

Design Discourse

Blank Meaning as Design Affordance. Memory and Fictions (a dialogue between Anna Calvera and Fátima Pombo)*

Abstract

We are interested to contribute to an aesthetics of everyday things, by arguing the theme through the phenomenological context of the 'designed' things from the side of the user, namely as manifestation of self-creation (autopoiesis) and perception of time. Our paper focuses mainly on use as an act of giving meaning to everyday life. Some principles: design deals with memory and present time, tradition and innovation, permanent and ephemeral. Being the individual a perceptive being and being perception given on a horizon that cannot be only defined by efficiency, a product (artifact, thing) is open to diversity of interpretations. This statement will be enlightened with the concept of blank meaning (concept that we created and will be explained along the full paper). The background of our discourse is placed beyond the customization of everyday things: things still live and perform after being acquired. Therefore, we focus on the microdimension of the universe of fictions that allows people to be surrounded by things that have meaning even though they no longer have a function. The conclusion of our paper focus both into designer users and design practice as an act of giving meaning to everyday life. Therefore, arriving to that point, we intend to clarify the concept of meaning in order to contribute towards an Aesthetics of beauty in use.

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Recibido: Abril 4 2011.

Aprobado: Noviembre 1 de 2011

Key words: Design aesthetics, blank meaning, phenomenology, reminiscences.

* A shorter version of this article was presented by the authors at the 6th ICDHS Conference held in Brussels in September 2010.

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Resumen

Estamos interesadas en contribuir a una visión estética de las cosas cotidianas, al discutir el tema a través del contexto fenomenológico de las cosas “diseñadas” desde el lado del usuario, es decir, como manifestación de la auto-creación (autopoiesis) y la percepción del tiempo. Nuestro trabajo se centra principalmente en el “uso” como un acto de dar sentido a la vida cotidiana. Algunos principios: tratos del diseño con la memoria y el tiempo presente la tradición y la innovación, lo permanente y lo efímero. Siendo el individuo un ser perceptivo, y ser dada la percepción de un horizonte que no puede ser definido por la eficiencia, un producto (artefacto, cosa) está abierto a una diversidad de interpretaciones. Esta declaración será iluminada con el concepto de significado en blanco (concepto que hemos creado y se explicará a lo largo del documento completo). El fondo de nuestro discurso se coloca más allá de la personalización de las cosas cotidianas: las cosas siguen viviendo y llevar a cabo después de ser adquirido. Por lo tanto, nos centramos en el universo de micro-dimensión de las ficciones que permiten a la gente a estar rodeado de cosas que tienen significado a pesar de que ya no tienen una función. Las conclusiones de nuestro trabajo se centran tanto en los usuarios de diseño y la práctica del diseño como un acto de dar sentido a la vida cotidiana. Por lo tanto, llegar a ese punto, tenemos la intención de aclarar el concepto de significado con el fin de contribuir a la estética de la belleza está en uso.

Palabras clave: Estética de diseño, sentido, fenomenología, recuerdos.

1. The Phenomenological Context of the Designed Things. About Enjoying Design

As a convergence area of intentionality, the interaction between users and artefacts brings together ‘interior reality’ and ‘exterior reality’, i.e., in a phenomenological language, Eigenworld (own world), and Lebenswelt (world of life) through the Dingwelt (world of the thing).

The representation of the world of things in the frame of the aesthetics of reception —so from the point of view of the users’ behavior— is manifestation of knowledge and perception of the world beyond customization of design goods: things still live after being acquired and its life is what interests us in this text. It is the individual who gives a meaning to the qualities of the thing.

Being the individual a perceptive being and being perception given on a horizon that cannot be only defined by efficiency, a product (artefact, thing) is open, apparently, to diversity of interpretations.

All around us calls for singularity, pleasure, freedom, personalization... whatever it may mask or express. If each man is man+thing (Calvino, 1999: 89), the interpreter (the user) and what he interprets (the thing) are in a mutual circuit of influences. The Calvino’s statement each man is man+thing recalls the opposite positions between Vance Packard and Ernest Dichter regarding the products’ individual interpretation. Among other works, we stress his reasoning in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) denouncing the mechanisms of persuasion and manipulation used by marketing, particularly in the post-war North America. Publicity often uses techniques based in the psychological functioning of human being to exploits consumers’ desires that should not be related with objects. Because in effect and according to him, products that should be just merchandises responding to efficient, direct necessities (he means an answer to a practical problem) are

wrapped in a psychological cover that shows them as responses to hidden needs (so called sub-conscious needs). A product, besides being merchandise, appears as a symbolical value that touches an emotion, a feeling, a desire. And that's this value that most of all interferes with the selling success. On the other hand Dichter (1960) studies the relationship that individuals establish with things present in their daily life. He concludes that the division between objective, material things and spiritual ones are hypocrite. Individuals project themselves into things which according to Dichter have a 'soul', i.e. they can provoke psychological effects and emotional reactions in their users and this fact is a positive one. Individuals and things are constantly interfacing inside a social and cultural system of values which things' interface help to distinguish. We are also very much interested in digging on the specificity of the meaning of the relation that a desiring being unfolds with things.

Having as inspiration the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, we will discuss that mutual circuit of influences —individual/things; desire/meaning; individual-desire/things-meaning— for an individual that is as a bodily incarnated subject (as we considered already in other articles¹. Merleau-Ponty defends that the individual, by the fact that is an inhabitant of the world, searches for a meaning to the existence; a meaning that cannot be separated from the meaning that is attributed to things. Therefore, things, the phenomenon (this that appears hic et nunc), are so important. Thinking is, therefore, making that an experience is converted in something with meaning for a bodily incarnated subject. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty, we understand that by inhabiting the world, the individual unfolds an experience that balances between desire and meaning: the pleasure of the body's experience is inseparable of the experience of the world. This experience of double face (body and world) has also interpretative and practical (from praxis) implications. Hence, we are interested in situating the designed artifact in terms

¹. See, for example, Fátima Pombo, "El deseo de las mañanas. Merleau-Ponty y el diseño" in Anna Calvera's edited book 2007, 83-100.

of the current of relations between objects and experiences highlighting it as a field of experience in which the subject appears as a desiring being.

For each individual, desire is the devil and the god. The desiring subject always has an empty space, while the subject of representation, the transcendental subject, aims to fill all the gaps. Desire does not allow the subject to shut himself in the position of the ego as aporia, as a closing of himself; it is an experience of the limitations and an opening to what is not the self. The subject of desire has no certainties. The body is inhabited by the language of desire, which is a language marked by symbols, images and affections. The body has an emotive dynamic, which oscillates between what is sensitive and intelligible, placing it in the world of interpretation, made of a balance between what is intimate and what is external. The psychosomatic bond develops the conditions in which representation and evocation are formed (the bodily incarnated subject) whenever the subject is placed before objects. The own-body is therefore the reality in which desire is impression and expression and, associated with affection and its representation, has the value of an event. The desiring subject is thus moved depending on the circuit of impression-expression. Sudjic interprets a category of objects that particularly please, calling them 'cult objects'. Those objects display a seduction that awakes the desire of possessing them. He defends that this kind of objects have certain design characteristics that seem to evoke an emotional answer in certain groups of individuals. In texts like *Cult Objects* (1985) or *The Language of Things* (2009), the author speaks about cult objects and of some strategic conditions which favour cult objects' creation and the impact of them in daily life of those who have, exhibit and use them. Focusing on the value of desire, we find a perceptive totality that corresponds to the experience of pleasure in mutual dialectic with imaginary and symbolic. Jourdan develops an interesting thesis in *Designing Pleasurable Products* (2000) by demonstrating the difference between 'pleasure-based and usability-based approaches' when designing.

Since the beginning of time humans have sought pleasure. We have gained pleasure from the natural environment: from the beauty of flowers or the feeling of the sun on our skin; from bathing in soothing waters or the refreshment of a cool breeze (...). Another source of pleasure has been the artefacts with which we have surrounded ourselves. (Jourdan, 2000: 11).

Is there, then, a synthesis possible between the symbolic arguments of Packard and Dichter? We present our thesis, proposing a synthesis between Packard and Dichter with the following statement: while phenomenon offered to interpretation, the designed thing transports besides all functions designers can imagine and display, the possibilities of the blank meaning which cannot be predicted (fortunately) by designers or producers. Things exist very much with and through the individual's meaning concession that general public/the users give to them.

2. The Blank Meaning within the Designed Things

The concept of blank meaning was created by Fátima Pombo as a filling of a conceptual need that could express the freedom in the territory of the being-there (Dasein) while a desiring subject facing the experience of things. So, by blank meaning we mean the interpretation each individual makes of one thing (object) besides all qualities that characterize an object are considered. And that depends on both the object and the subject, but not in any expected way, once the interpretation is ascribed by each individual based on his/her own subjective interpretation and constitution of his/her personal world (Umwelt).

The first time Pombo addressed the concept of blank meaning was at the 4th European Academy of Design Conference (d3- Desire, Designum, Design) hosted by the University of Aveiro, Portugal, on April 2001. In her paper —'Desire and Destiny of Things'— the phenomenology of desire led us to the conclusion that the object of design as a phenomenon passive of interpretation is not innocent: as well as the range of many different functions well signalled, it carries with it a blank meaning. So, if the designed object provides communicative facilities that

are, in principle, clear and intelligible, it does not have to stick to the mission of having to show itself as objective or truthful. Things receive an unexpected and personal meaning during the interpretative process. The blank meaning of the thing is the meaning that, after all its functions have been fulfilled, also allows the subject to form a sense that has impact just for him/herself².

After the presentation in 2001, the concept of blank meaning was maturing through other scientific presentations, and imposing itself to us as a very dynamic methodological concept. More we were interested in deepen our thoughts on an Aesthetics of design from the point of view of user's aesthetic behaviour, more the blank meaning appears as the key to read the importance of interpretation from each subjectivity. Then, in the scientific meeting held in January 2010, in Copenhagen (Cephad 2010, The Borderland between Philosophy and Design Research) the blank meaning was coupled to the concept of autopoiesis. The blank meaning of autopoiesis. The meaning given to the things by each individual participates in the construction of his/her own self. A return to Greek thought will help us to understand, with Aristotle, that the human being cannot find satisfaction merely in knowledge, in the ostentation of judgment, and in measures and numbers, because the human being dwells upon his individual distinctiveness while asserting his condition of poietic being (he/she who makes; he/she who creates).

The Aristotelian model of knowledge does not oppose *theoria* and *praxis* nor does delimit *poiesis* as the sphere of the *techné*. Hence, *poiesis* depends on both the object and the subject, while possibility of giving meaning and defining subjectivity. Pombo proposed in Copenhagen that 'La Chaise' (1948) designed by Charles and Ray Eames may not evoke any particular meaning in spite of its beauty and cult value (among other characteristics), unless it was a special gift offered by a beloved one. But the vase bought a long time ago accompanies its owner in the

². Meanwhile, in a Conference on Graphic Design held in Santo Domingo in 1994, Anna Calvera presented a paper where she introduced the public as the actor who puts the end of the story of what a graphic design tells, something that is conceptually characteristic for graphics made during postmodern times. See Calvera (1996) 'La idea en diseño gráfico: reflexiones sobre la creación (¿o recreación?) de comunicados visuales.' *Experimenta*, 10, Madrid, 1996: 67-82. Translated and published also in *Étapes Graphiques*, 21, Paris, 1996.

several moving in and out of houses and of countries. The experience of moving from country helps to define which are indeed the things (objects) that cannot be left behind. When living in a very different landscape and human environment as were those from birth and temperament, some objects help to give a sense of belonging and peace. Could an object of design such as La Chaise play the same role for somebody?³ Moving is a way of experiencing objects, realizing constantly their true values for their owner. But there is also another way of approaching things, that one experienced by people who always stay in the same place: the way these people get used to be with, accomplishing what once Sartre explained as a typical European approach: to be aware that things last longer than people do. By living always in the same family house, each corner is full of memories, but this is not necessary what makes a person to continue living there, but the simple fact that the house became a home. In that case, La Chaise could be an important element of that home if selected by the inhabitant.

At that point we realize that opposing a very famous and connoted piece of good design with a personal and very local piece of craft wasn't useful anymore to understand the complexity of subjective interpretations an object or a thing may bring up whatever its character. We discussed examples of both situations. Creations of craftsmen, mainly if made by hand, are widely recognized as the true places of memory. Historically have been presented and defended as the real repositories of human values, the only objects that can be authentic in our world. It has often been asserted that a true and culturally legitimate aesthetic experience concerns only craft pieces. On the other hand, 'machine-made-things' are so common nowadays that it is easy to find every kind of products, objects and things in most part of the world. Some of them are useful and well designed things, both humble and discreet and wise in their polite simplicity. They accompany our life without making noise, and in such a low and discreet

³. A research conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi demonstrated how important were personal reminiscences in the appreciation of things collected by people at home. See Margolin & Buchanan 1995. Then, this was the subject Mario Praz used to write his memories using furniture and objects collected at his house in Rome to explain his life. See Mario Praz (1979), *La casa della vita*. Milano: Adelphi.

profile they sometimes reach and settle our remembered childhood landscape. Most of them inspired Pop artists' imagination, in the sense that Pop artists used images from advertising and from the massive product's consumerism to shape a nostalgic and emotional imaginary, converting such objects in something more than useful objects, namely in childhood memories. Can those objects always be left aside without regret? They are so common, there are so many, that it is really difficult to grow fond of them⁴.

Then, there is indeed another kind of things: design masterpieces so often advertised and considered objects of reference. For that reason, 'La Chaise' of Charles and Ray Eames can perfectly become the repository of souvenirs and affections and be linked sentimentally with its owners and users, mainly with those users that never use it to sit down but just to watch it deeply touched and feeling satisfied to have it. For that reason the path of our reflection opened up and to all designed things that an individual can integrate in his/her autopoiesis process. The individual by choosing objects is giving meaning to it and is communicating that meaning to the others, i.e., is defining a presence among the others. The individual is not only 'I and my circumstances', but is also the objects that fill and abandon his/her circumstances. The challenge now is to take into account the sentimental links and subjective interpretations that all kind of things can awake in their users. Memory is a huge consolation by linking the thread of things and events. Sometimes in the 'spinning process', memory becomes even creative by connecting threads from different time, space and stories. This contributes also for the autopoiesis development of the individual. We are finally what our memories are. Memory is an important topic in the epoch of dematerialization of design and dematerialization of the affections.

If by the diversity of objects we are aware of a mankind that desires, thinks, speaks..., if the individual, through his/her relation with the objects, expresses himself and the

⁴. This was the criticism Vilém Flusser addressed once to mass-production and most common objects created by designers: tools such as Bic ball-point pen. According to Flusser, the abundance of a thing revokes its uniqueness and spirituality. See Flusser 1999.

others... it is necessary to recognize that dematerialization asks for a very decisive role of the memory. The blank meaning is the meaning that remains as fundamental for the existence after forgetting all things, after giving up many other things.

3. How the blank meaning works: introducing the character of a user, a Reader is looking for a book

Personal experiences are useful to explain what we mean but are not enough to reinforce the concept of blank meaning and to show that should be useful to understand the social life of designed things. When discussing about the paper, we remembered a short piece written by Italo Calvino some time ago. The chapter introduces the role of the Reader as an active character within the story told by the romance. In fact, the story starts precisely when the reader decides to buy the book and goes to the bookshop. There he looks and classifies all the books from a very quick glance. Though it is a long quotation, it is interesting to follow his description of the situation written as a dialog of the Writer with the Reader:

In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid manoeuvre you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out... (Calvino, 1979).

And the classification continues describing new types of books until the reader arrives and you 'leap straight into the citadel of the New Books Whose Author Or Subject Appeals To You'.

Don't worry: at the end, the reader buys just the book he has already decided to buy, that one which was the reason of his journey to the bookshop, and the story goes on introducing the Author who is necessarily not Italo Calvino himself. The text could be interpreted in many ways. Of course it stands and proposes a logical topic, an approach to cognitive maps that people have in mind to think and perform⁵. But this is not our subject here. What is appealing is its ability to show how different is the appreciation of things because it depends on personal situation, personality and character of somebody that also includes his past time, memories and personal experiences. And so, he shows perfectly the way users refill, they stuff in some way, the blank meaning of things giving them a specific content, and by doing so, things become worth just for them.

Calvino introduces some considerations too on the visual appearance of books through their covers and talks about its special aesthetics before they get old and used and then become ready for the second hand market. Calvinos' description of the Reader's feelings about his new purchase is as follows: 'You derive a special pleasure from a just-published book, and it isn't only a book you are taking with you but its novelty as well, which could also be merely that of an object fresh from the factory, the youthful bloom of new books, which lasts until the dust jacket begins to yellow, until a veil of smog settles on the top edge, until the binding becomes dog-eared, in the rapid autumn of libraries'.

From the aesthetic point of view, the translation in English looses the aesthetic quality the original offered. Calvino says "la bellezza dell'asino" —the donkey beauty— a popular expression in Italian used to speak about the beauty of tools and very useful things, characteristic of all these things worth just because they work and help people to live better.

⁵. For an analysis of strange classifications, see the introduction of Foucault to his book *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966) where he deals with Jorge Luis Borges' bizarre classification of animals

In our conversations, objects such as La Chaise stay at the middle of the question just because they go ahead from the functional commandment of Modernist times and point out directly design as an aesthetic practice and discourse. But we need to finish now and so, that's better to finish putting some questions to be disclosed in a next text. Do designed things add a difference to those objects we had chosen to accompany us during life as Jourdan suggests? Are then a special class of objects seen from the aesthetic point of view? Calvino offers a new way of proposing the question even though related to literature and books to be read:

'Even inside this stronghold you can make some breaches in the ranks of the defenders, dividing them into New Books by Authors Or On Subjects Not New (for you or in general) and New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Completely Unknown (at least to you), and defining the attraction they have for you on the basis of your desires and needs for the new and the not new (for the new you seek in the not new and for the not new you seek in the new).'

Anna Calvera & Fátima Pombo (Barcelona & Leuven, 2010).

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