Not Just Smoothness but Also Critical Reflection

Contesting Contemporary Design Aesthetics

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Abstract: This position/working paper contests and challenges a trend in contemporary design aesthetics where aesthetic questions in relation to design deal primarily with the creation of emotional appeal by means of the sensual elements of design objects. On a general level, the paper seeks to broaden the perspective on aesthetic concepts relevant for design, and on a specific level, it advocates relating design to aesthetic concepts that derive from the long tradition of relating aesthetics to art. The paper discusses four different perspectives on design based on this approach to aesthetics: representation, reflectivity, ontology and epistemology. Thus, it is the claim of the paper that the aesthetics of design not only deals with the smoothness of the sensual-emotional appeal of design objects but also with a critical reflection of design objects as sites of meaning construction.

Keywords: Aesthetics, art, design, representation, reflectivity, ontology, epistemology

INTRODUCTION

Even if aesthetics may be regarded highly relevant for design by practitioners and in the everyday evaluation of design objects, the aesthetics of design has long lacked theoretical description. Only recently, a series of attempts have aimed to formulate theoretical frameworks for investigating design aesthetics, either in the context of the philosophy of aesthetics (Steinbrenner & Nida-Rümelin 2010; Forsey 2013), as aspects of formulating and articulating meaning in design (Folkmann 2013) or as an approach to investigating the creation of appealing products through a ‘unified model of aesthetics’ (UMA 2015). Recently, too, the concept of aesthetics has been the subject of special attention in an investigation of its role in design history and design discourse (Stockmarr 2014).

Within most of these approaches, the prevailing ambition is to describe what is specific about an aesthetics of/for design and, in turn, what differentiates it from other kinds of aesthetics, especially the aesthetics of art. To illustrate, philosopher Jane Forsey attaches the aesthetics of design to the experience of the beauty in and of the functional, e.g. in the experience of the use of a coffee pot and not just its appearance. By discussing the beauty of the functional, she aims to situate the aesthetics of design between, on the one hand, a general and broad focus on everyday life with a tendency to confirm the
modernist design dogma of letting form follow function and, on the other hand, a focus on beauty which refers to the Kantian tradition in philosophy and the focus on art. In this middle position, it is Forsey’s claim that an account of design, ‘with a broader view on both the way that aesthetic judgement operates and the objects to which it applies, is better situated to claim that quotidian life indeed does have aesthetic texture’ (Forsey 2013, 249), by which she means an element of and appeal to beauty.

In the following, I will enter the discussion of how to reflect the aesthetic in design and point to a trend which limits it to the sensually and emotionally appealing aspects of the design object and thus also delimits design aesthetics from the aesthetics of art. In contrast to this view, my claim will be that important insights about the specific aesthetics of design objects can be found also in art-related aesthetics. That requires a broader perspective on what design aesthetics is. I will present four entries into this field, raising questions of representation, reflectivity, ontology and epistemology in relation to the perception, apprehension and understanding of design. These entries are not exhaustive but may nurture further reflection.

With this, my ambition is the opposite of (re-)conceiving design as art, as that is a dead-end reflection which neglects the specifics of design, e.g. the role of functionality. Instead, I will propose a framework for understanding aesthetics specifically in design, which explores and reconnects with the potential of a broader field of aesthetic theory.

CONTESTING THE SENSUAL IMPETUS OF DESIGN AESTHETICS

In recent years, there has been a tendency to articulate the aesthetics of design as a question of the sensually and emotionally appealing qualities of design objects. This trend connects to a trend in the philosophy of aesthetics which loosens the connection between art and aesthetic theory and revisits Alexander Baumgarten’s original idea of applying aesthetics to sensual matter in his work *Aesthetica* (1750-58; in Old Greek, *aisthetá* means ‘that which can be sensed’). The philosophical focus on the sensual matter and its effect on aesthetic experience has been developed in works by the philosophers Martin Seel (2000, 2007), Gernot Böhme (2001, 2013), and, drawing on John Dewey’s Pragmatist aesthetics (2005), Richard Shusterman (2000). Related to this is a general interest in the nature of the aesthetic experience in its generic character of emotional and psychological responses independently of the object in question (Schaeffer 2015).

In relation to design, this interest has several outlets. It has led to an increased understanding of the role of the body in design, as ‘an increased somatic awareness of the body and its surroundings can enrich and deepen everyday experiences’ (Bhatt 2013, 4), which are seen as being shaped by design. The interest in the emotional appeal of design can also be seen in this context; as a trend, it marks a broad desire to understand the aesthetic qualities of the nonfunctional, emotionally appealing factors in design and how they affect the process of designing (Jordan 2000; Norman 2004; Hekkert 2006; Desmet
and Hekkert 2007; Hekkert & Leder 2007; Desmet 2010). Also, the Dutch project UMA, lead by Paul Hekkert, works within this framework.

Further, a recent thesis on design aesthetics concludes by suggesting that ‘a deepening fusion of ideas from the emotional theories of design and the philosophical notion of the aesthetic as sensual experience would be able to take the discussion of the aesthetic in design in new directions’ (Stockmarr 2014, 202-3). The thesis contains a refined discussion of the intricate relationship of design to art in terms of aesthetics and points out how art in the 20th century developed to take an avant-garde and critical approach, whereas beauty, the classical domain of art, was left to design. On this basis, the thesis chooses to leave art-related aesthetics behind.

In my perspective, this aspect of aesthetics, concerning the sensual appearance and communication of design objects and their emotional appeal, is an important part of contemporary design aesthetics – but only a part. As proposed elsewhere, I suggest that design aesthetics should be investigated on (at least) three levels: on a sensual-phenomenological level, a conceptual-hermeneutical level and a discursive-contextual level (Folkmann 2013). Design objects communicate not only through their sensual appeal (even if this is highly important) but also through their potential for reflecting themselves as sites of meaning production embedded in cultural contexts. In my perspective, art-related aesthetic theory and reflection still has much to say about design. In the next section, I will outline four aspects of this kind of reflection, which may contribute to the understanding of the meaning potentials of design objects, as objects not just of smoothness but also of critical reflection.

**CONCEPTS IN ART-RELATED AESTHETICS**

One reason for reevaluating art-related aesthetic theory in relation to design is its longstanding tradition for developing and refining aesthetic concepts. It takes, however, some translation to transpose the concepts from the field of general or art-related aesthetics to design, but the potential of the concepts will stand out if they themselves are put to test. The following four (meta-)concepts are intended as a starting point for the discussion:

**Representation**

Design objects are not just material objects of sensual appeal but also media of representation. They may represent, and refer to, values and meaning entities beyond themselves. As the culturally oriented theoretical discourse on design informs us, design objects are always embedded in cultural and social contexts that they relate to in complex ways by contributing to it (cf. e.g. du Gay 1997, Julier 2014). In this view, design objects are always both things (which can take many shapes and even be immaterialized) and
meaning entities for a symbolic meaning equally ascribed to them and referring to
meaning complexes beyond themselves.

The concept of ‘representation’ is well established in aesthetic theory as a question of
how aesthetic media may be articulated in accordance to different codes, e.g. ‘beauty’,
the ‘sublime’, the ‘comic’ or the ‘uncanny’ (Schweppenhäuser 2007). That is, it is a
question of meaning systems lying behind the aesthetic media which may impact both
meaning content (what the message of a medium is) and formal constitution (how the
message is conveyed).

By looking at design objects not only as objects of sensual appeal but also as media
of representation, we can a) look at their cultural coding and symbolic meaning but also
b) debate how they function as media for an aesthetic representation, that is, how they
may be related to different conventions and traditions in aesthetics. Beauty may play a
role (and often as part of a Modernist convention of simplicity and balanced clarity in
formal expression; curiously, today’s Modernism has been perverted from the formal
experiments of the early 20th century into a static aesthetic of simplistic beauty), but so
may other aesthetic value systems. Thus, Sianne Ngai states that ‘aesthetic experience has
been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven
conditions of late capitalism’, whereby new aesthetic categories and, thus, reference
systems have developed (Ngai 2012, 1). In Ngai’s analysis, the major aesthetic categories
of the late 18th century, such as beauty and the sublime, are in part replaced with the
new, minor and more ‘trivial’ categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting. In
relation to design, we may operate with multiple aesthetic meaning systems at the same
time and ask, ‘What do design objects represent in terms of aesthetic meaning systems?
Which aesthetic conventions are in play?’

Reflectivity

Further, design objects may reflect upon themselves as media for aesthetic meaning. In
my opinion, this is overlooked by the proponents of emotional aesthetics; roughly put,
someone involved in designing and evaluating objects with the goal of achieving optimal
sensual-emotional appeal may overlook the possibility that the objects in question might
contain some kind of reflection on their status and constitution as ‘aesthetic’.

The art-oriented aesthetic theory offers concepts to shed light on this point. Within
the context of formalism and linguistics, an interest in the ‘aesthetic function’ as a way
for language to reflect its own constitution as a producer of meaning that does not point
beyond itself to a ‘message’ has been formulated, e.g. in the 1930s by Jan Mukařovský
who belonged to the so-called Prague School of Aesthetics (Mukarovsky 1979).

In the context of design, objects reflecting their own status as sites of meaning
construction (and not just transparent vehicles for emotional experiences) may be found
in experimental design on the verge of being art, e.g. the 1960s Italian Radical Design
movement or the more recent Critical Design movement (lately dealing with ‘Speculative
Everything’, Dunne & Raby 2013). But it also plays a role in the cultural-historical process of aestheticization where more and more objects are created and positioned as ‘aesthetic’ and as objects with a consciously constructed and reflected meaning content. To illustrate, the furniture company HAY works with design mediations that clearly reflect their constitution as images (and thereby destroy the illusion effect of the image) and stages its furniture not only as special but also as props for a process of visible meaning construction (Figure 1). Thus, as a general question, we may ask, ‘How is the design object positioned as aesthetic, and how does it testify to being so? Does it reflect/point to its own process of meaning constitution?’

Figure 1. Reflective presentation of furniture by HAY, 2015.

Ontology

The aim of emotional design is often to create better product experiences for people. Or, to take the notion to an extreme, ‘pleasure’ (Jordan 2000) should be obtained, whereby the state of the given remains unchallenged. Emotional design is ontologically conservative as it does not, by its own means, challenge the ontology of the given.

If we enter the discursive sphere of art-oriented aesthetic theory, we may find notions of aesthetic media with the potential to criticize the ontology of the given and offer other versions of the world or an all-encompassing reversal of things. In this way, Theodor Adorno discusses art as a medium that is inevitably bound to the reality of the given while at the same time having the potential to transcend the given and point to new meaning potential that may ultimately prove subversive or utopian (Adorno 1970). This transcendence is, of course, a paradox, as it cannot in its constitution transcend the conditions of the given. Put another way, although art may encompass a configuration of the ‘other’ of the given, it must always be on the basis of the given. In this way, Adorno states that ‘fantasy’ cannot be ‘that cheap ability to escape being in proposing a non-
being as if it existed’; instead it can transform ‘what the works of art always absorbed from being, into constellations, through which they become the other of being, if only through the specific negation of being.’ (258). Consequently, for Adorno, the work of art is not to be seen as a means of representing of something but as ‘apparition’ (130), which in itself creates momentary traces of that which is not existing or not yet existing.

Much (commercial) design affirms the existing reality and does not contain or evoke this kind of radical otherness. Some design is, however, conceived to have the potential to break with existing patterns of meaning and to be disruptive, e.g. social design or design activism (see Markussen 2013). Other types of design may be disruptive, engaging the users to new types of use, or may acknowledge alternative existential spaces of design as the ‘human mode of existence takes place in worlds of possibilities, molded by our capacities of memory, fantasy, and imagination’ (Pallasmaa 2013, 223-4). Still, we may take the question from the ‘avant-garde’ of design, such as Thomas Thwaites’ toaster and its discussion of the prerequisites of civilization necessary for modern design (Figure 2), and pose it to ‘ordinary’ design: How does it, as a medium of aesthetic meaning articulation, state itself as being, and how does it relate to the existing reality? Does it mirror it, criticize it, try to overcome it or propose alternative, possible approaches to it?

Figure 2: DIY Toaster. Design: Thomas Thwaites

Epistemology

In this context, ‘epistemology’ conceptualizes how our relationship with the world is co-organized by aesthetic media as these provide a frame for our access to and understanding of the world.

In this line of reflection, Martin Seel speaks of how aesthetic media may create new frames of understanding and reflect themselves as media for comprehending and meeting the world. Focusing on the function of human perception in the process of confronting something ‘other’, he claims that the capacity of aesthetic media is to ‘bring forward
otherwise unrepresentable circumstances’ and has to do with ‘ways of human commitment in the real or the unreal, in conditions of the world in the past, the present, or the future. Ways of meeting the world [Weltbegegnung] are put forward, whereby ways of meeting the meeting of the world [Begegnung mit Weltbegegnung] will be possible’ (Seel 2000, 184). For Seel, this kind of epistemological reflection of meeting the world also has an ontological component as he talks about the possible otherness. But, importantly, he points to aesthetic media (which he conceives broadly but exemplifies with art) as reflective access points to the world.

Design objects are often not, in contrast to art, obviously self-reflective of their own role as creators of meeting points between us and the world, but we can nevertheless ask how design objects are conceived and operate as such in the same manner that Verner Panton’s psychedelic interior design (Figure 3) frames a new approach to and engagement with the world: How can design objects be seen as media for meeting the world in perhaps new and reflective ways where new kinds of experience and forms of experiencing are evoked? By which means?

Figure 3: Interior design for the basement swimming pool in the Hamburg headquarters of the German magazine Der Spiegel, 1969. Design: Verner Panton.

CONCLUSION

In this working paper I have attempted, polemically, to advocate the relevance of art-related aesthetic approaches in relation to design. The ambition is not, however, to abandon the kinds of aesthetic theories aimed at sensual-emotional appeal but to widen the perspective and to discuss the fruitful potential in a broader perspective of aesthetic theories. It may be that these theories pose difficult questions and are difficult to use as
tools, for example, in design processes, but they are important as tools for reflection and thought:

What are the potentials of contemporary design? How does it represent something, how does it reflect itself, how is it conceived as a structure of being, and how does it offer access to engaging with and understanding the world?

REFERENCES