The media-friendly furniture

Presentation in media and mediation context

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Abstract: *Tangible and intangible qualities of furniture as well as media culture are each well-known topics in the academic context, while a nexus between the two fields is less studied. This paper focus on modern furniture's presentation in media and in mediation context. Present is a general intensification of furniture mediations in photos as well as in spatial installations, texts and things, that either directly or indirectly relates to the individual furniture. The mediation of certain furniture is extensive, and happens through many different mediation platforms. I state that a group of furniture is exceptional media-friendly. They have features and characteristics making them particular suitable for media contexts. They are mediagenic furniture.*

Keywords: *Design, Media Culture, Mediatization, Mediation, Mediagenic furniture*

INTRODUCTION

Catalogues, books, films, magazines, Facebook, Instagram… These days, you can see and experience furniture on all sorts of media platforms. It is marketed and branded by companies and designers, staged by stylists for interior magazines, used in TV series and films, and displayed in various contexts on the Internet. The amount of media exposure is huge: particularly with the advent of visual social media such as Pinterest and Instagram. In such, the branding and media culture seems to be the allover driver of all these furniture mediations. What if we reverse this perspective, and look at the furniture itself as a driver of mediation in the media culture?

Both perspectives are a part of the approach in my Phd-project entitled *Instant Icon? The Significance of Visual Media for Contemporary Furniture Design.* The aim is here to understand the underlying mechanism between media and furniture. In this paper I will focus on furniture as driver of mediation, and explore the concept of 'mediagenic' design.

When we look at an item of furniture the intensive exposure often ceases. Its novelty value fizzles out, and new furniture emerges and take the front page. But one group of furniture in particular endures. It is more frequently presented in a media context than others. It gets more advertising space, it appears more frequently in magazines, and it is posted on the Internet much more than other chairs. There are many reasons for its popularity. Either the items of furniture in this group have a special story to tell or they assimilate a story via today's powerful media culture, which offers a wealth of opportunities for exposure and for the sharing and forwarding of favourites. This is another major factor behind the massive media presence.

If we take a broad look at these mediations of individual items of furniture, there are special features that recur across the media and design culture. Special ways, in which the furniture is presented, styled and mediated. My analyses indicate that an individual item of furniture has something special, something *implicit*, which is particularly media-friendly, making it especially suitable for various media formats. It has something that engenders mediations. For instance Eames Lounge Chair by the Eameses. The chair is disassembly, and this function generates mediations in form of films, illustrations, drawings, still life motives and so on. In this essay, I will examine this aspect more closely and point to furniture characteristics, which I find particularly media-friendly. I use chairs like Egg Chair, Eames Lounge, Panton Chair, Louis Ghost and Vegetal as examples. These characteristics differ from one item of furniture to another, and there are several different kinds like shape, colours, name, patterns, function and material. In this paper I will highlight three factors, which in particular are drivers of mediation; shape, material and name. I call these characteristics *mediagenic* features. So there is a *mediagenicity*, in the sense of something that catches the eye and creates stories across a broad spectrum of media. We will come back to this. First of all, I will look at the media context, which is at the root of it all.

Media culture and social media

Refering to marketing, media exposure and mediagenicity as a whole, this is on the basis of a view of media culture as a strong, underlying premise. Media today can be said to be ubiquitous, and they are deployed across all social strata, cultures and organisations. With the advent of the Internet and digital media, the media seem, in no uncertain terms, to intervene and penetrate into just about

everything. Media must be considered as an element that significantly generates meaning in terms of the way we understand, regard and experience our lives and the world. The degree, to which this happens and how it embeds itself, pervades the discussion within the area of media theories, which tackle mediatization.

(See eg. Jansson 2001; Hjarvard 2008;Hepp & Krotz 2014; Lundby 2014).

Furniture companies and designers (in other words, the overall network surrounding furniture) deploy, and brand themselves via the platforms of communication, which contemporary technology provides. That is nothing new: not even in a historical perspective, where old furniture companies such as Heal's, Thonet and Herman Miller, even at the start of the 20th century, advertised, and created the likes of brochures, films and posters. Per H. Hansen describes the use of media and their significance in a Danish context in his book, *Da danske møbler blev moderne* [Eng. When Danish Furniture Became Modern]. He regards them as a vital factor for the success of Danish furniture design in the mid-20th century (Hansen 2006). What is new is that it is no longer just the professional network (companies, designers, retailers, journalists, stylists etc.) that is responsible for the media exposure of furniture. Users constitute a new and important group.

The digital media, which in the field of media theory are considered to be the fifth largest media matrix in the history of mankind, have changed this radically. This is particularly true of the social media, whose features include user-created content with no commercial purpose (Kolstrup 2014, 66). This is multi-way communication. Now everyone can show images, films and scenes from their own lives and forward those of others. In my study of furniture mediations and the recurrent, particularly characteristic features, the users of blogs and visual social media play a major role. Not only do they share and forward images of furniture. They also post their own images, in particular mimicking former imagery, experimenting and playing with furniture and the look of furniture on various scales. In a way, they are responding to the furniture narratives presented to them. Most frequently, there is no commercial purpose involved. That means that the activities of this group are particularly important in the assessment of the characteristics of any particular item of furniture that gets repeated exposure in the media.

Mediation – across scales

The Internet and, particularly, the visual social media, where images are posted constantly, have led to a quasi-explosive exposure of furniture. There is virtually no item of furniture or furniture event that we do not know about. We may not have seen or experienced it physically, but we know about it through images in the media. Of course, furniture appear in our lives in other ways. Furniture companies deploy a huge variety of platforms for exposure, where graphic material, logos, text and symbols interact. Eye-catching advertisements, slogans and articles are propagated in catalogues, newsletters, their own magazines, films and so forth. The furniture is also styled physically in the companies' shops, at trade fairs and, in some cases, in their own museums.

Collaborations are established across the lifestyle industries: fashion, food, cars, art, music etc. That means we encounter furniture even in these areas of popular culture. Often, furniture designers are also part of the dissemination. In addition to contributions to articles and magazines, they take part in events and talks on the occasion of furniture launches. We also witness a growing tendency for furniture and images of furniture to be transferred to a variety of objects and merchandise such as miniatures, clothing, key chains, jewellery, handbags and the like. Even back in 2007, in their book, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*, the English sociologists, Scott Lash and Celia Lury highlighted the tendency of mediation in the fashion, entertainment and lifestyle industries. Today, the propagation is even greater, and is also visible in the furniture sector. Furniture and all these different versions of them are then presented in images, so the furniture constantly merges and moves *in* and *out* of media culture. On the basis of this understanding and view on design, I employ the concept of mediation. I understand this as: *the activities and accompanying methods in the circulation of design, which help to generate a system of meaning of a product.*

This definition is an extension of the interpretation by the design historian, Grace Lees-Maffei. Lees-Maffei, who is a particular exponent of the concept of mediation, defines it as the phenomenon, which exists between production and consumption, and which helps to convey and create a system of meaning around a product (Lees-Maffei 2009). She is referring to Tony Fry's formulation, which describes mediation as the way, in which a product is illustrated, photographed, exhibited and advertised (Lees-Maffei 2009, 365). With the rise of social media, this linear route of

communication, which Lees-Maffei describes, has become more circular. Consumers of furniture are also transmitters of furniture mediations, making the mediation network more complex and spread in several directions. This aligns with the design professor, Guy Julier's interpretation, which regards mediation as *everything that communicates*. It can be a variety of things: Everything mediates all the time (Julier 2014, 247). However, some transmitters are more important than others. During my research in the furniture sector, I see 4 groups stands out; 1) the designer/manufacturer 2) the professional/institutional network 3) popular culture 4) consumers and users of social media (Satell, IN: Folkmann 2016).

Consequently, in this essay and this context, the concept of mediation relates not only to media, but also to exposure in the broadest sense of the word, in order to contain all places where furniture is seen and from where it is later on presented in images. Out from my empirical data I define four major ways in which furniture is being mediated. That is through 1) Images 2) Space 3) Words and 4) Things. Mediation via *images* I defined as sketches, photographs in advertisements, blogs, movies, games, books, articles etc.: in other words, two-dimensional material that is 'born' as an image. Mediation via *space* includes set-ups and installations in shops, trade fairs, showrooms etc.: in other words, three-dimensional material that exists in a physical place. Mediation via *words* refers to short texts, names, slogans, phrases etc.: in other words, something that is written or graphically produced. Mediation via *things* refers, for example, to miniature furniture, maxi furniture, toys and other interior items, which are designed to resemble furniture or, in some way or another, depict furniture: in other words, items and objects that refer to furniture in a direct way.

A distinctive kind of mediagenicity

As mentioned before, many items of furniture are exposed in media contexts, some very much so. This appearance in media contexts and exposure in particular ways is certainly not a new phenomenon: Neither is items of furniture, which virtually from Day 1 become media stars. There are several historical examples of this: for example, the Eames Lounge Chair (1956), designed by the American designers, Ray and Charles Eames. It was given a quasi-glamorous presentation that same year on NBC Home. It was then heavily marketed by the furniture manufacturer, Herman Miller, and made regular appearances in the Eames's numerous personal campaigns. Since then, the

Eames Lounge Chair has been exposed again and again in books, commercials, films, exhibitions, blogs, social visual media etc. from Herman Miller, Vitra and others. Today, it is one of the most photographed chairs in the world. Arne Jacobsen's Egg (1958) is another, similar example. The very same year it was launched, the chair could be seen in American *Vogue*. This was virtually unheard-of for a Danish chair at the time. This chair too has subsequently received huge exposure in both fashion and design contexts and across popular culture. In the book, *101 Danish Design Icons*, the title of the chapter on the chair is very aptly titled 'The Furniture Media Diva' (Munch, I: Dybdahl 2014).

So we see a particular mediagenicity in these cases. But what exactly is mediagenicity, and what items of furniture have it? In his book, *The Furniture Machine*, Gareth Williams, a former curator at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, defines mediagenic design as: "*Objects that can command a magazine spread or dominate a television studio set*." (Williams 2006, 12) He highlights objects that stand out from other everyday objects in terms of process, shape and expression, describing them as eye-catching, conceptual and experimental (Williams 2006). Often, the consummate mediagenic furniture is only available in a limited edition and can usually be seen in the collections of design museums. In the mid-20th century, this type of furniture and design was probably given some of the most advanced mediations. But the advent of the digital media, in which users have acquired a strong voice, has changed this.

If we take a look at the number of mediations and mediation methods (*images, space, words, things*), these days industrially manufactured furniture has much more media volume. In particular these items of furniture that we regard as 'the icons'. In the anthology, *Iconic Designs*, Grace Lees-Maffei emphasises that media exposure is very much a feature of icons. She also suggests that other characteristics include: the significant idea behind a design; its recognisable visual form; and the fame and worship attached to it (Lees-Maffei 2014). Thus, according to Lees-Maffei, iconic design works particularly well in media contexts: but for a variety of reasons, which relate to both the design's outer and underlying factors such as vision, origin, use, production methods etc.

This essay is principally about mediations of furniture. In other words, I have studied the history of furniture and looked at the many different contexts, places and scales, in which we encounter furniture in *images, spaces, words* and *things*. I have not concentrated on the underlying factors

such as brand, designer and production method, even though these factors are a natural part of the (media) story of an item of furniture, and despite the fact that these usually initiate the first mediation. I will describe this broader perspective in my PhD project on furniture and media. In this essay this means that it is not the designer/architect and company *alone* who disseminate the mediagenics. In this context, I am looking at furniture: what you see the moment you look at it, and where and how it appears in media contexts. In other words, I am looking a mediations attracted by the furniture *itself*. This special something: something that is easy to mediate, fantasise about or experiment with.

Shape as a mediagenic feature

Not surprisingly, the actual shape of an item of furniture is a mediagenic feature to some extent. In the majority of mediations of a chair, in some way or another the chair itself is the eye-catcher: most distinctively in the myriad photos that exist with a white background. However, some more than others. Take, for example, Arne Jacobsen's Egg, which, as well as being one of the most photographed chairs of all time, is one of the chairs that is shown from the greatest variety of angles. It is photographed and illustrated all the way round. As the angles change, the lines shift, the shadows move and the space in the chair is altered. It has an infinity of expressions. Together, these sculptural, organic curves, soft bends and round shell constitute the chair's main mediagenic features. So, in many photographs, the shape is the main character. Many photos simply show close-ups of the curves. The Egg is also a favourite item of furniture to use in the fashion industry and among the individuals and celebrities who let themselves be portrayed in the chair. In its way, it is a mediagenic feature or a *media characteristic* that can generally emphasise the shape. However, here, what is what becomes more imprecise. Aside from its origin and history, there may be something feminine about the gentle shape, the sculptural aspect, the distinctive ears or, conversely, the simplicity of the lines etc. In the illustrated blog example, which is clearly an imitation of the photo of Michelle Pfeiffer on the front page of *Esquire*, the shape in itself is probably not what constitutes the mediation. Instead, it can be this particular presentation of a celebrity in a well-known lifestyle magazine.

Figure 1: The actual shape of the Egg is the subject of countless mediations and re-mediations.
Fritz Hansen advertisement / Front cover Esquire, 2007 / Blogger Jadgirl666

The shape of the Eames Lounge Chair by Ray and Charles Eames is also one of the chair's mediagenic features. As with the Egg, it can be difficult to determine where it begins and ends, and the extent to which the shape alone has meaning in individual mediations. As described above, the Eames Lounge Chair has received huge exposure and mediation over the years, making it, according to Lees-Maffei's theory, a perfect iconic chair. Nevertheless, what the shape has in terms of an explicit media feature is the many components, of which the chair consists. Unlike many other chairs, they are all visible and can easily be separated from one another. This construction is seen, not only in countless 'exploded' drawings by Eames, Herman Miller and Vitra, but also by bloggers who mimic the style of drawing and portray the chair in its separated form. This is given material form in an artwork installation by Vincent Faust, while many users of visual social media post their own separated Eames Lounge Chairs. All these separate components that make up the shape result in many mediations and re-mediations. This is a great example of *something* in an item of furniture, which works well in image and media contexts.
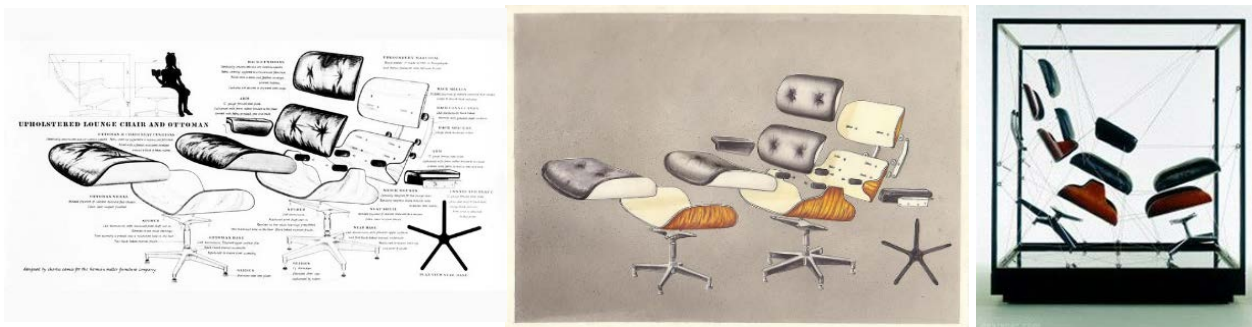

Figure 2: The many components in the shape of Eames Lounge generate mediations.

Exploded drawing 1956, Blogger, photograph, India / Installation by V. Faust, 2006.

On the subject of shape, another example I would like to highlight is Verner Panton's Panton Chair. Its shape is also the subject of many mediations and, in most of them, it is the centre or the eye-catching element. In this sense, the shape is an obvious mediagenic feature (for all furniture) because it is always exposed! So we need to ask *what* it is about the shape of this chair that generates mediations. I look for the mediations that stand out, so it becomes clearer to see what the transmitter of the mediation had in mind or what he/she associated the chair or the shape of the chair with. In the case of the Panton Chair it points in two directions. One emphasises the sensuous aspect of the chair; the soft, smooth, almost moist surfaces and the analogies to the female body in particular; the back and the seat, which are shaped like a bottom, the rounded shape at the 'knee' and the 'lower legs'. The other is the figurative expression of the shape: obvious chair components such as legs and arms are absent in Panton Chair and, viewed from the side and in rotation, the chair is obfuscated. It becomes more like a figure with an exciting organic form. This is a particularly special feature of the Panton Chair, which is mediated in beautiful patterns and set-ups by many different operators.

Figure 3: The sensuous/sensual and figurative aspects of the shape generate mediations.

'Nudes on Furniture', Adrian Portmann / Graphic designer, Holland / Installation, BMW Welt Munich.

Material

It is hard to distinguish material as a mediagenic feature from shape. In many instances they merge, so both the shape and the material form the overall expression. Take, for example, the Panton Chair. The smooth, shiny material in the classic Panton Chair (of fibre glass) helps to underpin the associations with sensuousness. On the other hand, the bodily analogies probably lie more in the

actual shape. Nor does material necessarily play a major role in the Egg. In this case, it is more the shape that is the subject of the mediations. Meanwhile, the materials in the Eames Lounge Chair (dark wood, rich leather, steel) are emphasised in the linguistic mediations of the chair and probably play a role in terms of its use by, and popularity among men. There is something masculine about the material, and about the large, substantial shape too. It is hard to regard these two aspects separately in this case.

Conversely, in Louis Ghost by Philippe Starck, the material can be seen separately from the shape and is mediated very explicitly. The chair is made of transparent plastic. The clear, colourless version in particular is staged in ways, in which the transparency of the material is a prerequisite for seeing what is behind it: a baby, a building, a face etc. The material, or more specifically what the material is *capable of* (transparency), is mediated in photos by the manufacturer, by photographers and, especially, by bloggers and users on social media. Many people own the chair, and this is a simple, instantly fun way of creating images. Unlike in the Eames Lounge Chair, the material is *not just* material. It is *capable* of something, which is easy to understand and easy to translate into images.

Figure 4: The transparent material of Louis Ghost is a clear mediagenic feature.
Kartell advertisement / Photographer Terri Smith, Florida / Julie Delbar (NL), Pinterest

Name

The name is the final mediagenic feature I want to emphasise. In many instances, it does not in itself give rise to specific mediations centred around it. It is more a designation than something

implicit in the chair that expresses or communicates something specific. But some chairs, and I believe an increasing number of them, have a name, which more directly refers to the chair's shape, material and concept, and they are objects of mediation. The Egg is a good example. The name refers to the chair's oval shell and, over the years, the egg as a food and a shape have repeatedly been involved in both linguistic and visual mediations of the chair. Most recently, particularly users on social media have been playing with, and waxing lyrical over the word 'egg'.

Just as in the case of the material, in this context the name is also associated with the shape. A great deal emanates from the shape. To an extent, the same is also true of the Vegetal chair by Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec. The concept, shape and pattern of the chair were taken from nature, so the name alludes to all these elements. That means that mediations cannot focus on the name in itself, because the chair's stories all overlap. Vegetal is an example of a strong, well-coordinated marketing strategy and, in many subsequent mediations of the chair, it has been mediated in relation to nature. As shown in the example, the miniature chair is surrounded by plants, shrubs and the like: a motif, which many others have also detected. But the name is undoubtedly an important factor in helping us to see the chair as something natural, so to speak.

In Louis Ghost, the name comes across loudly and clearly. First, there is the name 'Louis', which refers to the French king, Louis XIV, the Sun King. This reference is visible in several photos, in which the chair is placed in front of various portraits of the king, and positioned in settings indicating that stylistic period. Of course, these contexts also refer to the shape of the chair, which has the characteristic lines of the Baroque period. So it is not the name 'Louis' alone that generates these mediations. In these cases it is probably more the shape, while the name underpins and reinforces the story. On the other hand, the name 'Ghost' generates mediations, which seem to stem from the name in itself: something phantom-like, something spooky. This may in itself also refer to the chair's transparency and material, but the point is that these mediations (eg. photo) would probably not exist, if the chair had another name.

Figure 5: The name is a mediagenic feature, which draws mediations.

Ib Antoni poster for Heal's, 1967 / Káldi Bernadett Imola (HU), Instagram / Artist Pure Evil, London

Conclusion

Like many other lifestyle products, furniture (chairs in particular) are exposed in the media in no uncertain terms. This is not a new phenomenon, but the degree has been intensified as a result of the increasing influence of media culture and the technological options available. In particular, the (visual) social media generate an abundance of images, while the actual users of this group of media design, imitate and style versions of the expressions, shapes and stories of furniture. By following items of furniture and their appearance in the media, certain items of furniture are particularly prominent with special features that generate mediations.

The examples in this essay have shown that several items of furniture have features that are repeated again and again in a variety of ways and on diverse media platforms. Shape, material and name were mentioned here as significant features common to several cases. Does this mean manufacturer simply can make furniture with mediagenic features and they becomes instant successes? Properly not. The examples can not be studied in isolation from their origin. Especially designer and manufacturer have a high role in forming a media platform, and all of the examples mentioned are well-known chair. Furthermore, we must take influences from lifestyle media, social media, etc. into account. Largely the media culture determines whether a particular feature in the chair goes viral - or suddenly other aspects in the chair. However this study does exemplify what works in the media, and which features in particular the users of social media can relate to. They respond to aspects that can be easily transformed and translated.

This raises new questions in relation to media. Who or what exactly imposed these conditions? Does the media has its own logic and agenda, where communication under certain conditions is necessary? Or does the media culture and the many new technologies and platforms emerge *because of* people's use and need? Who is controlling whom?

Note: The examples in this paper are among selected chairs, which are part of the exhibition INSTANT ICON. Fotogenic design. The exhibition is a survey of media features in furniture, and presents the media story of seven chairs told through pictures, space, words and things.

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