



ARTIGOS



# Signification, communication, and the subject of desire

Flávio Vinicius Cauduro

**Abstract:** Every product of *design* must evoke appropriate sensorial and symbolic resonances in the subjects to which it is offered, not simply by satisfying to their specific 'rational' needs but mainly by appealing to their 'irrational' desires. Thus, a successful product is one that evokes a polymorphous, complex 'image' of itself in people's minds, onto which targeted subjects may project their respective desires. According to Lacan's theories, therefore, any successful product is one that becomes a mediating sign between the conscious subject and his unconscious 'object' of desire, which means that products are consumed not merely for their 'objective' properties, as commodities, but as brands imbued with specific images and fantasies.

**Keywords:** signification; desire; *design*

**Resumo:** *Significação, comunicação e o sujeito do desejo* – Todo produto de *design* precisa despertar ressonâncias sensoriais e simbólicas apropriadas nos sujeitos aos quais se oferece. Não simplesmente apelando para necessidades racionais específicas de seus consumidores em potencial, mas principalmente se dirigindo aos seus desejos. Por isso, qualquer produto de sucesso, de acordo com as teorias de Lacan, é aquele que se torna um signo mediador entre o sujeito consciente e seu inconsciente 'objeto' de desejo, o que significa que produtos não são simplesmente consumidos por suas propriedades 'objetivas', como mercadorias, mas como marcas, com imagens e fantasias específicas.

**Palavras-chave:** significação; desejo; design

According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the fundamental driving force of the human subject is not libido, pleasure, Eros, as Freud saw it, but desire – desire for 'love', that is, desire for *recognition* by the idealized Other, as represented by physical 'others', that is, by other representative entities and institutions of the Other (first the Mother, then the Father, the School, the

Gang, the Loved One, the Family, the Relatives, the Club, the University, the Professional Circle, the State, the Party, the Nation, the Church, etc).

Lacan's fundamental thesis is that desire is preceded by a series of dialectical, biological splittings of the subject, and that desire only becomes human (shared by others as well) when the child enters language; for the child then becomes 'castrated', in the sense that he/she then experiences for the first time the catastrophe of negation (he/she is *not one* with the mother) and the trauma of discovering the limitations of his/her being. He/she has to recognize the tragedy of his/her finitude and biological limitations, in realizing his/her mortality and his/her sexual position, when signifying his/her desires in relation to others' desires.

The entry of the child into language and into the laws of culture, thus forces the subject to articulate his/her biological *needs* in the field or the locus of the Other; that is, through *symbolic demands* addressed to the other (primarily the mother in the first years). The Other is thus assumed to be that *symbolic other* which the subject assumes to be in a position of authority, knowledge, power, and from which he/she learned the first linguistic signifiers and grammatical rules. By psychic transference, as Lacan stresses, the 'other' becomes, in the subject imaginary, the personification of an absolute, all-knowing Other. This first occurs, as we have pointed before, at the level of parents, but thereafter it also includes relatives, teachers, doctors, religious figures, etc, the presence of the Other being later on transferred to institutions and their laws: the family, the school, the church, the university, the labour union, the military establishment, the professional body of practice, the media, the nation, science, etc. They constitute, as well as are constituted, as symbolic objects of desire by the subject's fantasies.

Thus, the subject is always trying to find and assert his/her identity and personal value by aligning his/her practices and beliefs with those held by persons, institutions and theories he/she recognizes as endowed with the knowledge, therefore the power, for satisfying his/her most fundamental need (love or recognition), and thus assumed to be capable of filling up the void of his/her existential lack and abolishing his/her feeling of a *primaeval* loss. These imaginary representatives of the Other, however, are also constituted as such by sociocultural forces.

For that reason, Lacan stresses that the subject's demand, being articulated through a chain of linguistic signifiers, *constitutes* as well as *is constituted* by the Other as signifying positions which are assumed to possess the privilege of satisfying his/her needs, from which he/she can have or be the objects of his/her desires. Thus, demands formulated by the subject explicitly *nominate*, or

designate, through signifiers, personal as well ideological beliefs on the power of others — persons, institutions, commodities, beliefs, theories, etc. (signifiers of the Other), imagined as capable of fulfilling his/her desire for being or having an object of an other's desire. Which means that the subject, in externalizing any demand, is forced to align its desire with the imagined desire of the Other, by assuming the Other's language, culture, socio-economic practices, habits, customs, beliefs, etc. — because his/her demands, in order to be intelligible to others, have to be addressed in such a way they can be recognized as originary from the same Other of his/her others too. That is, he/she tries to follow the same symbolic patterns and norms of the Other of his/her addressed others, the Other constituting an imaginary absent third party which verifies all meanings in intersubjective communications. Thus, the subject both articulates shared linguistic signifiers on his/her own way, in signifying his/her desire through communications addressed to others, as well as he/she is also submitted to the normative effects of those articulations.

For that reason, Lacan (1966-1977, p. 84) departed from the structuralist tradition, which viewed communication as a nonproblematic linear transmission of pre-signified linguistic 'signs' (fixed correlations between signifiers and signifieds) provided by a language-like-code. Lacan, before Derrida, had already realized the sliding of the signified under the signifier, proposing instead the concept of the 'signifying chain', that sequence through which signifiers are articulated in *paroles*, and the temporary closure of meaning through certain privileged, underlying, absent signifiers of one's desire, which he metaphorically dubbed *points de capiton* (anchoring points), somehow associated with the *primaeva* *objet petit a*. As he put it:

[...] we can say that it is in the chain of the signifiers that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' [...] We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier [...] one has only to listen to poetry [...] for a polyphony to be heard, for it to become clear that all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score. [...] There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended 'vertically', as it were, from that [anchoring] point. (LACAN 1966-1977, p. 153-154).

Rejecting any metaphysical notion of the signified or the concept, for being a convict materialist, Lacan concentrated his attention in the flow of signifiers: being a psychoanalyst, he realized that language is fundamentally *dialogical* and that, therefore, when a subject speaks he/she is first of all speaking with his/her

other self. Which means that in articulating any externally perceptible chain of signifiers, the subject is also under the articulation of another associated, subconscious chain of signifiers, which in turn connected to another one, and so on. As Muller and Richardson observe:

Each signifier has what Saussure would call a corresponding conceptual content (signified), but for Lacan the signifier does not refer to its individual signified but rather to another signifier/association, and this in turn to another in a chain of signifiers. Lacan [1977: p. 153] describes this 'signifying chain' as 'rings in a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings'. (MULLER & RICHARDSON, 1983, p. 15).

In effect, Lacan emphasizes, in the same way as Peirce, that meaning does not reside in any single word in a sentence, but rather it is an effect of a subsequent translation of a first association of signifiers into other chains. For Lacan noted that meaning is an unconscious, retrospective effect of a chain of signifiers, and not the correlative of a single signifier, as Saussure had proposed.

As Fages (1971, p. 21) interprets it, according to Lacan the ensemble of signifieds produced by an enunciation reacts historically on the network of articulated signifiers. For being diachronically determined, the overall signified of a sentence (or of several sentences, or of a discourse) is only produced and completed after the last signifier of the chain is delivered. But as soon as this meaning is obtained, a new sentence or a new thought (that is, new signifiers) occurs and its meaning immediately affects the meaning of the preceding sentence, and thus successively: the signified is always changing in retrospect, it is always sliding under the chain of signifiers, being oriented in that movement by one's desire, which always aim at a wholeness of the subject and a totalization or *closure* of meaning (for when meaning is 'found', that closure or capture effects an imaginary sensation of power in the subject: his/her imaginary order has once more dominated, or grounded, or made intelligible to his/her self, an articulation of public symbols).

Thus, Lacan concluded that any correlations between signifiers and signifieds had always been established between two parallel and never ending chains, one conscious and the other unconscious, with occasional points of anchorage between there here and there along the flow. As Coward and Ellis (1977) explain it:

Language is seen [by Lacan] to have the dizzying effects of a dictionary: each word, definition by definition, refers to the others by a series of equivalents; every synonymous substitution is authorized. Language results in a tautology, without at any moment having been able to 'hook onto' any signified at all. In the face of this endless tautology, in which resides the

origin of the incessant sliding of the signified under the the signifier, what does Lacan suggest to explain the fact that language lends itself so readily to the 'effects of meaning'? Why, as Laplanche and Leclaire ask, does the word 'x' only have a group of meanings 'b, c, d', rather than opening endlessly on to an alphabet of meanings? It is here that Lacan introduces his 'points de capiton'...privileged points at which the direction of the signifying chain is established...[and which are] located in the diachronic function of the phrase, in that meaning is only ensured with its last term, that is, retrospective meaning. (COWARD & ELLIS, 1977, p. 97-98).

In effect, as Lacan said:

[...] only the correlations between signifier and signifier provide the standard for all research into signification. [...] For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it. As it is seen at the level of the sentence when it is interrupted before the significant term: 'I shall never...', 'All the same it is...', 'And yet there may be...'. Such sentences are not without meaning, a meaning all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it. (LACAN 1966-1977, p. 153).

Those fictional *points de capiton* must be more or less familiar to those engaged in a dialogue, otherwise meaningful communication would be impossible. Such points of reference or 'anchorage' thus tend to effect a 'closure' of meaning, preventing the possibility of an endless semiosis taking place in practice. Being more or less shared and orienting meaning to specific directions, they can only come from the symbolic order, in the form of privileged, habitual correlations between signifiers which are quite difficult for the subject alone to change, for they belong to various ideological structures or belief systems whose discourses and their stereotypes are re-produced by many people many times: common-sense, rationality, science, religion, law, etc. These discourses *in-form* our subjectivity, since they provide stable, recurrent, reassuring positions of signification, and we are materially subjected to them daily, in the form of repetitive rites, rituals, practices, conventions which constitute and channel our mind, body and emotions in particular directions — those necessitated by institutions in order for them to continue their existence and be able to maintain their power. However, such privileged anchorage points are not exclusively symbolic, for the subject's imaginary also has its own predilections (recurring fantasies). It is for that reason that 'language' alone is not sufficient to represent the whole of signification, for *linguistic signifiers, if not correlated with images, are tautological*, as Lacan perceived. More than that, formal or 'objective' linguistic articulations are relatively weak in evoking emotions, in comparison with other (musical, visual, gestural, etc) sensorial signifiers.

For instance, Weedon (1987) points out that ideologies do not work only through rational, logical, symbolic discourses, but also through fantasies, emotions, playful actions, etc. She says that 'The reliance of Catholicism on faith rather than rationality has its compensations for the individual in the degree of emotionality which the Church's religious practices produce' (WEEDON, 1987, p. 96).

Realizing language's tautological functioning, Lacan thus proposed a new formulation for the concept of 'language', which in turn affected previous, traditional (non-dialogical, one way, mechanistic) views on 'social communication':

Human language [...] constitutes a communication in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form [...] [...] when you congratulate yourself on having met someone who speaks the same kind of language as you do, you do not mean that you met with him in the discourse of everybody, but that you are united to him by a special kind of speech [...] it is by the intersubjectivity of the 'we' that it assumes that the value of a language as speech is measured. (LACAN, 1966-1977, p. 85).

According to Lacan (1966-1977, p. 86), thus, the function of 'language' is not simply to 'inform', in the technical sense of the word, but to evoke, *to resonate*, to establish relations and associations between subjects and their signifiers:

What I seek in speech is the response of the other. [...] In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me. (LACAN, 1966-1977, p. 86).

For all that, as Kristeva (1969/1981, p. 13) has observed, the message addressed to the present/absent other, in any act of communication, is, at the same time, also addressed to its sender from the locus of the Other: in principle, the subject only emits what itself (its-self as constituted by the Other) can decipher. Any message is always addressed, in the first place, to an Other internalized by the sender. Coward and Ellis (1977) make Kristeva's point more explicit:

Communication involves more than just a message being transmitted from the speaker to the destinee: the speaker is at the same time the destinee of his own message, because he is capable of deciphering a message as he is speaking it and because he cannot say anything he does not in some way understand. Thus the message which is intended for the other person is in one sense intended for the person who speaks: you talk to yourself from the place of another. Equally, the destinee can only decipher what he is capable of speaking himself. Thus, communication involves not just the transfer of information to another, but the very constitution of the speaking subject in



relation to its other, and the way in which this other is internalised in the formation of the individual. (COWARD & ELLIS, 1977, p. 79-80, my emphasis).

In other words, in the very act of communicating with another subject, we are systematically being (re)positioned by the signs being exchanged. Or, as Peirce had already realized in his semiotic theory, the subject uses signs as much as signs use the subject.

In terms of writing and typographic design, the occurrence of such obligatory positionings has also been acknowledged by Waller (1987), who observed in his doctoral thesis (*The typographic contribution to language*):

The absence of a physical reader does not mean that the communication is no longer conversational. Just as readers enquire of texts as well as receive information, so the composition process objectifies the writer's thoughts and reflects them back for analysis and amendment. In the light of feedback from listeners' expressions and questions, speakers hesitate, back-track, repeat or retract; writers do the same things but privately, in response to their own reaction to what they have written. (WALLER, 1987, p. 175, my italics).

But, we should add, it is not only the subject's thoughts which are *objectified* in the process of signifying — the subject itself is also objectifying him/herself and his/her reality anew, re-constituting, re-producing, and trans-forming, through signification and communicational practices, what had been part of his/her subjectivity until then. "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object", said Lacan (1966-1977, p. 86). The subject is always in the process of becoming, in any signifying practice: "the subject constitutes himself in the search for truth" (LACAN 1966-1977, p. 94). Furthermore, any communication is always already a signification, a writing, involving a triad of positions: the conscious *subject*, his/her preconscious *Other*, and the unconscious, signified *other* (*in praesentia* or *in absentia*).

Therefore, in a semiotic practice so dependent on creative transgressions like graphic design or visual communication, we have to remember that the designer's *own* reactions arise, in the last instance, not from an unique, singular, self-assured, permanent *self* or *ego*, but rather from a continuous process of association and dissociation of signifiers, evoked by conflicting ideological positions present both in his/her preconscious (his/her present sociocultural habits and beliefs) and his/her unconscious affects and fantasies, which are (re)activated by specific communicational practices, as well as objectified by his/her reading of several other concurrent external 'texts' participating in the process of signification (the manuscript of the author, the briefing of the client, the requirements of distributors and sales representatives, the recommendations of the marketing sector regarding anticipated consumer needs and preferences,

the limitations of the producer or manufacturer, etc). Thus, the subject's unconscious desire for love and recognition by the Other (his/her family, parents, friends, colleagues, clients, etc) is always present in practices of communication (dialogue).

Waller (1987, p. 298) concludes in his thesis that any solution elaborated, or negotiated, by graphic designers is basically constrained by both stereotyped *genre conventions* and circumstantial *functional constraints*: topic, artefact, and access 'structures'. That is, according to Waller, design practice is under the determinations of communicational 'conventions', as well as depend also of the expressive 'intentions' of the *writer*, of the physical 'constraints' of the *medium*, and of the anticipated 'needs' of an imaginary *reader*. It should be observed, though, that all such factors are *constructed* by the subject, rather than concretely 'given' by one's 'objective' reality.

Predictably enough, Waller's structuralism, in his modelling of the design process, does not account for the designer's own motivations, neither for his/her subjectivity and desires, and not even for those imagined to please specific clients and audiences. Design is a process which requires a permanent negotiation of beliefs and desires, of conflicting interests, of imaginary identifications, and whose practice leads thus to hybrid results, thanks to the intervention of the fantasies of clients, designers and audiences in that process. One American pioneer of modern design and a teacher at Northwestern University, Dave Chapman, used to tell his students and clients, through his educational and professional practices, in Chicago, USA, during the 70's, that 'Design is *the business of relating things to people*' — a synthetic and pragmatic definition which encompasses many 'practical truths'.

Because, first of all, design practice, as capitalist nations see it, should be most of all motivated as well as constrained by profit-making, which is the next-best signifier to power. No design task will be sponsored or undertaken unless its promoters are convinced its products will bring reasonable economic benefits and dividends to them, be it either in a short, medium or long term. Moreover, once the design process is started, it may be stopped and abandoned at any time, whatever its stage of development, once its sponsors realize that some circumstances have changed and, for one reason or another, the product under design no longer constitutes a viable financial or commercial proposition.

Secondly, because whatever design produces has to be sold to and consumed by people. Thus, its products have to appeal to people's desires one way or another — the most rational, economical, intelligent, familiar, predictable solution is not necessarily the most attractive or desirable one for consumers. Fashions and fads have to be accounted for, much more than Waller's static

'genres'. As Chapman also used to observe, 'People buy promises, miracles, fantasies, rather than commodities'.

Therefore, any product of design has to evoke appropriate sensorial and ideological resonances (familiar stereotypes) in the subjects it addresses. Not simply by aiming at some specific 'rational' need of its potential consumers (that is, by assuming a clear *position* in the market, declaring what it does and to whom it is addressed), but mainly by connecting itself with people's 'irrational' desires. And for that any product should present significative differences, it should elicit a polymorphous, complex 'image' in people's minds, images onto which targeted subjects may project and alienate their respective desires. For any product is a signifier, a mediator, connecting one's desire with the desire of another. More than anything else, a product is also an interpretant-sign that mediates between the subject and the 'object' of his/her desire.

For that reason, products are sold not as simply 'objective' commodities, as traditional materialists see it, but like brands having specific images (fantasies). Products have to address appropriate, socioculturally determined, subjective fantasies of desire. Even bananas nowadays, in the US, are branded and differentiated through promotional, anthropomorphised, stereotyped names and images ('Chiquita', for instance).

David Ogilvy, an advertising practitioner of some reputation, once said, in the same way as Chapman did, that products are bought for what they promise, and that this is the main reason they are branded (differentiated from similar ones through 'names' and specific signifiers). Each brand in turn is associated with a specific image, with a preferred and imposed temporary constellation of linguistic and visual signifieds, in order to attract (through the emotional, positive reactions it thus obtains) a certain segment of its specific market:

You... have to decide what 'image' you want for your brand. Image means personality. Products, like people, have personalities, and they can make or break them in the market place. The personality of a product is an amalgam of many things — its name, its packaging, its price, the style of its advertising, and, above all, the nature of the product itself... .

Take whiskey. Why do some people chose Jack Daniel's, while others choose Grand Dad or Taylor? Have they tried all three and compared the taste? Don't make me laugh. The reality is that these three brands have different images which appeal to different kinds of people. It isn't the whiskey they choose, it's the image. The brand image is 90 per cent of what the distiller has to sell... Give people a taste of Old Crow, and tell them it's Old Crow. Then give them another taste of Old Crow, but tell them it's Jack Daniel's.

Ask them which they prefer. They will think the two drinks are quite different. They are tasting images. (OGILVY, 1983, p. 14-15).

As we notice, Lacan's formulations and advertising insights have much in common. For both stress, in their last instance, the power of representations and discourses in defining one's subjectivity, through appeals addressed to subjects' particular, but socioculturally determined, desires.

According to Lacan, all our needs are subjected to 'the defiles of the signifier', defiles which are syntactic articulations of mostly visual elements through which our desire flows, or is oriented, when we relate ourselves to others through intersubjective discourses (the network of verbal, visual and gestural familiar signifiers through which our demands are articulated).

Thus, the translation of one's subjective needs into symbolic demands implies that the subject formulates them from the locus of the Other, which means the abolition of the particularity of one's needs. For the articulation of linguistic signifiers is incapable of adequately 'expressing' one's particular feelings and emotions. This forced alienation of one's being into linguistic signifiers has been happening since one's birth, when one first learned that the satisfaction of his/her basic needs depended on his/her mother's breast. Even then, the child needs, formulated in cried demands, were already unsatisfied: "Oral satisfaction ensuing from the feeding of the child does not satisfy the multitude of needs of which the infant's body is a complex" (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 118). For that reason, the child became accustomed to articulate any particular need in unconditional terms, in excess, wishing for total, unconditional love. Which, of course, is an impossibility: "Satisfaction, then, can only be a frustration producing a sense of loss, almost an anguish, at the lack of universal satisfaction obtainable from the other" (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 119).

When the child enters language and the symbolic order, that lack which the subject senses in his/her other, the realization that the other cannot provide all that one demands, becomes more intensely felt, since the subject has then undergone additional lacks, as Lacan stresses. Therefore, according to Lacan, desire is the resulting *difference* produced from the subtraction of the appetite for satisfaction of needs from the demand for love — the difference between what the subject unreasonably expects to obtain from the other and that which he/she effectively obtains (always less). Desire is, thus, a *metonymic residue*, as Lacan sees it, which puts the subject in a constant process of search and research for his/her missing complement, for that retrospectively and unconsciously fantasised *primaeva* object of his/her desire, that his/her unconscious feels capable of filling his/her existential gap, of closing all sociocultural differences one day (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 119).

Lacan also posits the castration complex as the most powerful agency in the constitution of desire, for it is around sexual difference that the discourse of the Other is organized to cultural ends in western social formations. The desire which is thus finally constituted forces the transition of the subject from the imaginary to the symbolic stage of signification. The subject assumes a sexed position in language and in the symbolic order by the effect of a lack for which his/her imaginary can no longer compensate. Desire is thus definitively produced in the subject by the acquisition of the symbol, which promises him/her a better mastering of the satisfaction of his/her needs (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 104).

That metonymic residue which is desire, according to Lacan, lives in the subject's unconscious and it is likely to be called up into consciousness at any moment by a metonymic relation between signifiers (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 120). Thus,

[...] desire results from the process by which the subject is produced in a system of finished positions, that is, signification, in order to master dependence on an unpredictable source of satisfaction. Desidero (I desire) is according to Lacan the Freudian Cogito, since what is essential in the primary process (the play of combination and substitution in the signifier which determines the institution of the subject) traces the route of desire... .[T]he play of displacement and condensation, in which he [the subject] is doomed in the exercise of his functions, marks his relation as subject to the signifier. (COWARD; ELLIS, 1977, p. 120-21).

Thus, signification, according to Lacan, is always at the service of desire. Since signification is dependent on the Other, our subjectivity is defined by its symbolic (conventional) representations. However, what the Lacanian semiotic postulates fail to stress is that the symbolic order is neither homogeneous nor monolithic, but rather constituted by a plurality of contradictory, competitive discourses: it is always possible to have the positioning of a subject changed in that order, by the 'displacement' of his/her unconscious desire towards alternative representations for his/her subjectivity and make it 'condense' on alternative promises of satisfaction, through which new possibilities of signifying are found, new meanings are produced, new ideological positions are taken up. But for that plurality and competitiveness to be significant, for change to be a real possibility, one's sociocultural formation should allow the democratic proposition of several, equivalent alternative positions of signification as well as should allow the existence of ideologically different practices of communication. Otherwise, subjects might know of alternative positions and practices in theory, but be deterred from experimenting most of them in practice, due to oppressive norms,

laws and regulations. In other words, it is necessary to find ways of opposing the representations of the dominant and prevailing ideologies, by pluralizing discourses and objects of desire.

Since the practice of social communication is the only means by which alternative discourses, positions and practices are able to be articulated and *represented*, made visible, in the symbolic order, the democratization of the media and its representations become critically important for maintaining a plurality of sociocultural meanings in any social group.

Moreover, as Coward and Ellis (1977) argue, ideology and language are distinct but inseparable, for subjects need ideology as much as language to act within social structures — as such, ideology is in no way ‘false consciousness’, as Marx and others posited, for there can be no neutral *positions* of signification according to contemporary semiotics (notwithstanding the refusal of deconstructionists to declare or recognize their respective positions). We all need to *believe* in ideological representations in order to function in society, otherwise we would have to retreat to a schizophrenic position. Ideology puts the contradictory subject in place, in positions of coherence and responsibility for his/her own actions, so that the subject can act productively. It assures the subject of his/her autonomy, of his/her ‘individuality’, as if he/she were always the originator of his/her ‘own’ ideas and always completely in control of its acts and thoughts, thus fully responsible for their consequences.

For that reason, the existence of the unconscious is necessary: it is the repository of everything that has been repressed in the subject (feelings, images, sensations) by its acquisition of a ‘language’, which provides the subject with the basic linguistic signifiers and grammatical rules for the articulation of his/her subjectivity through it. Thus, ‘the unconscious is essentially made up, not by what consciousness can call up at some point, but by what is refused entry into consciousness’ (COWARD; ELLIS, p. 103). Everything that threatens our ego ideal, our ‘individuality’, stays there, repressed, in a latent state: basically, heterogeneous, emotionally charged signifiers which we cannot articulate most of the time because of rationalized norms, conventions, habits, regulations. But we can, nevertheless, evoke them through the so-called creative, innovative, artistic practices which social formations made available for the partial de-repression of the subject.

As Young (1981) puts it,

The force of the Lacanian reading of Freud is to show that the ego is not a totality that can assimilate unconscious processes. The term ‘ego’ covers a number of different functions — narcissism, introjection, identification, etc — that have never been and never will be assimilated into a whole. Nevertheless

the subject, as a bundle of different functions, identifies with an image of the desired totality. The repressive movement in psychic activity, including dreams, will be against the movements of the unconscious that disrupt the ego's illusion of its own totality. In texts, the repressive function of reading will be against processes or structures in a text which disrupts the plenitude of meaning. In spite of this, of course, unconscious movements will always escape. Indeed, the unconscious is that which always escapes. (YOUNG, 1981, p. 177-178, my italics).

Repression, according to Lacan, is necessary for the entrance of the subject into the symbolic order, but it produces the splitting of the subject into two: the conscious, rational, consistent, language-user 'individual' and the unconscious, irrational, nonlinguistic 'animal' of desire.

Unconscious desire does not recognize time, boundaries, limits, prohibitions. Thus, it threatens sexual difference, official taxonomies, 'rational' categorizations, hierarchies, compartmentalizations,. Desire needs thus to be controlled through signifying practices, for social formations need a subject able to recognize him/herself in its symbolic institutions in order to have agents capable of, and willing to re-produce them for future generations of subjects. If he/she cannot find its signifying place in a social formation, due to traumas occurred in his/her childhood and upbringing, which have made his/her desire too deviant in relation to most other desires, thus bringing about fundamental alterations to his/her signifying processes, he/she falls ill (COWARD; ELLIS, p. 119), becoming a psychotic who will require special treatment (CAMERON, 1985, p. 119).

On the other hand, even when 'normal' adaptation to the instituted symbolic practices of a social formation takes place, the subject's unconscious desire will not cease disrupting signification, with more or less intensity, according the subject and the circumstances considered. Desire, and its effects, cannot be suppressed, only *transferred*. Desire will always make itself felt in consciousness, indicating — through recurring 'returns of the oppressed', what a given sociocultural formation had to *repress* in order to reproduce itself through its subjects.

## References

- CAMERON, D. (1985). *Feminism & linguistic theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- COWARD, R; ELLIS, J. (1977). *Language and materialism: developments in semiology and the theory of the subject*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- FAGES, J. B. (1971). *Comprendre Jacques Lacan*. Pensée, Toulouse: Edouard Privat.

KRISTEVA, J. (1969-1981). *Le langage, cet inconnu*. Points, Paris: Seuil.

LACAN, J. (1966-1977). *Écrits: a selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock. (A selection from *Écrits* originally published in 1966, Paris: Seuil).

MULLER, J. P.; RICHARDSON, W. J. (1982). *Lacan and e language: a reader's guide to 'Écrits'*. New York: International Universities Press.

OGILVY, D. (1983). *Ogilvy on advertising*. London: Pan.

WALLER, R. H. (1987). *The typographic contribution to language*, PhD thesis, Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading.

WEEDON, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

YOUNG, R. (Ed.) (1981). *Untying the text: a post-structuralist reader*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

FLÁVIO VINICIUS CAUDURO is a professor at PPGCom PUC-RS and Editor of Art & Design of the Journal *Famecos*. He holds a PhD from the University of Reading's Dept. of Typography & Graphic Communication, UK, and is a 1-D researcher of CNPq, Brazil.

flaviocauduro@yahoo.com

*Recebido em 3 de outubro de 2006 e  
aprovado em 20 de dezembro de 2006*