

Consumer fetish

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Commercial ethnography has become an important activity for accessing the lived experiences of consumers that are constructed as “others” that firms have to discover and manage. In organizational contexts where the necessity to accumulate organizational knowledge about markets have become paramount, the figure of the “consumer” has become a quasi-magical object bestowed with the aura of the real, a fetish that comes to stand for the market, and symbolizes the firm’s effective orientation towards the market. In this paper we demonstrate how the anthropological concept of the fetish may be usefully employed in understanding the nature of this process, whereby the voices and images of consumers are endowed with power within organizational contexts. Consumer fetish is at once a quasi object and a manifestation of analogical knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Our paper focuses on corporate ethnographic research as a specific organizational activity which firms undertake to “get close” to consumers. While organizations buzz with talk about consumer needs (Appelbaum 1998; Lien 2004), firms usually rely on intermediaries, such as corporate ethnographers, to document the lives of people who purchase their products. As a consequence, ethnography has become increasingly visible in the business world through the practice of prominent companies like Harley-Davidson, Intel, Procter and Gamble or Microsoft that regularly conduct ethnographic studies. Recent books (Cefkin 2009; Mariampolski 2006; Sunderland and Denny 2007), professional conferences, and media exposure of star ethnographers such as Intel executive Genevieve Bell (Barnett 2005), have all contributed to a newfound interest in ethnography.

The rise of ethnographic research in corporate contexts is tightly linked to what du Gay and Salaman (1992) call the “cult[ure] of the consumer” (p.1), i.e. a powerful ideology of governmentality (Foucault 1979) structuring managerial work, where organizational members are “expected to work on themselves to become flexible, service-minded, and disciplined providers of customer satisfaction... in the name of profitability” (p. 32). In this context, organizational work revolves around the needs of consumers who are internalized as “sovereign” and social relations within the firm, which are expected to resemble those of the market, what du Gay and Salaman call an “enterprise culture” (p. 627). Previous research documents the extension of these trends in education (Kennedy, Goolsby and Arnould 2003; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon 2011) and management consulting (Press and Arnould 2011), and especially in international markets where the process of producing the

idea of the sovereign consumer where she previously did not exist is evident (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Mazzerella 2003).

In this context, we argue that consumers operate as powerful images within organizations, and that the current popularity of ethnographic research in corporate settings is precisely because of what we will term the fetishistic qualities of these quasi-objects. Some years ago Appadurai (1996) evoked the transformation of consumers into signs, and alluded to the “fetishism of the consumer”:

As for the fetishism of the consumer, I mean to indicate here that the consumer has been transformed, through commodity flows (and the mediascapes, especially of advertising, that accompany them) into a sign, both in Baudrillard's sense of a simulacrum which only asymptotically approaches the form of a real social agent; and in the sense of a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production.’ (Appadurai 1996, 42).

Despite these allusions to processes of fetishization, and the cult of the consumer, we know little about the way consumers stimulate and fascinate organizational members. Du Gay and Salaman (1992) suggest that employees are expected to satisfy consumers as a way to fulfil their own desires to be creative. But if the figure of the consumer has power over organizational members, we know little about the way these power relations come to be and shape firm activities. Our work bridges this gap by attending to the fetishization of consumers in the corporate world.

THEORIZING THE FETISH

Trade with the newcomers came to be regulated by ritual objects that the European referred to as ‘fetishes,’ on which they were asked to swear oaths and that were held to bind together otherwise unrelated people in contractual obligations. The power ascribed to such objects were in this case quite similar to the sort of sovereign power imagined by Hobbes; not only were they tokens of agreement, but they were themselves capable of enforcing those agreements because they were essentially forms of crystallized violence (Graebner 2001, 231).

As Graebner suggests here, the system of representation that anthropologists and ethnographers call fetishism, emerged from the encounter between mutually exotic cultures during the age of discovery (15th to 18th century) and in which European explorers of that premodern era drew upon their religious self-understanding to make sense of culturally distinctive ontologies (i.e., theories of things, Miller 1987, 2005). In our work, we draw parallels between the fetish, as conceptualized in anthropological theory as ritual objects regulating social relations (in the enforcing of contracts above) to think about “consumers”

as a type of fetish structuring organizational relations, and endowed with the same kind of power to which Graebner alludes.

To understand how “consumers” operate as fetishes, we go to anthropological theory. Comparative research has determined that in a nominative sense, the fetish has four characteristics. First, it is a material embodiment of various qualities, not a symbol of them. Secondly, the fetish is a composite that uniquely organizes heterogeneous qualities—specific, if immaterial desires, beliefs, narratives, but also practices—into a novel identity (Pietz 1985, 7). The third element of the fetish is that it is a unique and clearly socially constituted form of value (Pietz 1985, 9). The fourth theme associated with the fetish is that it materializes a social bond (Serres 1982, 147). This is because fetishism is practiced to achieve certain tangible effects for its maker, in traditional systems, healing or constraining action on another person at a distance (Pietz 1985, 10); the fetish renders this possible.

Organizational scholars have already highlighted the fetishization process at play in the organization-wide celebration of statistics. Carlon and her colleagues (Carlon, Downs and Wert-Grey 2005) show that statistical indicators about CEO performance have become organizational fetishes, separated from the human and social context of performance, obfuscating various organizational aspects of a CEO’s performance by replacing them with statistical measures such as a company’s earnings. Here we find the idea of the fetish as masking the real as in Marx’s (1981/1884) theory of commodity fetishism through which the appearance of goods in markets always defined in terms of the common metric of price conceals the human labour that was necessary to produce them.

In consumer research, past work has highlighted the relevance of the fetish. For example, Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) work out how consumers imbue some cherished possessions with the properties of the fetish, transforming what they call relics and replicas into personal fetishes. However, a limitation in this work is its reproduction of a psychological understanding of fetish associated with its role in consumers’ identity work (Belk 1991), rather than embracing the sociological concept of fetish derived from Marx and Durkheim (Shiermer 2011).

The identity focus neglects two critical dimensions of fetish. The first, initially signaled by Pietz and affirmed by MacGaffey (1995), writing of Kongolese ritual objects, is the fetish arises in the encounter or transitions between heterogeneous social and symbolic systems. The second is neglect of fetish’s instrumentality and its inscription in some sort of power game. This latter point is significant in the research showing how statistics designed to represent firm performance enter into power contests through which CEO employees wrest astronomical salaries from corporate stakeholders (Carlon, Downs and Wert-Grey 2005).

In this paper, we turn to another important kind of organizational fetishism, more specifically the quasi-religious devotion that representations of consumers provoke within firms. We ground our argumentation in rich empirical material on the fetishization of consumers within organizations.

FIELDWORK

Our fieldwork focuses on a particular type of consumer research activity: ethnographic projects where firms try to capture and analyze the everyday lives of consumers, often with

the help of an outside research firm, ostensibly in order to better understand their markets. As we discover, what often ensues is the transubstantiation of consumer research data into a fetish, which constitutes an emic, that is, to say a culturally particular way of knowing (Harris 1976) and vehicle of corporate practical action.

In this project data comes mainly from long interviews with corporate ethnographers and their clients. We recruited informants through different kinds of referrals, relying especially on existing contacts within the community of corporate ethnographers. While access to ethnographers working freelance or for research and consulting companies was relatively easy, we had more difficulty accessing client firms. Organizations are reluctant to share information about the kind of consumer research they do, often because they fear this will be used by competitors or attract negative publicity. Despite these reservations, we conducted interviews in several organizations. Wherever possible, we did several interviews within the same firm, and interviewed consultants and researchers who worked on projects together. In contrast to the image of the solitary anthropologist doing fieldwork in an exotic locale, the ethnographers we studied often work collaboratively with clients, innovation consultants, videographers and recruitment agencies. During their visits in people's homes, they are often accompanied by executives of the client firm. We interviewed a total of 35 executives, working in various types of roles and industries, in various locations. We did these interviews in 5 different countries, with a predominant focus on North America, where most of the large organisations regularly using ethnography are based.

THREE MOMENTS IN THE FETISHIZATION OF CONSUMERS

Materialization

By materialization we refer to the process through which consumers come to be seen and heard within the corporation. We recall here Pietz's insight that 'the truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment of being; its truth is not that of the idol, for the idol's truth lies in its relation of iconic resemblance to some immaterial model or entity' (1985, 7).

The sense that the consumer is an exotic object with strange and unexpected attributes is a surprising theme in our data. This theme of dealing with a 'weird' species comes across in the following quote, where ethnographer Donna talks about an engineer in a software company watching a video of consumers interacting with his software:

I will never forget the very beginning of the two day workshop, one of the engineers, he is an ergonomics guy, engineering guy and we kind of spend an hour together; made them watch the video and kind of created these really cool experiences for them...and he was like 'this is really interesting but these people are weird...the consumers'...he is like 'they are just weird they do weird things' by the end of the second day he was like 'I get it they are not weird they are...this is what they are like and we need to kind of embrace the fact that just because they don't use this function the way I designed it as an engineer doesn't make them weird'.

Thus ethnographic work brings back to the firm reports of the strange and exotic world of consumers; troublesome raw materials for which ‘solutions’ can be devised. As in classic accounts, ethnography mediates between two worlds, that of the consumer and the firm. A related notion that consumers are material assets for firms comes across in a quote below where Janet, a senior researcher in a consumer goods company, talks about the practice of videotaping every consumer encounter:

When I say we videotape everything, we video tape everything. Whenever we’re talking to a consumer, whether it’s in their home or in the grocery store, if we get permission from a store to do consumer work, we’re videotaping [...] I purchased a video camera for our team, because we videotape everything now (Janet, New Product Development Team Leader, Upstate Care).

Thus, ethnographers are acting on the principle of comprehensiveness in their approach to data collection; to encompass the domain of the consumers’ life world. Similarly, the urge to capture and stock the consumer asset as reassuring ‘artifact’ is vividly expressed in the excerpt below:

I mean there is always this aspiration, that they’re gonna watch the videos. ...and you know over the course of study they already spend more time than they can possibly do, on top of their regular work. But they feel like if they’ve got those videos then you know after our engagement’s done with them, they’re kind of safe. It’s more an artifact of reality than audio would be. That’s what I think they think (Sam, Innovation Consultant)

What emerges from interviews is the sense that encounters with consumers are important, even sometimes dramatic events; the example of Upstate Care recording every consumer encounter is an illustration of the importance of the consumer encounter. In materialization these exotic consumers are made tangible, through the projection of images on screens, photographs, and audio recordings. Video clips of exemplary consumers become a ubiquitous feature of consulting reports, and then are replayed and recirculated through marketing teams. Managerial customers “just love” these video artifacts. As a consumer ethnographer explained, they become powerful tokens of target markets that circulate within firms:

People just love video. They get engaged with it in a way that they don’t get engaged with words on a page. It’s a great take away for them to share internally with their team or with their partners. Obviously, there are limits as to how they can use it. They can’t be posting it on their websites or anything. But internally, it is an important learning tool for the organisation. Certainly, their videos embedded within that report. Sometimes they want a separate summary video made. So you might

make a 15-minute highlight reel of different aspects of the report. So if you have five key insights, you would have a few minutes of video that reflect that behaviour or that occasion.

Dramatically, the materialization of the consumer takes the form of composite photographs and even cardboard cut-out representations (see below two user personas developed for a software development project).



Figure 1. Photo of Persona Developed in a Corporate Setting (used with permission from Rosa Guðjónsdóttir)

The composite persona is another ubiquitous product of ethnographic segmentation studies. The personification process illustrates the desire to materialize consumers within organizations. But notice how in the image above, the personified image appears to watch over the employee pictured.

Marketers have employed personification to represent target segments (Reynolds, Crask and Wells 1977; Dutta-Bergman and Wells 2002). Advertising researchers have used the persona concept to understand the meanings spokespersons evoke (Stern 1994). Designers use personas, understood as representations of product users, to help them imagine their behaviour and goals (Cooper 1999). But persona has clearly evolved beyond these uses. One might even say it has gone a bit “feral” to paraphrase Genevieve Bell (2011). To see how persona has evolved as a product of corporate ethnographic research consider a 2010 report on the use of personas at Microsoft:

Meet Chris Green and Colin Wilcox. They're typical IT folks working in small and midsize businesses. Chris and Colin are 'personas' created by Microsoft's Windows Server team to represent the real IT workers that use the products and help make sure the company meets the needs of its customers[...] Bill Laing, Microsoft corporate vice president, Windows Server and Solutions Division, explains: 'Microsoft needs to be clear on 'who are we building this for' and 'how are we meeting the needs of these people?' Personas offer 'a way to focus the conversation... almost as if the customer were in the room.'"
<http://www.informationweek.com/news/222500024>.

Ford also used persona in the design of the Ford Verve:

Antonella is an attractive 28-year old woman who lives in Rome. Her life is focused on friends and fun, clubbing and parties. She is also completely imaginary. Ford is using characters like Antonella to bring a human element to the dry statistical research drawn from polls and interviews.[...] They are also like avatars, those invented characters used in online games and forums to symbolize a participant's personality.'
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/automobiles/19design.htm>.

Notice the use of the term avatar; an avatar is an active agent, not merely a passive representation. A picture of this persona Antonella is shown in figure 2 below. Notice in this image how the colour scheme of the car is identical to the colour scheme associated with the persona; greys and pink tones predominate. It is as if car and image constitute the hybrid persona.

Before Creating the Car, Ford Designs the Driver



A model depicting Antonella, the imaginary woman who was the guiding personality for the Ford Focus, a design study that was the basis for the new Fiesta. [More Photos >](#)

Figure 2. A Hybridized Image of Car and Persona

Personas are brought into being according to user researchers, because ‘the elicited user needs disappear during system development’ (Guðjónsdóttir 2010, 14). As we can see from our review of primary and secondary data, commercial personas exemplify the materiality of the fetish. They are unique compositions of heterogeneous elements, and as materialized in text, photos, video, and cut-outs, irreducibly material. While the generation of personas from commercial ethnographic research is relatively new, we found it ubiquitous across firms. Persona has become part of the standard vocabulary employed by commercial ethnographers and their clients. Moreover, these idealizations have become the ‘Holy Grail’ for judging the real, as a high placed executive with an anthropology pedigree admitted:

Yeah, you know, I would think in the consumer space, you know, again, that is really encountered even more heavily if you know, then it becomes this Holy Grail of you know, you want to find just the right real one and model everything around that and then as if it is going to stay fixed and we’ve got it now, you know... There is this kind of perfection that is assumed to go with that and again, I think for me the dishonesty is both in the questions of objectivity but also the assumption that, you know, once you do that it is so easy to want to fix it.

We do not believe this spiritual analogy is superficial. And as our informant suggests, researchers are incentivized to find ‘just the right real one’ and when they do there is a

tendency for firms to attribute perfection to this image and to want to 'fix' it as an exemplification of the market.

Animation

Animation refers to the process of imparting life and vitality to the material embodiments described above. Sculptors of Dogon statues display expertise when through their skill they 'give life' to the fetish, that is endow the fetish with some kind of vitality, so that one feels he is seeing a human being (Leloup 2011). Animation is also a process of simulation, first as mimesis, in the way ethnographers simulate the market by adding details about consumers, as already suggested in the descriptions of Chris and Antonella above. In addition, animation is also simulation, in the way that it masks an absence, here the absence of real consumers, replaced by personas ("avatars") and other material embodiments. Ethnography plays a central role in this context, in helping executives develop layers of narrative about consumers, and bring 'consumers to life'. No effort is spared in the quest to animate the persona:

Then the baton passes to us and we say 'we're going to go deep on these segments now' So we will go out to maybe five countries and we'll spend a day and a half with each person who represents that segment. We'll do a two hour long introductory interview and then we'll come back and spend a whole day with them, sometimes from 7am to 10 o'clock at night. So we collect this very rich contextual data and we bring it back to the office" (Donna, Senior User Experience Manager, Denver, emphasis added).

The language executives used to talk about the benefits of ethnography is telling. It is the word that simulates the market that brings life to the persona:

So, I think that video is often like the quote come alive. It's like the consumer come alive. So that's one reason. It has a verity kind of quality about it that really works. (Alicia, Ethnographic Consultant)

It is as if the word represented the kind of contagious magic Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) describe among collectors of rock star relics, once uttered and attached to the marketers' simulation, the persona, the word sticks the qualities of the original to the persona:

To me, just like a picture says a thousand words, having someone say it on video really brings it alive in people's minds where they can relate better to it and therefore it is just a better communication tool. (Janet, New Product Development Team Leader, Upstate Care).

Similarly in the following quote, Linda, an innovation consultant talks about a recurring project where their company is asked to bring 'a segment to life. She mentions the selective recruitment of exemplars and the careful staging employed to craft persona especially when the end product is to circulate widely within a firm ('show it to all their sales staff):

If the objective is really about sort of bringing a segment to life we are going to be very picky about who we talk to, sort of find the exemplary person [...] On a few occasions, when clients explicitly state that they want a high end deliverable that they want to show it to all their sales staff, or to all their executive team, we'll rent specialized equipments we'll work with a videographer, we'll stage it much more (Linda, VP of Research, Innovation Consulting Firm).

As brought to life inside the firm, personas are similar to what Baudrillard (1998, 31) calls 'sham objects,' and others like Shiermer (2011) 'quasi-objects', i.e. objects that offer an abundance of signs that they are real such as those enumerations captured in hours of video tape, but in fact are not. And moreover, such concatenations of signs induce a state of happiness for like miraculous medical treatments they are signs of success (Franke 2000), in this case success of the research enterprise, of effective segmentation and targeting.

Fascination

Fascination refers both to conflating simulacra with the real, and secondly, the ambiguity of control, that is, the power of consumer-fetishes so conflated to enthrall organizational members. The process of materialization, of bringing consumer voices, images, bodies within the corporation and of simulating their lives is a process of control, of being able to fashion consumers in a certain way. This is the idea of action on relevant targets at a distance referred to in the anthropological theory of the fetish. Diana, a user experience manager at a software company, explained how the use of personas within her corporation helped her colleagues produce 'solutions' (also see quote from Donna above) for a target market:

Personas are really powerful in our company. You take a customer segment, and you give them a name and a face and you make that person come alive. For engineering teams this is really powerful, we have something like 10 thousand engineers in our engineering team and we want to make sure that everyone understands the customer.

Our interviews often evoke the sense of ownership and control that personas provide to management. Personas provide power both relative to other members of a marketing team and over the market, the persona represents. Malcolm describes the fascination process evoking both conflation and control:

When we show the film the client says [lowered voice] ‘Oh, I went to that ethnography, that’s my person. That’s my person, and I was there.’ So there’s a real strong sense of identification- they are excited, and they buy into it, and they believe it even more. So, somehow the truth they have experienced it, they have seen it again and then they have the power- the client...to tell their other people about it, and validate it. (Malcolm, VP of Planning, Advertising Agency).

Thus, managers buy-in to and believe in the persona as an object of firm action, but then this image becomes a “power” that may be exerted. First once materialized and animated, the fetish becomes self-referential. It induces researchers to reconfirm its realness:

When it’s just illustrative segmentation data, we have to find that ‘busy mom’. And we have to bring her to life. And if the ‘Busy Mom’ Just Right Eater isn’t a busy mom, then we move on to the next person who is a Busy Mom. (Nate, ethnographic researcher, Sydney)

In other words, once Busy Mom Just Right Eater has been codified, the search is on to assert the conformity of real persons with the consumer fetish. According to Nate, the search continues until she is found. And second, it exerts influence over others. These consumer fetishes begin to circulate through companies, exerting influence (“bring used” to “anchor” experiential reality) as they do:

Our business partners and people outside of the groups know Philippe and Jane and Harry and Sue. And so it’s a – I guess – I mean they are, I think, being used in the way that they’re supposed to, which is like, you know, they’re the experience anchors.

Once animated in this way, consumer-fetishes become part of the organization’s life. Beyond fictional archetypes, persona become real, but also by materializing and containing consumers in the persona, they also become objects of control. They channel perception, (“we met three Marys”). But also under control, they may even become objects of contempt as in the following:

Some of these design tools, these personas are about taking that even further cause at least the soccer mom is sort of an archetype. But once you say that she is Mary and you and you rewrite Mary the soccer mom to make you feel like it’s real. And I hear people telling stories about ‘well yeah we met three Marys so far in the study’ and I think that is sort of letting you feel safe when you are embracing the strange. Now I think that is having the opposite of fact...I think the more you sort of pretty up your archetypes the more you create the option for contempt...

Contempt of course is the flip side of fear. And fear of the unruly consumer is never far below the surface (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Some of the strongest evidence for the ambiguity of control, and the power of the fetish derives from uncovering fear of the consumer “other” within the walls of the corporation. One anthropologist working for an American telecommunications company talked about not being allowed to actually meet any consumers, illustrating the sense of awe, wonder and fear that consumer-fetishes can induce:

So I put together a proposal to actually talk to the customers who were using the cell phones. And what was interesting about that is that I was absolutely not allowed to talk to any customers in person. They freaked out at the fact that I would actually talk to real people. They were worried about lawsuits; they were worried about all kinds of things. And it just wasn't in their model...

CONSUMERS AS ORGANIZATIONAL FETISHES

On a descriptive level, our novel contribution is demonstrating that in the hands of corporate ethnographers and their clients, customers become fetishized creations. We demonstrated that themes of materialization, animation and fascination, terms glossing scholarly work on fetishism, run through our primary data and that ready material exemplars of consumer fetishes can be found in secondary sources as well. Under the sign of the real, ethnographic researchers “bring back” heterogeneous source materials from the field that is crafted into material representations. Through video and other tools, these materials are brought “to life.” And finally these persona begin to exert power at a distance, not only in the crafting of consumer “solutions” but in influencing how subsequent research is moulded to confirm and deepen knowledge of the fetish, and in circulating through firms, and across departments to “anchor” the behaviour of managers and employees in service to the consumer fetish as target market. The fixing of these anthropomorphic persona well illustrates the idea of the fetish as a sign that has been captured by key actors, in this case the firm (Carlon et al. 2005, 479) for practical ends. Further, these processes provide a framework for examining how ethnographic consumer data circulates within firms.

According to MacGaffey (1995) and Carlon et al. (2005), the fetish arises in the encounter between heterogeneous social systems. In our case these systems are constituted by the lifeworlds contemporary persons inhabit and the world of the bureaucratic corporation, one function of which is to turn such persons into customers. We have described a process by which this occurs. That is, persons are transformed into fetishistic persona through ethnographic research. These customer-signs are objects of value to firms; they contend for their custom in the marketplace of images. Thus, the sign or figuration is sought after as an object of value. However, as consumer data the sign has gone adrift in the transition between semiotic systems, the system of the ethnographic researcher inspired by the anthropological conventions of contextualized thick descriptions of cultural experience, and the pragmatic sign world of actionable insights with bottom line implications that animates the firm (Denny and Sunderland 2006; Jordan 2012). Once fixed as persona in a system of persona the sign is captured in a second semiotic system. As fetish, persona such

as Microsoft's Chris or Colin or Ford's Antonella exemplify the erased distinction between signifier and signified that is the hallmark of traditional fetish. To paraphrase Carlon et al (2005, 480-481) the fetish as an object echoes another object, process, or relationship elsewhere. But with its origin effaced in the synthetic process of materialization and animation within the firm, the fetish is captured and takes up new power to operate within a second-order system, the firm's segmentation or new product development systems, for example.

Our analysis of ethnographic consumer research contributes to a better understanding of corporate ethnographic research as a social-material practice. More specifically, through a description of the devices and artefacts that surround ethnographic projects, we are better able to document how ethnographers and executives fashion consumers from heterogeneous bits and pieces of image, text, and artefacts. By attending to the reactions and emotions of executives exposed to these representations, we can explain how the fetishization of consumers happens. By contextualizing these practices within the discourse of the 'market-oriented organization', we can begin to analyze why this fetishization happens and what it means for our understanding of the contemporary organization.

CONSUMER FETISHIZATION AS ANALOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

If consumer quasi-objects –persona–are fetishes, our analysis leads to reflection about the nature of the knowledge firms develop when they extrude such objects. Here we want to show how the anthropological insight -- that representation is not the only ontological strategy that people adopt -- is particularly relevant to understanding this one product, only one, of ethnographic consumer research. Considering non representational modes of what Descola calls figuration (Descola 2005) can help elucidate some aspects of effective ethnographic knowledge production and suggest that consumer fetishes correspond to an alternative to representational ontologies.

In western society beginning in the 15th century, artistic representation whether of people by way of portraiture or nature by way of landscapes and still lives, emancipated itself from religious symbolism and mimetic figuration. Eventually the truth of the physical world and the truthful expression of the inner life of persons became objects of privileged concern in art as in science, disciplines less hermetically sealed from one another in that time. Note that Leonardo was both a gifted portraitist and pioneering anatomist. The idea that hidden laws governed both the human and the natural world gradually diffused. Eventually in portraiture the interior life of the human subject is deduced from a systemic amalgamation of realistic details concerning its exterior appearance.

By extension, the inner moral dimension of the individual is read from visual evidence. Consequently, resemblance to the real and verisimilitude became the principle criteria of the truth of painting until late in the 20th century (Blanc 2010). Scientific objectivity or realism is a branch of this aesthetic principle as well. Thus, on the one hand, scientific realism holds that the real and the true can be represented by graphic images (Tufte 2001), that is, the equations, models, plots, and figures that decorate scientific articles. Conversely the truth is discernible behind empirical detail if only the latter is captured in sufficient verisimilitude. Hence, the constant reference to invisible phenomena like law like generalizations, higher

order and latent constructs in positivist managerial science. Certainly in fields like management and market research, representing the material world, the world of behaviours, has become prioritized over what is seen as a fugitive and relatively superfluous interior spirit, albeit the interest in neuromarketing suggests a return to the search for inner essences. Nevertheless, the representation of hidden truth is a long standing pillar of modern western scientific ontology.

In non-western societies, by contrast, whether animist or totemist in orientation, images and sometimes sounds are not intended to reproduce reality. In other words they do not represent something; instead, they produce or activate certain elements that they render present in a form that people give to them (Stoller 1989). In societies that privilege totemic ways of knowing the spirit and the flesh are considered to be two divergent registers of being. This ontology is vividly reflected on the Northwest coast of North America in animal masks that open to reveal a hidden anthropomorphic image within. For divergent surface appearances mask a hidden interior kinship. In contrast, in societies that privilege animistic ways of knowing as captured in Australian Aboriginal painting, groupings of geographic features, animals, plants, and humans are epigenetically linked together through the Dream Time actions of various ancestral beings. There is no divergence between the interior and exterior manifestations of these things' instead they are all deemed to share certain characteristics. Knowledge is all about remembering, re-enacting, and re-embodying these linkages. In both totemic and animist systems of figuration, through myth and ritual forms and images distinctive forms of knowledge is transmitted and reproduced from generation to generation with minor variations.

The modes of figuration that a fourth system called analogical knowledge adopts are diverse. But notable for our research is the point that analogical figuration brings together disparate elements and gives them coherence through narrative. Analogical thinking holds that there is a fundamental difference between both the internal and external manifestations of things; Descola (2007) invites us to think of examples such as the ancient Chinese idea of the 1000 elements or the medieval European idea of the Great Chain of Being in which every single thing is uniquely created by God and inviolate. In analogical thinking the narrative principle that presides over the assemblage takes precedence over the diversity of the elements that compose the assemblage. In other words, in a universe conceived of as an indefinite combination of separate and autonomous entities, networks of correspondences establish linkages between entities. To make order, to create continuity within a myriad of interwoven differences, many visual mechanisms are called upon. Analogical thinking is the foundation of the fetish as described by ethnographers and theorized by classical sociologists like Durkheim (Ellen 1988; Pietz 1985; 1987; Schiermer 2011).

The fetish construct adds to understanding the nature of knowledge in organizations as it breaks out a definable category of figurative knowledge from "the residual category of tacit knowledge" where all cases of knowledge not easily classed as explicit, rationalistic knowledge amenable to representation in formulas and algorithms tend to be classed (Styhre 2004, 178; 183; Werr and Stjernberg 2013). It brings this form of knowledge out of the shadows through two moves, first by drawing on Descola to show how naturalistic representationalism is just one, albeit a powerful one, among several strategies by which people encode knowledge of the world. And second, by showing that fetish corresponds to

another class of knowledge strategies, and may be recognized through both its systematic and dynamic properties, properties that our data analysis revealed. Thus, consumer fetish as analogical knowledge becomes of the recognizable distributed organizational resources that comprise knowledge.

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