

# Changes in the Symbolic Correspondences between Man and Architecture

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## Summary

The author sketches a theory of "symbolic correspondences" by referring to the thesis of Leroi-Gourhan, according to which symbolic meaning became "linearised" by urbanisation and alphabetisation. A strong tendency towards general "linearisation" led to the purification of architecture and design by modern architects and to the elaboration of a "new practicability" credo. The actions of young graffiti 'taggers' that are becoming so numerous in urban contexts are viewed as a protest movement against the narrowing effects of linearisation.

## Résumé

L'auteur élabore brièvement une "théorie des correspondances symboliques" en se référant à la thèse de Leroi-Gourhan, selon laquelle le sens symbolique a été "linéarisé" par l'urbanisation et l'alphabetisation. On constate qu'une forte tendance à une "linéarisation" générale a conduit à une purification de l'architecture et du design et à ce que les architectes modernes adoptent un credo centré sur un "nouvel utilitarisme". L'article conclut en analysant les intentions des jeunes 'sprayers' et leurs graffitis; il les perçoit comme faisant partie d'un mouvement de protestation contre les effets restrictifs de la linéarisation.

The topic of the symbolic correspondences between man and architecture has interested me, in part due to my interest for architecture, but also because I have had experiences teaching social medicine to young people who will become social workers. It is in this field that I have been confronted with the rising influence of New Age philosophies. Plenty of remedies are offered, that are said to cure sick people quickly. But of course, many remedies are also offered by these philosophies, supposedly for curing social problems. The healing techniques of ancient societies are often considered to still be very effective. Yet, the assumptions that are made about the functioning of ancient or archaic societies are usually erroneous. Back to the roots – is that the answer?

In order to answer some of my questions concerning the functioning of early human societies, I shall first go back to the roots of modern sociological thinking. Durkheim and his nephew, Marcel Mauss, tried to decipher the meaning of magical ceremonies and religious rituals, applying a sociological approach and not a psychological one, as Freud did. In an article published in 1903, on "Some Primitive Forms of Classification", they stated that even logical categories were at first means of social

differentiation (Durkheim & Mauss, 1968). Following the social order found within human groups, i.e. according to individuals belonging to a "totem", the world is divided and re-ordered in such a way that it will "fit" the totem qualities of given groups. The world as seen by a member of the wolf-totem is thus quite different from the world as it appears to a blackbird clan member. Psycho-social affinity or similarity also helps create logical hierarchies.

Lévy-Bruhl, another prominent follower of Durkheim's ideas, saw this system of classification as based on "pre-logical" thinking. This type of thinking involves "mystic participation", that is, things or phenomena of the same classificatory group are assumed to participate in the same "substance" or "soul". This participation may take on various degrees of intensity, but the "belonging-together" implies that there exists a common "substance" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1927).

"Mystic participation" assumes relationships between things or beings that, in reality, have no connection at all. I thus call these relationships "symbolic correspondences". Connections are imputed by men and they express their emotional, as well as their social needs. Correspondences may be symbolized by signs, sounds, rhythms, pictures, figures, masks, etc. and they create logical relationships which also have aesthetic qualities. Some of this thinking was preserved up until the middle of the 19th century in the Greek ideas concerning the four elements and their relation to the 'humours' in the body whose balance determines individual well-being or illness. Of course, these affinities seem rather strange to us nowadays, because our society functions differently from the Greek society at the time of Hippocrates and applies another scheme of symbolic correspondences. Nevertheless, primitive thinking is still alive in us – as psychoanalysis has shown by interpreting the language of dreams and the meaning of symptoms. But this is "private" thinking, not socially approved.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel may have been a genuine forerunner of all sociological thinking: he was the first to draw a line between systems of thought, i.e. philosophy, and systems of social organization. He also made a distinction between art and social meaning. In his "Lectures on Aesthetics" Hegel says that man changes his surroundings so that his "inner destination" is reflected in the things he has changed (Hegel, 1970, 51). Like science and philosophy, works of art are emanations of the human mind. Art precedes philosophy as an instrument of self-recognition. It operates on a level intellectually minor to that of philosophy. As far as Hegel goes, we may say that the fascinating aspect of his philosophy rests in his conclusion that the work of human beings translates invisible phantasies, imaginary or symbolic visions, into a visible, audible or touchable thing in the outer world. This is how man creates his own world and human reality. Art and techniques appear on the same level of mental activity: they are "materializations" of mere thoughts.

It seems that the contemporary French anthropologist, André Leroi-Gourhan, has been inspired both by the Durkheim school and by the Hegelian "materialistic" interpretation of arts and techniques. He has developed a very interesting theory on the danger brought into our modern thought by a growing "linearisation" of thinking. Primitive thinking rests on the assumption of a "mystic participation" and on innumerable "symbolic correspondences" between all things. Writing and mathematics were invented by "linearising" the existing symbols that served as predecessors of the alphabet. These important inventions were made after cities had been founded (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964).

According to Leroi-Gourhan, art, language and technical memory begin from a "graphic symbolism". To demonstrate his thesis, he refers to the *churingas* used by Australian Aborigines. Anthropologists and ethnologists agree that Australian Aborigines have the oldest and most archaic form of social life of all contemporary primitive tribes. *Churingas* are oval-shaped pieces of wood, engraved with parallel lines and circles. It is assumed that these engravings help the groups remember the long and complicated mythical stories that connect them with their ancestors, as well as knowledge about the topography of their vast desert country. Stories are sung that indicate where to find fruits, deer and waterholes – this is why Bruce Chatwin (1987) referred to Australia as a country that is crossed by hundreds of songlines.

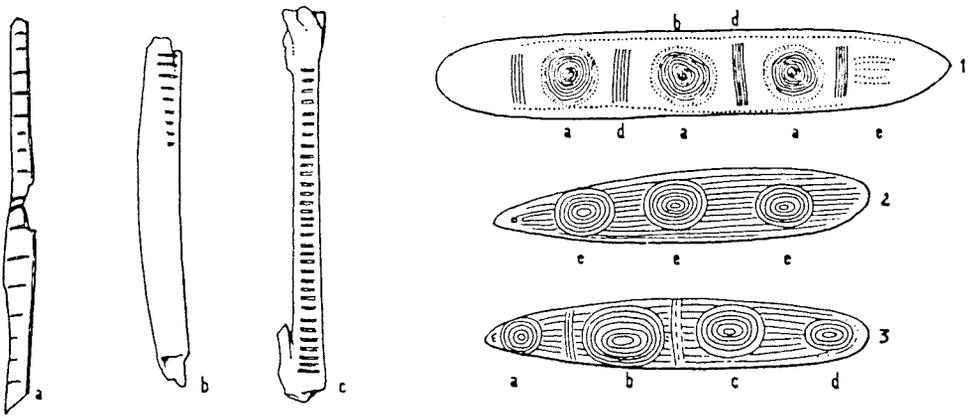


Fig. 1 Examples of churingas (Illustration from: Leroi-Gourhan, A. (1964), "Le geste et la parole" (Albin Michel, Paris), p. 264).

Exemples de churingas (tiré de: Leroi-Gourhan, A. (1964), "Le geste et la parole" (Albin Michel, Paris), p. 264).

The equilibrium between man and nature that was characteristic of Australian native groups up until the beginning of the 20th century – and probably of all groups living in a stone-age economic system – was destroyed at different times on the different continents. We cannot go into the details of this evolution and I am now jumping to the beginning of the 20th century, to the time when the hygienic ideals of bourgeois life were "translated" into new aesthetic ideals. This created new "symbolic correspondences" between man and architecture. Ornaments and all sorts of naturalistic adornments were rejected as "criminal" (Adolf Loos). A purification of all forms was being attempted. As usually, artists were the forerunners in the codification of new "symbolic correspondences". Bruno Taut spoke like a missionary to housewives, trying to convert them to preferring purified forms when they were choosing furniture. The whole of the German Bauhaus school may be considered to have been a most powerful institution serving to implement new aesthetic "values". In order to fit the new spirit of purification, forms – even well established ones, like those of chess

figures – had to be redesigned. Modernized figures are shaped to express the dogma of modern functionalism in architecture – form follows function; the simplest figures do the simplest movements.

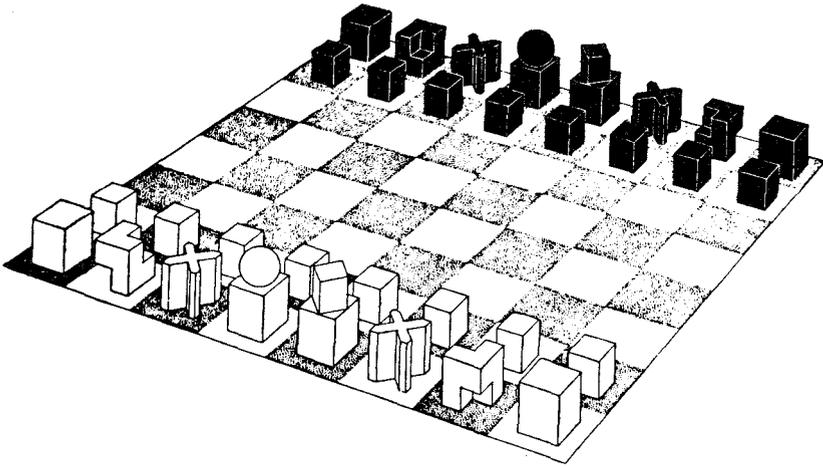


Fig. 2 The chess pieces designed by Josef Hartwig (Bauhaus, 1924) (Illustration from: Benevolo, L. {1980}, "The History of the City" {Scholar Press, London}, p. 869).

Les pièces du jeu d'échecs de Josef Hartwig (Bauhaus, 1924) (tiré de: Benevolo, L. {1980}, "The History of the City" {Scholar Press, London}, p. 869).

I am not sure that the attempted correlation between form of the figures and functions within the chess game is less arbitrary than the choices accidentally made by our stone-age forefathers when they selected phenomena in this world to fit their totems. It seems to me that, even now, the relation of man with his environment largely rests on a "mystic participation". The purified forms of the "New Practicability" are probably no better or more aesthetic than the older forms. They only "fit" better into the modern state of mind.

Leroi-Gourhan (188, 293) is convinced that even in the industrialized countries, most people still function on the edge of mystical participation, despite alphabetisation. This means that the majority of people accept the prefabricated "symbolic correspondences" of their modern surroundings, just as our stone age forefathers accepted the superstitious magical preconceptions on which their worldview rested. A new mode of integration or ecological balance that accompanied the growth of urbanization only influenced the mental state of a few people, that is, of those who did not have to constantly confront hard physical work.

Whereas in pre-urban, pre-literate times, the world resembled a network of unlimited symbolic correspondences, the construction of cities and the "linearisation" of symbols through the invention of the alphabet brought about a narrowing of the scope of symbolic correspondences. Thus, the continuity between the human subject and the objective world broke up. This break marks the decline of mythical thinking,

but it is also the beginning of material civilization and of architecture. However, large sectors of the world population still function on a much more primitive level, because they are not given the material means to participate in an urban civilization. They have not really adapted to the new symbolic correspondences that have been created by the development of urban industrial societies. They are thus unable to react adequately to many aspects of this development. Also, large parts of our mind will always function on primitive levels. But the "child in us" – or the "inner child" –, as I want to call our primitive potential, also gives us a chance to create new symbolic meanings.

Whether we want it or not, we cannot avoid reacting emotionally to our surroundings. Subconsciously, we constantly recognize our "inner destinations" in the outer world. What are the effects of the purified forms of modern buildings on our emotional condition? Our aesthetic preferences cannot be much different from the likes and dislikes of our totemistic forefathers. In liking modern forms we conform to a certain social order. The linearisation of all symbols has also brought a linearisation of symbolic correspondences, limiting their number to an unbearable degree. This is how the "one-dimensional man" (Herbert Marcuse) lives. He no longer has access to a "mystical substance" that makes for all the pre-logical assumptions defining primitive thinking. The linearisation of all symbols has narrowed our horizon.

So far, no protest movement has elaborated on the danger arising from the linearisation of symbolic correspondences. Even the '68 generation answered in traditional political terms to most of the conflicts that were prominent at the time. But I believe that a new kind of protest is arising, expressed through the activities of young sprayers – or "writers", as they call themselves. Their signs, "tags" or "pieces" are to be seen on subways and on other public transportation systems, but never on cars. City governments and transportation companies view them as enemies and prosecute them, accusing them of vandalism although authors see themselves as artists. Much of their work, and especially the larger pieces, obey the rules of aesthetics and is bright and beautiful. Group hierarchies are formed according to artistic ability (Graffiti-live, 1987). They risk a lot and severe fines or penalties may jeopardize their future. It is difficult to understand why these graffiti are considered crimes while those on the Berlin wall were very much appreciated as pieces of art and as attractions for tourists. The reactions to their authors sometimes remind me of the rage provoked thirty years ago by the Beatles letting their hair grow. To me, there is no doubt that all the emotions represented by graffiti have to be understood as reactions to the threat to familiar symbolic correspondences.

In a way, by aesthetically distorting the letters used in their "writings", sprayers return to the "graphic symbolism" that characterized the beginnings of human mental activity. But their symbolic competence lies at a very high level. Also, they use the most advanced technical means. They work with cans and not with brushes. They are television and computer kids, their slang is English. Since they are prosecuted, they observe clandestine rules and change their names very often. Their protest questions the "mystic participation" which urban industrial civilization has forced upon us by linearising all symbols and narrowing down all symbolic correspondences. Thus, one sprayer's graffiti, "When will you understand that there are no weapon against artists!" (Fig. 3), makes more sense than many famous political slogan.

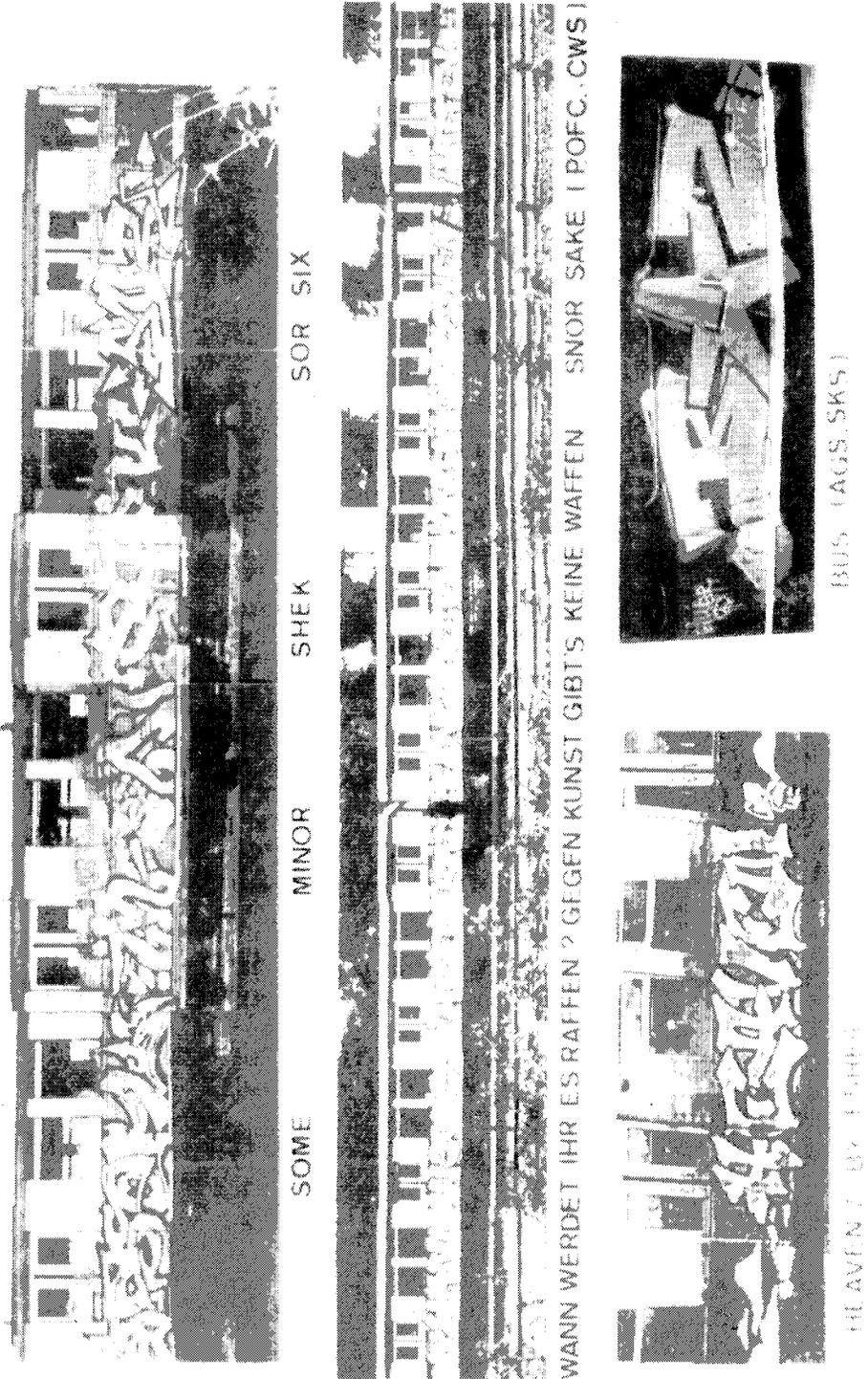


Fig. 3 Graffiti and tags (Illustration from: Enterprise, Hip Hop Magazin, "Berliner Trains", Jan. 92).  
 Quelques graffiti et 'tags' (tiré de: Enterprise, Hip Hop Magazin, "Berliner Trains", Jan. 92).

Whenever a social group attempts to modify the standard of symbolic meaning, the rest of society feels offended. The new mode of integration is felt to be unfamiliar and therefore strange; it disturbs the established order of things and this disturbance provokes aggressive feelings. This is one of the reasons why the greatest artists do not easily become popular during their life time. The young graffiti sprayers of our days reject the modern symbolic correspondences. Perhaps they feel that these correspondences stand for a social system or a way of life that is relatively closed to individual choice. And it may well be that, by spraying their messages on the trains, they experience a feeling of freedom.

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