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Reflections in a Cultural Mirror: Aesthetics and Its Role in Consumer Culture Research

Scholars (e.g., Schechner 1988, 2006; Turner 1987) have often described aesthetics as a mirror to society, because they relate to and reflect our reality, allowing us to see ourselves and our world from new perspectives and to develop deeper levels of understanding. Holbrook (1980) defined aesthetic experiences as “cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to media, entertainment and the arts” (104). However, we agree with Joy (2000) that aesthetics go far beyond art and entertainment. Philosophers, such as Kant, Hume, and Hegel, have proposed various views on how to understand the complex concept of aesthetics. While there is no consensus on a definition, all perspectives converge on the idea that aesthetics are a process of reflection, expression, and development, which pushes human thought and understanding. We strongly hold to this idea in our proposed session.

Aesthetics have been acknowledged as a significant part of consumers’ lives (Hirschman 1987; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Holbrook and Grayson (1986) have pointed out that exploring aesthetics can expand our understanding of consumers and their practices. Following Brown’s (1996) typology, consumer research has mostly explored aesthetics either as consumption in art-related contexts, or as consumer research applying theoretical and methodological perspectives developed for analyzing art. Joy and Sherry (2003), in their study of art appreciation in museums, opened the door to documenting and interpreting aesthetics as embodied experiences. Such a perspective does not look at aesthetics as a context or a theoretical tool, but rather explores consumption as aesthetics. We take on and develop this perspective in our session, with the aim to build understanding of aesthetics as a process that is tied into consumers’ lives and practices.

We provide three perspectives to using aesthetics as a basis for research and exploring consumer culture, building from aesthetics as part of individual experiences, to aesthetics as a part of culture and its structures, and ending up in aesthetics as an element of knowledge and thought in research. The first paper explores aesthetics as an element of individual experience in the process of consumption. The research was conducted in the context of live action role-playing games and uses theatre performance as a means of understanding experiences of fantasy. The second paper taps into aesthetics through its role in the branding of everyday consumption objects and in creating culture around them in the context of Swedish design. The third paper looks at aesthetics as an underlying process in creating knowledge, thus building understanding of the concept as part of a research frame. This is done in the context of music and musicological research.

We believe that the three perspectives together will provide the audience with an overview of aesthetics as a process in consumer culture, and of how we can use it in more diverse ways in consumer culture research. Our discussant is well versed in and has widely written on the topic of aesthetics, having been at the forefront of its introduction to consumer culture research. He will provide novel and unique insight to the discussion topic through his reflections on the session papers.

We believe this session will provide a fresh take on the concept of aesthetics and its use in consumer research as a guiding tool to understanding consumption processes. We hope to bring new ideas and inspire new thoughts in our audience regarding aesthetics as a part of our contexts, our research, and our understanding of consumption.
1) Theatre Aesthetics as a Guiding Tool to Understanding Consumers’ Fantasy Experiences

It would be impossible to imagine our lives without imagination. Imaginary elements allow us to have ideals and envision possibilities, to create meaning and engage in social interaction (Schechner 1993). The imaginary is a central part of consumption through its connection to desires, identity building and meaning construction (Kozinets et al. 2004; Martin 2004). Imagination, however, is elusive because it is too perfect in its unreal essence (Campbell 1987). For us to grasp it, it needs to be extended by concepts from what we perceive as reality (Fine 1983). Fantasy works as this operative link to imagination (Tolkien 1964).

Our intuitive understanding of fantasy is pleasurable mental imagery (Campbell 1987; Martin 2004), yet fantasy appeals not just to our mind and emotions, but to all of our senses (Hoogland 2002; Chronis, Arnould, and Hampton 2013). Consequently, it becomes important to locate fantasy as an embodied experience (Hoogland 2002). In this study, I explore how individuals experience fantasy.

I have conducted the study as an ethnography of live action role-playing games (LARP), which are face-to-face games that allow individuals to take on fantasy characters and immerse themselves in fantasy worlds to play out various scenarios. To study these embodied and tangible fantasy experiences, I have taken on the perspective of performance theory, following which all action and interaction can be seen as performance. Performance is defined as behavior that is restored out of recombining previous behavior (Schechner 2006). Understanding is created through acting in and engaging with one’s context (Denzin 2003), while reality and the self emerge as effects of performance (Butler 1990).

Performances are endless series of transformations, which take on various forms, the main categories of which are social and aesthetic performances (Turner 1987; Schechner 2006). The former is perceived to make up quotidian life, while the latter is seen to have a second order relationship to reality and matter (Butler 1990). A central concern of performance theory is understanding how social and aesthetic performances coexist and interact (Schechner 2006; Carlson 2003). This becomes increasingly difficult to map, as the coexistence of the two has resulted in an elaborate feedback system of conventions, replication, and power (Schechner 2006). To discern differences between and relationships among different performance, we must analyze them through the various elements they are made up of (Pitches and Popat 2011).

Studying the relationship of social and aesthetic performance ties in well with my research aims, as the connection to reality and imagination is central to fantasy. Consumer research has noted that fantasy experiences involve negotiation of elements of real and unreal (e.g. Schouten 1991; Kozinets et al. 2004). However, it is still unclear how and in what forms the process actually happens. This is what I set out to do in my ethnography.

While engaging in the context of LARP, I realized that I needed something more to guide my thinking in exploring aesthetic performance. I turned to one of the only types of aesthetic performance that has remained embodied and active: theatre (Carlson 1996; Schechner 2006). Theatre allows individuals to enter fantasy and become a part of it, as it always requires a physical presence and awareness from both performers and spectators (Carlson 2003).

Contemporary theatre performance has its origins in the typology presented by Stanislavski (1953). The two forms of the typology continue to be appropriated and reinvented to this day, resulting in different approaches to and streams of theatre
performance. These differing viewpoints propose different perspectives to how to approach one’s self, character, audience, co-performers, and space, as well as how these and various other elements interact. To give a rough idea of various approaches to theatre, I will quickly describe the two theatre forms of Stanislavski’s typology. 

*Perezhivanie* is modeled on “real” life, with the actor disappearing into the role. Emotions and the individual’s inner world are aimed at creating a static result, and the performance moves from fantasy towards reality. *Predstavlenie* emphasizes processes and their physical and material aspects. The actor does not disappear into the role, but engages with it, moving from reality to fantasy (Stanislavksi 1953). The different approaches can provide consumer research with new perspectives to understanding experience through a focus on emotional, embodied, and spatial elements of performance.

Combining and juxtaposing the different perspectives to theatre aesthetics has aided me in exploring fantasy experiences by informing my conceptualizations of social and physical space, interaction, and the self. Using aesthetics as a supportive tool for research can thus help build understanding of and theorize experiences.
Despite its small size, Sweden has proven to be an important design nation with several brands that have gained international recognition as well as commercial success throughout the last century—ranging from fashion, furniture, cars, to architecture and even social planning, and from small niche brands such as Katja of Sweden, Sighsten Herrgård & Rohdi Heintz in the 1960s to contemporary globally available brands like H&M and Ikea that continue to climb the Interbrand top list (Interbrand 2014).

These Swedish design success stories are many times suggested to have a common ground in some sense of Swedish style. In this presentation we aim to draw some historical linkages to important formative political events during the early 20th century, not least the political welfare state project, that have come to shape the way that aesthetics and materiality are orchestrated in Sweden.

The roots of what is now characterized as Swedish design can be found in three texts from the beginning of the last century (Lane Miller et al. 2008), namely Ellen Key's *Beauty for All* (1899), Gregor Paulsson's *More beautiful everyday products* (1919), and the design and architectural manifesto *acceptera* (Asplund et al. 1931). Common for these texts was a kind of social engineering with the ambition to educate the masses in good taste that in the long run was believed to lead to a more advanced and cultivated society with better and happier workers. Furthermore, this taste education also had democratic aspirations as beauty was seen as something everyone should have access to (Key 1899).

In line with other educational projects that were launched at the time (Frykman and Löfgren 1979), the cultivation of taste was seen as urgently needed as Sweden quickly moved from being a poor, mostly agrarian country in the 19th century into being a modern industrial society already during the first decades of the 20th century. When large parts of the population were uprooted from their poor agrarian backgrounds and morphed into modern citizens they needed help in navigating the aesthetic landscape of the rising consumer culture. Key (1899), who was influenced by the Arts & Crafts movement of the time, explained that beauty was connected to *simplicity, functionality, appropriateness, harmony* and *honesty*, contrary to the taste of the growing bourgeoisie whom she criticized for being pretentious and dishonest, mimicking traditional, expensive styles creating a cheap looking concoction of dreary, heavy, dark furniture, tassels and draperies.

Paulsson (1919) promoted linking the arts to the industry, as access to beautiful and cheap goods for the masses required rational management. The masses also stood at the center in the *acceptera* manifesto (1931) written by a number of influential architects, including Paulsson, who advocated rational construction to deal with the housing shortage with the help of a type of functionalism suitable for mass production. These ideas were also strongly supported by both workers and capitalists and politicians (Kristoffersson 2010). While the three texts were important tools in the development of the welfare state they also contained clear elitist and paternalistic traits. It was about educating consumers to understand what was right and beautiful.

The democratization of beauty was also beneficial to the commercial forces (Kristoffersson 2010) and the orchestration of Swedish design clearly demonstrates the interdependencies between state and capital, also confirmed by the saying "What's good for Volvo is good for Sweden". One example is Volvo’s focus on simplicity and appropriateness in terms of safety for the masses rather than on status objects for the elite and also on the working conditions for their employees (Berge 2014), another the
simplicity and everyday wearability of Swedish fashion like Filippa K (Ben Saad 2009) and a third Ikea’s simple and cheap furniture that the founder describes as a gigantic democratization project (Kristoffersson 2014). Still, the acceptera manifesto also resulted in a throwaway mentality noticed already in the 60s, but that was waved away at the time (Husz 2012). Today, however, Ikea’s and H&M’s business models are gaining more attention as a cautionary examples claimed to be more about profits than social involvement (Kristoffersson 2010).

Swedish brands, however, continue to gain interest globally, while holding on to simple, functional, appropriate and harmonious design; ideas that have circulated in Swedish consumer culture for more than a century and sedimented into a common understanding of what good taste is. Many of the culturally and commercially successful companies emanating out of Sweden draw inspiration from this heritage. They have, however, also picked up other values from the Swedish welfare state model, like gender equality, gay rights, multi-culturalism and the nature as a type of sustainable Nordic luxury. Volvo, for example, draws heavily on the latter two in their latest campaign for Volvo xc70 with soccer player Zlatan Ibrahimowitz—yet another example of the interdependence between state and capital materialized in commercial products.
3) The Art VS Science Myth. CCT as an Aesthetic Performance

Interpretive consumer research was born around the nexus of art (Bradshaw 2009). It all began with art as a phenomenon, it brought philosophy of science implications and delivered a pool of new methodological options (Holbrook, Bell & Grayson 1989; Szmigin & Foxall 2000). This paper suggests that the historical origin, as much as it can be celebrated as a necessary liberation and progression, is still limiting the discussion about the role of art and aesthetics in CCT. Based on an ongoing larger art-based research collaboration between CCT scholars and a sound artist, the hypotheses is developed that to go beyond an outdated “art versus science” discussion, and to acknowledge the intertwined relationships between artistic and research practices, we have to look back to move forwards.

The origin myth of the art resurrection in consumer research can be found in a psychoanalytical session of the first seminal art movement leader Morris B. Holbrook. He described how in a session he explained to his psychoanalyst his dissatisfaction with his role in traditional consumer research (Holbrook 1986). The advice he was given: do something that you really enjoy doing. The consequence was first to include just artist names in his professional work, then to include art itself, leading to the symbolic consumer behavior conference that featured a variety of art related research projects (Hirschman & Holbrook 1981).

Such origin helped to create an ideological praxis of ”art versus science” (Belk 1986, Fillis 2009), where art represents the personal and pleasurable qualities, while science represents the public and agonizing qualities. The inclusion of art in a public, professional context has to be understood in this frame as moving closer to live an “authentic” life, with a concurrence of personal identity and professional activities. Utilizing an aesthetic frame, this is the core understanding of a musicological discourse system called “ROCK”. In the musicological literature, such frame is based on the aesthetic idea of an “authentic” artist whose products are iconically or indexically linked to the “real” person (Gracyk 1996). Furthermore, to protect the authenticity, the artists have to hide the commercial context of producing art. As a consequence, the authenticity of art defines the inauthenticity of research and science, as detached from the “real” subject not only in a scientific, objective way, but also as an ideological praxis.

In the musicological literature, the oppositional discourse system is called “POP” (Frith 1987; Diederichsen 2014). POP celebrates the artificiality, the surface, the imaginary and the playful. In the aesthetic praxis of POP, the performing subject is explicitly non-identical with the performed persona (Auslander 2004, 2006). Historically, also the business side is made explicit and in an aestheticized version integrated into the artistic practices (Reynolds 2005). We see this system manifested in the continuous regulative series of article mainly by Arnould and Thompson (2005, 2007). In an interesting dialectical move, art itself becomes less important than in the predecessor tradition, while emerging new in the conceptualization of academic practices. The romanticism of interpretive research (Thompson, Arnould, Giesler 2013:10f.) is criticized while the academic practices are seen in light of a realpolitik notion, grounded in a sociology of knowledge perspective. In this way the practices of knowledge production become performances (Thompson, Arnould, Giesler 2013:10f.). We interpret this move as the POP paradigm of “authentic inauthenticity” (Grossberg 1992, 207). In this way, the old “art versus science” constellation is replaced by an entangled system of aesthetic practices that can take place in different contexts (university, conference, club, theatre, concert venue).
In the paper we first analyze the historical changes in the aesthetic constellations of artistic and academic practices. Subsequently, we develop the consequences of the consequences of producing knowledge in a performative frame. Hereby we use the data of our art-based collaboration project, with a special emphasis on the construct of doubleness (between subject and persona, between performing persona and audience, and between the aesthetic representation and material constitution of social realities) as an analytical core of a performative social science approach (Schechner 2006; Carlson 2003).

Our research tries to contribute to a discussion of alternative modes of knowledge representations in CCT (Sherry & Schouten 2002) by pointing out that the aesthetic practices are ideologically constrained when they emerge out of a romanticized ROCK frame. To utilize the aesthetic potentials we should not only look to poetry, novels or movies, but we should acknowledge through a POP frame the aesthetic performance elements when we act in classrooms, conferences and in our fieldwork.
References
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