Conclusion: The Fullness of Diamonds
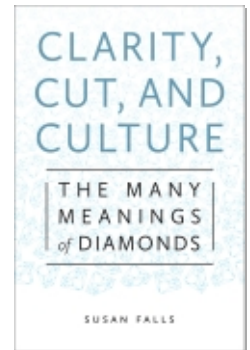
Published by

Falls, Susan.
Clarity, Cut, and Culture: The Many Meanings of Diamonds.
NYU Press, 2014.
Project MUSE.   https://muse.jhu.edu/book/31005.

→ For additional information about this book
   https://muse.jhu.edu/book/31005

CONCLUSION: THE FULLNESS OF DIAMONDS

✦

When I started doing research for this project, I was surprised by the variety of ideas, images, and metaphors in consumers' stories that diverged from the ad-based associations with class and romance that I had expected. Going far beyond those symbolic associations, people treat diamonds as if they have personalities, give them sacred histories, see them in terms that are primarily metaphorical or poetic, or deploy them performatively. Noting the variety of consumers' engagements with diamonds, I began looking for social theory that would embrace such idiosyncrasy, since accounting for variation, difference, and the unexpected is a prerequisite to making the world intelligible. I have presented one idea for integrating idiosyncrasy here in a study of the commodity.

"Consumption" is understood as the set of practices, including meaning making, that people undertake with things—commodities—they buy. I have used the term "commodity" to mean objects (though of course, services and experiences might be included too) that are usually mass produced, are often highly marketed and/or branded, and are sold in exchange for cash or its equivalent on the open market. Commodities usually have conventional, socially sanctioned—but not overdetermined—uses and meanings. The presence of commodities in contemporary American society can hardly be overstated. They acquire meaning, and it is by, through, and with commodities that we negotiate our lives. But how do things come to mean anything at all? This book

has examined people's stories to uncover the range of semiotic ideologies, or the kinds of signs diamonds are taken to be, but what can such a study suggest about consumption in general? Looking at some of the particular issues that shape the meaning of diamonds—authenticity, sensuality, luxury, and symbolic load—can help us open up the study of consumption to incorporate idiosyncratic meanings.

On a meta-level, fakes index the power of real diamonds. Many commodities engender fakes or replicas: "Gucci" watches, "leather" handbags, and gemstone jewelry can all be bought on the streets of New York for a fraction of the price one pays for the "real" things in a retail store where "authentic" goods are sold. Diamond owners frequently remarked upon the fact that diamonds are "easily faked" or that there are "lots of fakes out there." And some people are comfortable with wearing fakes, or even prefer fakes or knock-offs. The existence of simulated diamonds attests to the power of real diamonds' meaning, though they do have an ambiguous relationship. Fakes, for example, encode a set of commentaries on "real" diamonds through iconic resemblance; they may operate as a play for status, but the ease with which they are faked speaks to an uneasy relationship with their utility as a status marker.

Industry as well as consumer concern with authenticity is reflected in the professionalization and growth of grading and certification bodies such as GIA. In addition to the common "4 Cs" of diamond quality, retailers now urge consumers to pay attention to a fifth "C," which stands for "Certificates" that define, map, and legitimize the evaluation of diamonds using the first four "Cs." The trend toward certification reflects the threat presented to the industry by "good" fakes: to remain in power, the industry must construct and maintain a belief that the difference between a carbon gem and a paste is relevant and worth paying for. The industry has even developed responses to synthetic goods by promoting the idea that natural diamonds, with their irregularities and flaws, are more legitimate than lab-produced stones with their regular chemistry and lack of mineral inclusions. By calling flaws and inclusions "nature's signature" at the point of sale, retailers intimate that stones are

one-of-a-kind, "signed" pieces, akin to great works of art. (In fact, it was this analogy of a diamond to a great [and unique] work of art that led to an ad campaign that featured paintings by well-known artists such as Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali.) Laser branding, though virtually invisible, further adds to the sense that each diamond is special, not just one among millions of nearly identical stones.

It is through such efforts that mass-produced diamonds are orchestrated into having greater uniqueness and thus value. These activities—in combination with meaning making by individuals—generate an aura that cannot be replaced with a fake, a synthetic, or even another real diamond. On the other hand, when used purely for status marking, a less expensive but large fake diamond may be preferred to an expensive but small real diamond. The extent to which, and how, this aura of distinctiveness is construed varies depending on the combination of semiotic tactics the consumer deploys.

The issue of authenticity affects the study of commodities in general on several counts. Certain kinds of goods motivate the production of fakes. Works of art, or antiques, inspire reproductions and imitations, while branded goods are similarly "reproduced," often in ways that are playful and obvious (e.g., giant cubic zirconia jewelry), or in more subtle ways where there is a real effort, sometimes to the point of criminality, to imitate "real" things. Emulatory, iconic, and fake goods can mark or index the established presence of an authentic good, and can even challenge the authority of those goods whose value may be, ironically, further enhanced by emulation. This emulation often takes place in the visual arena but may work on other senses as well.

Furniture, chocolates, handbags, frying pans, stereos, shoes, and diamonds are all examples of material culture that address the senses. But sometimes in studies of consumerism, the sensual materiality of the object goes underappreciated. Material goods serve as a useful lens through which to investigate the labor, political, economic, and social relationships within which they are produced and of which they are symptomatic. But, materiality is not inconsequential when it comes to

the way we use commodities every day. Consumers "read" objects' formal qualities: the way something feels, smells, sounds, looks, or tastes can contribute to what it means.

With diamonds, several material variables tend to fuel interpretation. For instance, diamonds are durable; they are easily maintained and can last over many generations. This imperishability enables their conceptualization as heirlooms thought to carry memories and generational histories within them. And since diamonds are small and portable, they can be worn every day over the course of a lifetime. This makes diamonds a good candidate for what Jane Schneider (2006) has called "self-enhancement," the use of material culture to build the self both personally and interactively. The same could be said of clothes or cosmetics, or other materials that generate feelings of potentiality and self-confidence. People use objects to encode memory or experience, and as protective amulets draped on the body, hovering in that liminal space and incorporated into the person: consumer and commodity become one entity greater than the sum of its parts.

Moving away from direct, physical sensation, the notion of luxuriousness is more abstract. Luxury items sometimes serve as indexes of class, and diamonds are portrayed in the media, and characterized in consumer narratives, as very expensive things the wealthy or upper classes have. But demand has been democratized: cheap labor and increased extraction means larger and better-quality stones on the market. While price has remained relatively stable, the greater availability of inexpensive stones has meant that ever more people can afford to have some kind of diamond. So, while there is some truth to the idea that only the elite can afford to have large, high-quality diamonds (which are rare and pricey), the combined availability and fakeability of diamonds make it somewhat tricky to regard them as a luxury item that marks class, or anything at all, in a reliable way.

Though marketing sometimes uses celebrity endorsements, people in most advertisements for diamonds appear to be members of the (mainly white) "wholesome" middle class. The category of "middle class" in

the United States is itself problematic, however, since there is so much differentiation within it, and those differences are variably understood and negotiated regionally, economically, behaviorally, and stylistically (Rudd and Descartes 2008). But insofar as "luxury" cars, branded clothing, and the like are part of the set of highly marketed commodities that the middle class consumes, diamond jewelry fits right in, reflected in the fact that most American women own at least one diamond.

With a long history of tightly managed marketing, diamonds do have an especially high symbolic load. The industry spends inordinate amounts of money to maintain the appearance of diamonds in public discourse and is unrelenting in its efforts to fix meaning. Many commodities do not fit this profile, at least in degree (it's hard to imagine similar campaigns for sweet potatoes or dental braces, for example), though the symbolic load attached to "status" items may receive more similar treatment.

Because of the impact of these four features (authenticity, materiality, luxury, and symbolic load) in using diamond as an example, extrapolating how semiosis takes place is most justified when one is considering similar entities. Commodities that are faked or imitated, are used in personal adornment or drama, are considered luxurious even in a mild way, and carry a high symbolic load will probably be treated with similar modalities. Examples of such things include art, branded shoes and clothing, housewares, cars, and precious metals or gems such as gold or pearls.

Language Is to Culture

Interpretive strategies are complex, rife with incoherencies and irrationalities. People use an individualized mélange of semiotic strategies, combining cultural ideas with their own particular experiences and attitudes. Meanings are indeterminate and can change over time. Some diamond consumers struggle with contradictory values, such as "wanting a big, gorgeous stone" but simultaneously rejecting the conventionality or materiality they associate with diamonds. Diamond consumption is

idiosyncratic, historically and locally situated, and sensitive to context. Methods used to study it must be able to discern and make sense of these factors.

Anthropology has used a "culture as text" model for analyzing cultural phenomena, and insofar as culture does share some traits with language, this has been a productive strategy. The model of language this metaphor uses is drawn from Saussure, and contains a theory of meaning that can be described as referential. Following Saussure's dictum that analysts see only what their model allows, we expect the use of such a model to reveal those aspects of cultural communiqué that are referential (only). The lack of attention to subjectivity, history, and situatedness that is characteristic of consumer studies working from a "culture as text" position is a logical result of using this structuralist-based notion of the sign. That result is caused by three crucial features within Saussurean thought: the lack of speakers in favor of an idealized speaker, ahistorical systematicity, and a code of meaning that exists prior to individuals. Saussure argued that to study language, it was necessary to reconfigure the way that we understand it, having realized that "you can see only as far as your model permits you to see; that the methodological starting point does much more than simply reveal—it actually creates, the object under study" (Jameson 1972, 14).

But there are aspects of language left uncaptured by a structural (referential) paradigm. For example, explaining the context-specific use of pronouns requires expansion of the model. Other nonreferential modes of language include metaphors and performatives. Becoming more sensitive to different kinds of modalities enhances our understanding of language, and the same theoretical developments that capture nonreferential aspects of language can be mobilized to help us understand our dealings with material culture.

Using a lens open to both referentiality and nonreferentiality to examine diamond narratives, I have aimed to show that the language-as-text model is fruitful, but it can be executed with a model of language that accounts for many more mechanisms of meaning. Reconfiguring the

object under study—approaching commodities as various types of signs, rather than treating commodities only as symbols—we discern a fuller range of cultural practices.

An important aspect of cultural practice has to do with ideologies that direct or shape the semiotic strategies that we routinely deploy. "Linguistic ideology" is broadly defined as "shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world" (Rumsey 1990, 346). What we think language is and how we think it works informs our ideology of language, and is even one of the factors that shapes meta-theories of language. Ideologies of language are contingent upon some theory of how meaning works. A referential linguistic ideology contains a referential theory of meaning. Here, language is thought to refer to, point to, and call out entities or events in our experience, real or imaginary— proper names are perhaps the clearest example. A referential theory of meaning, again, traced to the sign concept as defined by Saussure, posits that words have meaning purely by virtue of their naming—or directly referring to—some entity. The linguistic term "Jorge Luis Borges" refers to a specific writer of some renown and wit. "Easter Bunny" refers to a more imaginary being, but one that inhabits our experience nonetheless.

In his work on linguistic ideology, Michael Silverstein (1979, 1995) has expressed concerns over the tendency to view propositionality as the essence of language and to confuse indexical functions with referential ones (see also Rumsey 1990; Schieffelin and Wollard 1994). Webb Keane (2003) has illustrated that language cannot generally be abstracted from context and cultural presuppositions and that, in addition to reference, language has indexical, performative, and poetic dimensions that make interaction richly meaningful. While some language is plainly referential, the various understandings of how language works as a social process, and to what ends, are culturally variable and need to be discovered rather than simply assumed (Bauman 1983, 16). And as some linguistic utterances are not comfortably contained under a conception of linguistic referentiality—for example, articles ("the," "an"), imperatives and declaratives ("Go!" "ma'am," "I promise"), and

indexes (pronouns, including "this" and "that") in standard American English—it has been necessary for linguistics to weave theoretical nets that catch nonreferential functions. The referential paradigm, with its code-like framework, suffers from a kind of literalism, eclipsing space for the combination of literal information with desire, struggle, critique, humor, and play that characterize natural discourse at the crux of real human interaction. And while material culture, like language, can be code-like or representational at times, it, like language, can mediate, enhance, motivate, and produce social realities. Focusing on the relationship between language and social dynamics, both within and between social groups, shows us that language is an important mediator of identity formation and social relationships. Language has practical consequences that are underexplained by reference alone. Nevertheless, a referential paradigm is often mobilized as the metaphor used in cultural analysis.

The tendency to view language as solely propositional rather than as some combination of propositionality, indexicality, and/or iconicity has been transported into the social sciences, via the metaphor of culture-as-text, to produce an ideology of consumption in which commodities are thought to function essentially referentially. If a referentially wrought linguistic ideology, which works to occlude nonreferential signing functions, is applied in commodity studies, it becomes difficult to appreciate the various nonreferential functions of commodities that emerge in narratives, at both the theoretical and empirical levels.

Referential theories of language do not easily account for poetic communication, such as irony, parody, or *ostranenie*, that subvert standard codes of meaning. We have seen just how "bling" partly operates as a symbol of glamour and status but also calls attention to itself and its signmanship, and how this can incite a critical, questioning, hermeneutic engagement in contrast to normative diamond display. In this sense bling acts as a poetic device, as a provocation, and instead of reflecting, or even pretending to reflect, a preexisting circumstance, it has the potential to create new knowledges and relationships.

Diamond consumers described rappers wearing diamonds as, for example, "ironic," or "witty." Because *ostranenie* operates as part of a larger theory of artfulness defined as a mode of readerly engagement, we are not required to take the intention of the industry or even the wearer as the final authority on meaning. Meaning exists as the product of an artful relationship between the reader and the (art/literary/poetic) sign—in this case between a person and another person's diamond. As part of a larger exploration of nonreferentiality in commodity meanings, the concept of *ostranenie* helps us understand diamond consumption. Rather than taking diamonds solely as signs deployed in claims about identity or socioeconomic status, they become unfamiliar carriers of the emotive, the political, and the ironic, and provocateurs of feeling, desire, and aesthetic sensibility. Commodities are more than containers of conventionally agreed-upon information; working with an openness toward sign types, and finding poesy, we identify meaning making that is invisible using only a Saussurean lens.

When analyzing cultural activity through a referential theory, "meaning" is located in a shared lexicon. Consumers clearly knew the lexicon of diamonds, but did not accept it wholesale. They routinely told me that diamonds are associated with power, status, and wealth for "your average Joe," but tended to see this as a social code that others, but not they themselves, accept and follow. Many people argued that their own diamonds have a different, more personalized meaning, and that they neither read nor use their own stones in accordance with the lexicon they view as a combined product of advertising and "the Hollywood thing."

In structural linguistics, individuals come to know a "code" in a more or less "competent" way, but the focus of study is on the code itself, not individuals or variations among individuals. Instead, there is an imagined ideal speaker who has perfect mastery of the code. This vocabulary of competence, and the consequential methodological step to put aside the individual and variations among individuals in favor of an underlying or generative grammar comes out of Noam Chomsky's work on linguistics. That an ideal code, which is the supposed object of study,

has been abstracted from a compendium of individual utterances, none of which is in and of itself representative or ideal, presents a fascinating paradox. And, while there is a tacit acknowledgment that differences among individuals exist, variation has been most insistently trivialized, although investigations of variation and change is an area currently benefiting from the supplementation of the "linguistics of systems" with a "linguistics of speakers" (Johnstone 2000). Currently, more linguists are paying attention to the individual and idiolects, and to the relationships among variations, within overarching abstracted systems, in attempts to understanding how language works in various contexts. Similarly, individuals use material culture in ways that are idiosyncratic; this idiosyncrasy must be cast into relief instead of smoothed into homogeneity if we are to understand the role objects have in creating, mediating, and reproducing social realities.

Fullness

Diamond meanings do refract ad discourse, but gaining a wider and more nuanced understanding of consumerism requires a methodological expansion in three ways. First, refocusing the gaze from the use of diamonds by social groups or as defined in marketing discourse to individual interpretations foregrounds everyday subjective perspectives without sacrificing a necessary and dedicated awareness of the political, cultural, and economic processes in which consumerism is inevitably and dialectically involved.

Second, there has been surprisingly little comprehensive work based on empirical observations of the practical relationships between consumers and commodities, particularly once these objects are acquired and integrated into everyday lives (Dant 1996, 2000). I have tried to demonstrate some of the ways in which commodities operate in postacquisition life, where they become meaningful and impact the everyday. And, third, a methodological focus on the interaction between individuals and objects illustrates how things are encountered. People
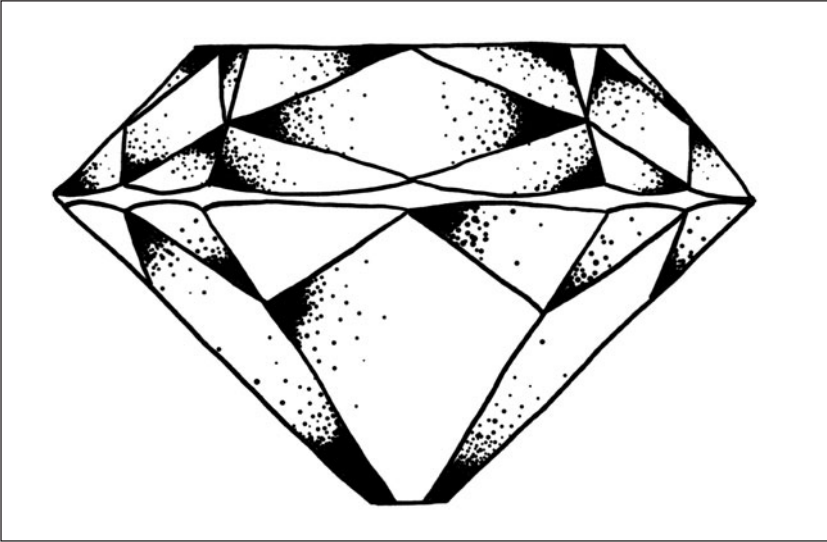
Figure C.1. Diamond. (Illustration by Kay Wolfersperger, used by permission.)

report surprising and contradictory interpretations and attendant emotional responses. In this book, I have examined how people consume objects by analyzing the types of meanings generated.

Work in the anthropology of commodities commonly reflects the idea that commodities function referentially, where commodities refer to cultural codes. And commodities do work like this, but pushing referentiality to its logical limits in the context of consumption can erase the very important local and contingent aspects of commodity interpretation. This erasure can result in overlooking the unpredictable mix of indexical, iconic, poetic, and performative semioses that constitute consumers' semiotic ideologies.

The existence of this unpredictability suggests that we ought to take a keener interest in idiosyncrasy: far from trivial, and without lauding individualism as a political project or social position, idiosyncrasy makes living in society not just bearable, but comprehensible. Its presence must, therefore, be integrated into cultural theory. But there is an even

more vital point: material culture is not a blank slate for unconstrained meaning making; it refracts, rejects, motivates, and expresses cultural patterns. By casting individual interpretative variations against these patterns, we pry open a theoretical space for creative agency, recognizing that alternative ways of being are often hidden in plain sight.

And finally, by peering into the subjective domain of consumption, we can expand in new directions our understanding of life under advanced capitalism. Inspired by exciting work done in phenomenology (Lingis 2004), affect (Berlant 1991; Stewart 2007), and individual voice (Johnstone 2000), I argue that recognizing creativity in everyday experience is crucial to theorizing human experience; it makes the landscape comprehensible, our days memorable, and the mundane extraordinary. The funny, strange, sad, heroic, and boring, but always idiosyncratic, diamond stories people shared with me, and that I share in this book, illustrate just how hard we work, not always with success, to ground our experience within personalized horizons of intelligibility.