On Dutch Windows

Hernan Vera
The University of Florida

ABSTRACT: In The Netherlands, living room windows are big, left uncovered day and night, and elaborately decorated. This pattern, which is widespread in all urban and rural regions in this country, disappears abruptly as soon as the border into Germany is crossed where windows are generally smaller, consistently covered, and more sparsely decorated. Going south into Flanders, the disappearance of open and decorated windows is gradual but noticeable.

The cognitive and sensory meaning of a single object in material culture, the Dutch window, is examined as a concrete articulation of the boundary between the public and private realms by "thinking it with" successive conceptual frames in sociology. Assuming that material objects are embodiments of ideas, the study focuses on (a) the norms for looking and for looking out of the windows, (b) the territorial boundary being established and, (c) the information game played through the windows in a context of the notion of privacy. Photographs of the cultural objects under consideration, i.e., Dutch windows, are presented throughout the text as reminders that the cultural and material realms are sensually linked. The study concludes that objects in material culture must be examined in terms of the active, purposive acts we accomplish by adapting the objects to our practical and expressive needs.

One salient feature of the Dutch habitat is its windows. They are big, left uncovered day and night, and passionately decorated. Their size and openness permit an abundance of natural light, but also effective visual control from the inside out to the street and from the street into the living room area. At night, when the interior lights shine, the big uncovered windows afford a view of the interior from the outside, and if the dwellers choose to flatten their noses against the glass, they can see the vast expanses of the dark exterior. To be sure, these visual exchanges apply principally to the windows of ground-level living rooms facing the street. The custom of decorating living room windows

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Address Correspondence to Prof. Hernan Vera, University of Florida, Department of Sociology, Gainesville, FL 32611.
and, to a lesser extent, all other windows with elaborate curtains, plants, flowers, statuettes, porcelain, handicrafts, posters, and a number of other objects gives the occupants of a house an opportunity for individual and familial self-expression. It also provides a degree of aesthetic and practical control over the transparency, size, and shape of the window.

Oversized, uncovered, or lavishly decorated windows can be found occasionally in other countries. In Dallas, Texas, there is a neighborhood where the very rich leave huge ground floor windows open providing generous views of their overfurnished parlors that poorer people come to admire. The American expression "picture window" refers to an oversized window left uncovered to offer a view of the exterior. The expression "lace curtain Irish" characterizes an individual's social status by a tradition of window decoration. In Nubia, in some courtyards, where all occupants belong to the same family, windows are also kept open.

In The Netherlands, any traveler will notice the combination of decoration, size, and little-obstructed view into interiors as a unique cultural pattern. Widespread in all urban and rural regions of The Netherlands, this pattern disappears abruptly when one crosses the border into Germany (De Weert, 1976; p. 14), where windows are generally smaller, consistently covered, and more sparsely decorated. Going south, into Flanders, the disappearance of open, decorated windows is gradual but noticeable.

**Theme and Method**

This paper reports an exploratory study of the meaning of a single object in material culture, a research strategy that can be traced to Marcel Mauss. The study is not concerned with finding the truth about Dutch windows conceived as a part of the world external to the researcher's experience. Rather it conveys a focused encounter with this world, and an effort to make sense of that encounter in sociological terms, both textual and visual. Thus, this report is not the product of a "data collection" venture to test a theory and achieve closure of an analytical field, but of an effort to open a field for further inquiry. This purpose does not make the study an atheoretical endeavor or one in which a theory "emerges" as observations are methodically organized. On the contrary, I have sought to render a material object intelligible by "thinking it with" successive conceptual frames, each in its own right a potential direction for sociological research. A give and take