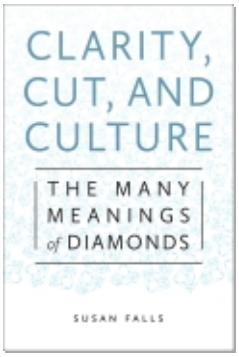
Preface: The Emptiness of Diamond



PREFACE: THE EMPTINESS OF DIAMONDS

My grandmother, whom we called "Nonni," used to wear a ring adorned with a big, winking diamond. I liked to touch that gemstone, given to her by my granddad after they were married in the 1920s; I remember being fascinated by its rainbow lights. She always called it a "friendship ring," to distinguish it from her engagement ring, which she later gave to my brother in hopes that he would eventually use it in a marriage proposal. (He did!) Nonni wore the friendship diamond until she passed it on to me. I hesitated to accept it then—I didn't want to be rude and refuse the gift—but it was a part of her, and I dreaded the implications of her giving things away. She insisted that it was better for me to have the ring "while there was still time for us to enjoy it," for us to see it on my hand instead of hers, instead of "waiting until it was too late." I was uneasy with the coded reference to her death, but honored by the gift.

Older now, and well aware of how marketing affixes glamour, wealth, matrimony, and status to diamonds, I understand them differently than I used to. And so, while my grandmother's diamond was transformed into an heirloom by her giving it to me, it remains an object whose significance is nested simultaneously within my own biography and a larger cultural milieu. This diamond ties me to her, to the grandfather I never knew, to my greater extended family, and to memories of the past and ideas about the future shared by my grandmother and me. It radiates, unites, and calls forth all of the stories we have made together over the years, creating in me a powerful sentimental attachment to this ring. I

wear it only on important occasions, when I want to feel special or just close to her, and especially when we are together.

Around the time that I started wearing my grandmother's diamond, I attended a class on Tibetan Buddhism at an elementary school near my apartment in Manhattan. During his lecture on "The Wheel of Life," Geshe Roach held up a pen and asked, "What is this?" People shifted around in their seats, wondering how to answer this weird question that seemed to have an obvious answer, too obvious to be the right one. Finally someone volunteered, "It's a pen." "Yeah," Geshe Roach affirmed in his customary colloquial way, "that's right, you know this is a pen. It writes and it's got ink in it and I can squiggle lines and that's what it is, it's a pen." He let that sink in, and continued, "But, I mean, so what if you were a dog? If you were a dog what would this be?" He held it high for all to see and then . . . silence. "OK, If you were a dog," he argued, "you come up to it and you look at it, and to you this is not a pen, this is a chewing stick, you see, you can chew on it and it feels good and you probably don't even know what a pen is anyway and so this thing is a stick. This thing is not anything from its side, it is only from your side that it becomes a pen or a chewing stick or whatever."

Geshe Roach's explanation drew attention both to the nonessential nature of things and to the power of perspective in determining meaning. Nonessentialism is, of course, not unique to Buddhism, but the way Geshe Roach illustrated how we give meaning to the things we encounter was elegant and powerful. These ideas resonated as I thought about my ring, in part because I had been reading about interpretation in the work of philosophers Charles Saunders Peirce (see Hartshorne and Weiss 1931–1935) and Hans Gadamer (1975). In their works, both Peirce and Gadamer explore how experience, context, and prior understanding structure, or shape, interpretation. I was impressed by Geshe Roach's use of a simple and concrete example to demonstrate how one's perspective, operating within various constraints, determines meaning.

This attention to subjective perspective is not the same as the cultural relativism outlined and propounded by the great anthropologist Franz Boas, who argued that meaning is pegged to cultural definitions and values. Geshe Roach's lesson highlights instead a distinction between meaning making as a process of imputation—where we "put" the meaning on something—versus one of discovery—where we come to know a predetermined meaning, a meaning that already exists.

The difference between imputation and discovery here is not unlike Roland Barthes' (1974) delineation between "writerly" and "readerly" texts. Writerly texts require an active, creative reader—one who imputes meaning onto the text—while in a readerly text, the reader is restricted to just reading, decoding, or discovering what is already there. The critical distinction between these terms lies in the way they describe the relationship of people to an object, or what we might call a "sign," defined by Peirce in a deceptively simple formulation as something that means something to someone.

How do objects come to have a meaning to someone? Where does meaning come from? Is our relationship to signs like diamonds or other kinds of commodities one of discovery or one of imputation? In the case of Nonni's diamond, for example: do I simply decode ready-made meanings, or do I create and impute other meanings onto it?

Where meaning making is a process, or act, of discovery, it exists externally and prior to us. Here, we come to learn what something means—both the word and the thing itself—by participating in society. We absorb cultural meaning through the process of enculturation. For example, we learn that apple pie means American nationalism. Meaning can also be a process of imputation, where we "put" or assign meaning onto things instead of learning a preexisting code. Attending to imputation allows for greater focus on the ways in which individual experience, history, local context, and contingency all impact the way each of us understands and acts in the world. Studying imputation shows us how meaning is fluid and indeterminate—that apple pie, for example,

could be associated with a particular event or person rather than the generic idea of nationalism.

In the case of diamonds, people use both discovery and imputation to do cultural work. Understanding how this happens is important because it illustrates how we negotiate the tension between individual experiences and wider cultural practices, and demonstrates how interpretive idiosyncrasy is a way for people to perform identity, demonstrate disagreement, and generate new ways of relating to others. Making meaning is, in short, a site of agency.

So what do diamonds mean? Diamonds like mine are similar to Geshe Roach's pen in that they are simultaneously historically and culturally situated objects, but with significance that is also deeply subjective and contextual. In Buddhism, the diamond is a metaphor for "emptiness," a special term used to highlight the shifting nature of all things.[1] This Buddhist concept of the diamond is very different from the way I think about my own diamond, which is different, again, from the way diamonds are rendered by the "A Diamond Is Forever" advertising campaign.

In listening to my grandmother talk about her experiences with my grandfather—memorialized by this stone—I realized that the diamond had been changed into a particular kind of object through her interpretive work. It had been transformed from a metaphor—the generic "diamond is forever"—to a specific, unique, "this diamond" when it became integrated into her life, her story, and her way of being in the world. I wondered about the roles taken on by other diamonds in other lives. I had presumed that diamonds, perhaps like all commodities, were "empty"—we add meaning to them with unique combinations of shared, public knowledge and personal life events—but, I wondered, what might we learn from delving into the dichotomy between public and private?

To understand how people go about making meaning in specific instances (this particular diamond) of generically known things (the idea of a diamond in general), I gathered stories about diamonds, and examined them within the context of diamonds' production and use. There is, of course, a massive marketing operation for diamonds, but I wanted to

track its reach. How much does diamonds' marketing—movies, fashion ads, wedding industry brochures, and so forth—determine their meaning? How is it that diamonds came to be embedded in American life at the end of a sprawling global production chain? Moving beyond "A Diamond Is Forever," I wondered how these rocks came into our lives as super-valuable gems in the first place. Because we are simultaneously entrenched in large-scale sociohistorical dynamics, microlocal circumstances, and everything in between, we cannot help but draw upon shared cultural ideologies. And yet, at times, people can see the world in ways that are incongruent with shared patterns. Tracing this tension allowed me to discover what Webb Keane (2003, 419) calls the "semiotic ideology" of diamonds—that is to say, what kinds of signs we take diamonds to be—and, more importantly, to illustrate the creative aspect of our interaction with material culture.

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In contemporary American society, material culture consists mostly of commodities, things that we buy. We live around them, with them, and through them. These things mean something to us; they anchor us in the world. And while the question of why things have meaning at all is a metaphysical question, one not easily answered using anthropological methods, we can use ethnography to investigate how things work as cultural objects. In unpacking the way meaning is made within the representational economy, which Keane (2003, 410) describes as "the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation," we gain an appreciation for how agency, imagination, humor, and poesy enhance everyday experience.

Knowing how meaning operates with regard to material culture—and in the case of an advanced capitalist society, this generally means highly advertised commodities—helps illuminate the way we engage the stream of mundane moments that constitute experience. And while

the methods (ethnographic study, archive and historical analysis, and examination of markets and marketing) employed in this study could be used to examine virtually any kind of object, they are especially well suited to deal with commodities subject to intense symbolic elaboration through advertising, or those used as identity markers in denoting and communicating gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and class. Because we both express ourselves and learn about others through the medium of material culture, semiotic analysis can help tell us who we are and how we got to be this way.

Enchanted one day, mystified the next, I experienced a spectrum of attitudes toward diamonds as I worked through this research. But looking at my grandmother's ring, flashing on my finger as I write, I realize how much I have come to appreciate its lovely rockness as a result of this project. It is my hope that other kinds of objects will also be made more full, as we better understand the cultural work we accomplish through them.