

CONSUMING AESTHETICS

The Role of Mediation for the Perception of Aesthetic Qualities in Design

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Abstract: *The paper is a contribution to a cultural contextualization of the aesthetics in design. The paper reports findings from a small-scale qualitative investigation in how consumers experience and articulate the role of visual mediation for their perception of aesthetic qualities in design objects, e.g. when they are influenced by visual representations in magazines and ads. The respondents of the investigation have been asked whether specific mediations would affect their understanding and appreciation of aesthetics in a positive or negative direction and which specific contexts would have the largest impact. Two findings are central. First, the home appears to be a setting that may invoke an appreciation of design objects as aesthetic; by being placed in a context of use, the objects are made open to an aesthetic appreciation which is both sensually based and confirms existing conventions from media culture. Second, design in ironical-reflective settings may affect the perception in a negative direction; at least the perception of design in an ironical-reflective setting is very dependent on the specific de-coding.*

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Mediation, Design Culture, Media Culture*

INTRODUCTION: AESTHETICS IN DESIGN

Aesthetics in design is often regarded as a question of how the designed object may possess certain appealing qualities in, for instance, its form, texture, material and/or colour and how it then may call for an aesthetic appreciation in the perceiving subject. In this way, the aesthetics of design may reflect a subject/object relationship which lies at the philosophical roots of aesthetics, e.g. in Baumgarten and Kant, where aesthetics is formulated as a subjective evaluation or judgement of some kind of objective entity outside the subject. Accordingly, philosopher Jane Forsey in her book *The Aesthetics of Design* connects aesthetics in design to the experience of a certain quality of beauty in the element of function in the object (Forsey 2013). Also there has been a tendency in recent years to relate aesthetics in design to a question of the ability of the objects to evoke pleasure or an emotionally positive response in the interaction with the object, especially in relation to the psychologically oriented Dutch project UMA (Unified Model of Aesthetics) at the TU Delft (Hekkert 2006; Hekkert 2014; UMA 2016).

In this paper, we argue that the perception of aesthetic qualities in design objects not only depends on the specific, internal qualities of the object itself, but also on external contextual factors surrounding the design object such as media and different kinds of articulations of the qualities of the object. By this, we argue that if an understanding of the aesthetics of design is to be adequate to the culturally dynamic field of design, it must also take the cultural context of design into account.

Relating to former research (Folkmann 2013), the aesthetics of design may be seen on three levels: 1) a sensual-phenomenological level dealing with the immediate sensual appeal of the design object, 2) a conceptual-hermeneutical level where the object stages a frame for our process of understanding it, and 3) a cultural-contextual level dealing with the cultural element of aestheticization where design in different ways and by different means is reflected, regarded and positioned as ‘aesthetic’. This multiple approach to aesthetics entails different kinds of discourses regarding the aesthetic: When we talk about aesthetics in design, we may not only employ a philosophical discourse but also art-related and cultural approaches. Thus, aesthetics in design is not only an aspect of philosophical reflection (e.g. Steinbrenner 2010; Forsey 2013; Bhatt 2013) but partakes in practices of “design culture”. In recent years, the concept of “design culture” has evolved as a way of describing the contextual and formative factors behind contemporary design in a cultural dynamics of production, consumption and mediation (Julier 2014; Folkmann 2016). In this way, the theoretical contribution of the paper is to embed the role of aesthetics within the concept of design culture. Often, studies of aesthetics in design lack a cultural and contextual understanding of design, and vice versa, the role of aesthetics is overlooked in studies in design culture.

On the basis of an empirical, qualitative investigation with in-depth interviews with 16 respondents in a Danish context, we have looked into how mediation may have had an effect of steering the consumer towards perceiving and appreciating aesthetics as a domain of design. On this background we have detected that the aesthetic qualities of design objects not only are formulated on behalf of internal qualities of the objects, but also relate to contextual factors in the surroundings of the design object, in this case the mediation of design objects in form of images depicting furniture in different settings.

In the following we will present the investigation and its results in terms of the role of mediation on aesthetic appreciation. Before coming to that, we will present the cultural-contextual element of mediation we base on.

MEDIATION

Looking at design in a cultural perspective, that is, at its ability to produce cultural meaning, mediation is central in understanding how design objects may be attributed with different kinds of meaning. The meaning of design objects derives not only from factors in production (manufacturers, designers) or from practices and actions of consumers, but

also from mediation which in the literature has been described as “the phenomena that exist between production and consumption, as being fundamentally important in inscribing meaning for products” (Lees-Maffei 2009: 365). This, among other things, entails exploring the role of media, or “channels such as television, magazines, corporate literature, advice literature and so on in mediating between producers and consumers, and forming consumption practices and ideas about design” (366).

Regarding aesthetics, mediation may affect how meaning is produced in a relationship between, on the one hand, a subject with an intention to see and perceive something as aesthetic and to have aesthetic experiences, and, on the other hand, an object with certain aesthetically coded features (Genette 1999). The subject may not (as often taken for granted in philosophical reflections of the topic) have a “pure” and “immediate” access to the object but may in her perception be affected by the different mediations through which concrete design objects and general ideas of design may be depicted and staged. Mediations frame the perception and operate as a communication bridge or as a barrier (depending on the perspective) in the aesthetic relationship between the subject and the object (Figure 1).

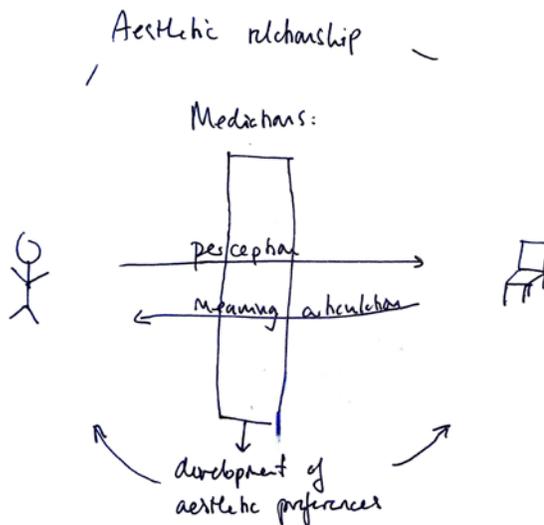


Figure 1. Model of mediation in the aesthetic relationship

The middle element of mediation is not to be seen as noise in a transmission of meaning from the object to the perceiver but as a basic condition for the aesthetic relationship: Mediations in form of visual media and systems of representation set the scene for the aesthetic relationship, e.g. when a piece of furniture is perceived by the consumer through media celebrating its formal qualities before the consumer has any actual tactile sensation with the furniture. An example may be mediations of a chair such as the Panton-chair which is more known through its mediations than through its tactile

appearance and function as a chair; further, this chair is often used as a visual icon of “design” or “modern design” in books and magazines whereby the mediation attributes a wider meaning to the chair. Further, visual representations may emphasize or point out elements in the design to be perceived aesthetically by the consumers. Still, the contribution of specific mediations to the articulation of aesthetic preferences may be difficult to disentangle from long-term biasing or influencing factors such the overall dominance of visual culture (Sturken & Cartwright 2009). We have, though, attempted to investigate how consumers acknowledge the role of specific mediations in a simple before-and-after test.

The investigation of the role of mediation in relation to aesthetics leads to two insights. First, aesthetic meaning is something which always also is produced within a cultural context, that is, it may be difficult to presuppose specific qualities as e.g. “beauty” at all times (Ngai 2012). Aesthetics is not universal, as may be suggested by psychological approaches, but cultural. Second, mediations in relation to design, often relate to specific aesthetic meaning properties, such as the “beautiful”, the sensual qualities of the objects, and/or their appealing meaning potentials.

THE INVESTIGATION

The investigation has the purpose of examining the role that mediations are assumed to play on consumers perception of aesthetic qualities in design. This has been done by carrying out 16 qualitative interviews with consumers. These 16 consumers have as well been asked about the role that mediation play on their perception of aesthetic qualities. It is part of a larger investigation on aesthetics in design with the purpose of exploring consumers’ aesthetic preferences through the research question: *What do consumers perceive and formulate as aesthetic qualities in design objects, and how does this correspond to the production of aesthetic qualities by actors in the cultural circuit of design, such as designers, manufacturers, retailers and media?* Thus, the investigation contains its own results but functions also as a pre-study for a larger research project.

We have been aware of framing the investigation too directly as an investigation of aesthetic preferences, as we have noticed in another study that the consumers may have a clear tendency to focus their attention almost exclusively in the concept “aesthetics” when it is introduced to them (Venkatesh & Meamber 2008). In the question design we therefore attempted to start asking openly about consumer preferences in general and only at the end to discuss the concept “aesthetics” directly.

The respondents were divided into two groups; a group of students at the university and a group of consumers outside university chosen by the criteria to be different in age, gender, employment and income. The purpose was to gain a wide variety of insights on how consumers can perceive aesthetics in design, by interviewing consumers who are different on the before mentioned parameters. The interviews were carried out in the

respondents own homes, as other parts of the interviews focused on what characteristics in their own objects they found aesthetically pleasing. The length of the interviews varied from one to two hours, and the part of the interviews that concerned the mediations affecting the consumers' aesthetic perception were at a length of 20 – 30 minutes.

The consumers were presented to 8 chairs, and as the interviews took place in their homes, they were presented to pictures of those chairs, that were of a neutral character as e.g. the picture of the Vegetal chair (Figure 2). These 8 chairs were of very different character, as some of them can be seen as sensually aesthetically appealing, others as conceptually aesthetically challenging. The respondents were asked to elaborate on their aesthetic perception of all 8 chairs.



Figure 2. Vegetal by Vitra, 2008.

Hereafter they were presented to 1-2 mediations of every chair. These mediations consisted of advertisements, pictures from commentaries in interior magazines and pictures of commercial and non-commercial exhibitions.

Some of these mediations were classic 'beautiful' mediation that confirms a Danish mediated ideal for home décor like Figure 3, while other demonstrated self-reflection. An example hereof is seen on Figure 4 and 5. Figure 4 is an advertisement by the Danish furniture and interior brand HAY, that obviously presents itself to be staged by allowing the viewer to see (at least what is supposed to look like) the total setup for the photoshoot. Figure 5 is an advertisement for the 'do hit chair' by Marijn van der Poll for Droog, a Dutch brand of conceptual design. This advertisement places the chair in an ironical self-reflective setting, which presents the chair in a home one might not expect by the look of the chair. The advertisement points ironically to a user that most likely will

never buy this kind of chair, and thereby point to itself as a chair that is not for this kind of user.



Figure 3. Bo Bedre, July 2015



Figure 4. HAY advertisement, 2015



Figure 5. Advertisement for 'Do hit chair'

The consumers were asked about their perception of each mediation and if they would not speak of it by themselves, they were asked to comment on it, and in that case how, the mediation affected their perception of the mediated chair. Every interview has been analyzed to identify how the mediations affected the perception of the chair, and if this affection was positive or negative compared to the immediate perception of the chair itself. This investigation of course led to many and very different insights on how different consumers' perception of a chair can be affected by mediations, but two findings were dominant in the investigation as they were mentioned by respectively 9 and 4 consumers independently.

Results

It became clear during the investigation, as we could expect from the literature on mediation, that mediations do affect the consumers' aesthetic perception of design objects, in most cases at least. If the mediation surprises the consumer, it will in high degree affect their perception, while in the case where the mediation confirms their expectations, it will not very much change the perception. If the mediation surprises them, it will affect the perception of the object in either a negative or a positive way, only rarely will a surprising mediation not affect the perception of the mediated object. The statements from the consumers' points to towards several findings, but two findings were continuous throughout the investigation.

1. Most dominant in our findings is that mediations that put chairs in a home-like setting is the kind of mediation that is most likely to affect the perception of the object in a positive way. For example two consumers state:

“If we look at this chair that I started out describing as being a bit too spacey, I think it becomes normalized in the advertisement because it is here in a natural context for the chair.” (Interview 11)

”This is exactly why I like these to [mediations] in homes, because that is the kind of situation where you would use it [the chair].” (Interview 3)

These are examples that are representative of the 9 consumers who expressed a positive reaction to their preferences for the mediated chairs in home-like settings. The general reason for this reaction was that these mediations presented the chairs in a context of use and that ‘de-alienates’ the chair. Two of the home-like settings in the investigation derived from comments in interior magazines, while one is an advertisement. The consumers did not explicitly reflect on the different origin of the mediations, and the origin does not seem to affect their perception of the mediation in this case. But the origin of the mediation was mentioned to the consumers, and we must be aware that this might affect their interpretation of the mediation, which is a parameter that must be considered during the complete investigation, but especially here where parallels are drawn between mediations with different origins.

2. Another finding concerns the use of irony in advertisements. Not surprisingly it affects the perception of the mediation whether the irony is de-coded or not, and in many cases the mediation affects the perception of the object in a positive way if it is de-coded, and in a negative way if it is not. One respondent states about the Do Hit chair that in its mediations is presented in a museum and in the ironical advertisement presented above:

“It is funny that they chose to put it [the chair] into exactly that home, as on this picture [in the museum] it is elevated as art, and there [in the advertisement] it stands next to dried flowers and.. and a duck in the windowsill. It stands out from everything around it, and then he stands there sweating. [she laughs] (Interview 2)

This respondent de-codes the ironical element of the mediation, and it affects her perception of the chair in a positive way. Another respondent states:

“This [advertisement] is not for me at all. I mean, it is fun, but it is not... No, it just doesn’t speak to me. Not such a large sweaty man, I don’t see what he is doing there.” (Interview 3)

In this case, the irony is decoded, at least partly, but still it affects her perception of the chair in a negative way.

This finding might have been different if they had known the chair already, or had the possibility to do research so they would not base their judgement on one advertisement, as is rarely the case in everyday life. For this reason we must be careful to accept this finding as final. It does however point to a kind of mediations that is very dependent that the de-coding is in compliance with the intention behind the mediation.

Reflection

In the future, it is important to be aware of the complications of doing this kind of investigation. The kind of reflection that the consumers in this investigation are asked to make is not ordinary for the consumer, and the talk is not an ordinary way of talking about the objects either. Therefore it is not easy for the consumer to put these thoughts into words, which is a general challenge when doing this kind of investigation, and a fact that we as researchers must be aware of. We must assume that only a part of their perception of the chairs and mediations are put into words. At the same time we might assume that the most dominant perceptions are being presented by the consumers, and therefore assumedly the most important ones.

As well we must remember that these results are based on an immediate reaction from the consumers on chairs and on mediations thereof, as if the chairs only existed in a vacuum. Of course they do not. Some of the chairs are well-known to the consumers while others are un-known. The long term development of the consumers' perception and continually re-evaluation of the well-known chairs affect their aesthetic perception.

It is also important to bear in mind that this qualitative investigation can give us insights on what is the consumers' own articulation and experience on how mediations might affect their aesthetic perception, but cannot produce an objective indication hereof. For that a larger quantitative study of the subject is needed, both with a larger number of participants and more methods in play (e.g. observation).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In approaching aesthetics in design as an object-subject relation that is affected by external contextual factors such as mediations, we have done a small-scale qualitative investigation of the role that mediations of design play for the perception of the aesthetic qualities in the mediated design. Mediations may steer the consumers' perception in the direction of aesthetic qualities of design as bound within certain visual conventions that are circulated with design culture in form of e.g. interior magazines.

The investigation clearly points to, that mediations do affect the consumers' perception of the mediated object. Two main findings have been done on basis of the

investigation. 1) Consumers' perception of an object is likely to be affected in a positive way when mediated in a home-like setting, as this kind of mediation de-alienates the object and/or shows the consumer how the object will look like in a home. 2) Irony used in mediations can affect the consumers' perception in a positive way when de-coded as intended or implied by the mediation, but is often to affect the perception in a negative way when not de-coded in the "right" way.

In our opinion, an investigation of aesthetics in design not only requires an understanding of the aesthetic qualities of the design objects as they can be described through formal elements and sensually appealing aspects of the design objects. Also, cultural-contextual factors such as mediations and the actual perceptions of consumers are important to take into consideration and to investigate. In the end, when we deal with design objects, we deal with objects of mass-culture where mediations indeed influence people's perceptions.

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