

## **THE USES OF ELECTRICITY**

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Today, in France, in the USA and in most European countries, the use of electricity is taken for granted so much that we tend to forget that it played an important part in the development of mass consumption, that its generalization in the daily lives of people is quite recent ( only one generation, that of the baby boomers), and that some countries like China are only now in the process of generalizing electricity in urban housing. Electricity allowed in the past, and promotes today, the development of refrigerators and of food industry that is associated with it, the development of lighting associated with the practice of reading and the improvement of education, and the development of hi-fi associated with the diffusion of popular or classical music. Electricity is one of the key material conditions of the development of mass consumption and of the new social distinctions that are linked to it. At the micro-social scale used here, the analysis is more centered on the uses associated with electricity than on the social distinctions that the unequal use of electric objects would reveal at a macro-social scale.

### **I The diffusion of electricity in France: the six functions of electric objects.**

In a period of about a hundred years, electricity spread from the public sphere and the industrial world to the domestic sphere. The same transfer mechanism of industrial technologies to the home environment occurred with computer science and home automation. This happened thanks to a reinterpretation of industrial uses by new and unforeseen domestic uses. Home automation, mainly used in industry to prevent technical incidents like water leaks or to reduce fire risks, or in housing projects to regulate heating systems, is rarely used in this sense by families. It is rather used as a comfort means, linked, for example, to the automatic opening of garage doors or shutters, or as a new technique to protect oneself against external aggressions.

Likewise, electricity has kept its functional use but it has been reinterpreted in the sense of an aesthetically pleasing use of the house space, thanks to the evolution of lighting and its possibilities of mood creation . The use of neon tubes, diffusing crude light with no nuances is, in urban France, almost prohibited in the living room and the bedrooms. People prefer indirect lighting that helps creating different atmospheres. To the contrary, neon is allowed in the bathroom or restroom, and recommended in the kitchen to light the working space, like a remnant of work in factory shops.

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This transfer from the industrial sphere to the home environment occurred with a transformation of representations of electricity from a luxury world to a world of rights, in the sense of vested rights. But, this right became a problem at the beginning of the nineties with the increased rate of poverty. Starting from this period, EDF<sup>2</sup> sought new ways to guarantee access to electricity to everybody, by experimenting the use of smart cards, or proposing 1,5 Kw low-power meters which allow minimal lighting, the use of television and washing machine but not of warm water.

From the sixties onwards, in France, six functions of electricity and their differentiation in the domestic sphere could be distinguished: the heating function, for the house and the water (the most important expense in the house); the lighting function, which represents the minimum for any house; the cooking function, with all the electrical appliances that are associated with it; the cleaning function (washing machine and dishwasher, vacuum cleaner and iron); the “fixing things” function; the media function, with the television, the computer, the vcr, the hi-fi and the games console.

## **II Electric objects: analyzers of family relationships**

Electricity applications are social “analyzers” of family relationships, especially the parents and children relationships with the “the war of buttons” and the “war of fire” (see further). The “noise” that the music of the young people make for example, the hi-fi put as loud as possible, symbolize one of the tensions between generations about how each uses energy, in the literal and figurative meaning: sparingly for older people or always beyond the possible limits for younger people. Electricity is also a revealer of relationships between sexes, within the couple that is building itself, working well or separating. It is an analyzer of social mobilization phases of calculation or interest, on the occasion of tensions triggered by the reception of bills, or at the moment of separations or daily exchanges based on tacit mechanisms of “gift and counter-gift”.

Electricity also punctuates moments that govern the life cycles. The selection of a type of housing, collective and as a renter at the beginning of adult life, more individual and as an owner later on in life, and of a type of power supply associated with it, gas or electricity, may serve as markers of a transition from one stage in life to another.

Electric objects have a function of social “staging”: either in terms of electronic and technologic capital ( for example, to have a high cost high quality hi-fi ), and thus of social positioning; or in terms of atmosphere, with some subdued lighting depending on the rooms of the house, the moment of the day and the people around.

Finally, electricity is a double system of realistic and symbolic representation. In terms of perception, electricity refers to two worlds. In the first world, the reference is *pure electric power* such as lightning bolts, or, outside the house, *channeled electric power* and its means of

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<sup>2</sup> Public services in charge of electricity (Electricité de France) (NdT).

transportation such as high tension wires and electricity pylons. In the second world, the reference is the electric current, tamed power seen in terms of its *applications* (fixing things, gardening, cooking, lighting, and heating) and its concrete ramifications which are all the things pertaining to the electric installation and the electric appliances within the domestic sphere. In symbolic terms, electricity corresponds to an ambivalent imaginative world structured around three tensions between progress and dependence, life and death, pleasure and guilt. Today, electric power is still progress, the Promethean myth. But it is a progress that can transform us into slaves or that is beyond our control (“we cannot stop progress”). Indeed, for users, electricity is also associated with the vital sources of power; “air, fire, and water”. Without electricity, life is no longer possible. But it is also an imaginative world of violence, of death associated with “heavy water”. Electricity is also associated with the pleasure of “working at home”, “welcoming people”, and creating “warm atmospheres”, but it is also a guilty pleasure because it is individual. Electric power refers to an imaginative domestic world that is both source of warmth and source of tension.

### **III Choosing domestic power supplies: life cycle, social distinction and identity construction**

In western world societies, the use of industrial power supplies, namely electricity, gas and oil for heating and cooking, is at the center of the organization of family life, but most often as an “invisible obviousness”. Choosing a power supply, especially between gas and electricity, fits into a social frame that organizes it. This frame is made of occasions of change that depend mainly on the evolution of the life cycle, but also on other cycles that govern social life, like seasons or birthdays.

Among these occasions of power supply change, we noted the first job, the installation of a couple, the birth of a child, separations and retirement. These events are often linked to moving from a dwelling place to another. The possibility to choose one’s power supply, beyond the functional choice making process in terms of cost and comfort, is also the symbolic indicator of the transition from one social or generation status to another, most often considered higher. The energy choices discreetly draw on the social rhetoric of status distinction and identity. They are signs and social markers of the place that each generation, sex or social group occupy in society.

It is the choice of the type of heating power that represents the most important decision. Next comes the decision about the energy for cooking and heating water, choice that is not always without tension, especially because of the symbolic importance of cooking in France. When people can choose their power supply, usually, they choose between the low installation cost of electric heating equipment, compared to the higher installation cost of gas equipment, and the working cost of electricity that is considered higher by most people.

### **IV Space, electricity and electric objects**

Once acquired, “electric objects”, are going to fit into a social space that corresponds to the big divisions between sexes and generations within the home. A little after world war one, electricity was located in a single place, the shared room. From the sixties onwards, the uses of electrical power diversified. Its new distribution in space occurred alongside the evolution of the family regarding the division of work by sex, the new composition of borders between sexes and generations, or between the social spaces, private or intimate. The kitchen was one of the two places which concentrated the bigger number of electrical appliances. The increase in the number of accessories since the fifties corresponded to a logic of rationalization of domestic work. Today, the kitchen remains a feminine space. The other place the most equipped in “electric objects” is the living room. There, we mainly find the objects with a media function. The living room is rather a social place where members of different generations meet. It is also the place where guests are welcomed, contrary to the kitchen that still remains more of a private place.

Finally come the bedrooms and the bathroom. These are both private and intimate places. There are not many electric objects in these rooms (alarm clock, hair dryer, or electrical razor). They are two spaces that can be source of tensions: the bathroom because every one wants to use it at the same time; the bedrooms because of the “war of fire” (because of the fights over the temperature of the rooms) and the “war of buttons” (because of the choice of lighting).

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