate role of technology in the formulation of the material civilization, the evaluation of the result of substituting mental functions with technical 'thought' hardly exists. From simple calculation and elementary manual construction up to decision making using deliberate planning, statistics or any other sort of analysis, all these processes presuppose the participation of machines.

Artifacts play an important role in determining the cultural content of each era. This a posteriori claim places modern societies against their present and proclaims them as configurative forces of History. At the same time, it commits them, in a way, to the duration, the development and the continuity of their own civilization. This issue emerges not only when we examine personal activity, the attitude of each citizen of each country, but also when we see the collective practices, the universal politics, through various ways and forms. Thus, it is connected with decisions and conditions that are formulated on the institutional level and which each of us must fulfill or oppose. We believe that the beginning and the development of the function of memory are interwoven with the material environment. Discourse over objects becomes a means by which people exchange evaluations and views concerning the notions of time, memory, history, progress and human solidarity. The promotion or concealment of previous eras, which correspond to material testimonies, are interconnected with the process of memory and indeed not with quantitative performance, i.e. with numbers and statistics that leave no room for different interpretations, but with a qualitative status, i.e. judgments that have to do with ideological/political interpretations. This is so because the various constructions of human connect, in a unique, unidentified and irrelevant to positivist views way, the senses with material substance. If material substance is to be processed and consumed immediately, there would be neither semiotics nor memory.

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(Note: the year of the original publication is indicated in brackets [])

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²⁰ The basic way of incorporating the work of art into the web of tradition, was manifested by cult. In Ancient Times works of art were created in order to serve for a ritual, which used to be magical and then religious. The unique value of the authentic work of art is based on the ritual, in the context of which the work of art acquired its basic and first use value. The technical reproduction of the work of art liberates it from its parasitic presence in ritual. However, when the criterion of authenticity in artistic production is useless (i.e., we can make many copies of a photograph, and thus its pointless to wonder which is the original one), the whole function of art is negated. See Benjamin, 1978: 18-19.

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