

“Cheapness is Not a Sense, George!”: An Economic Critique of Design and Emotion Discourse

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Abstract

The body of works gathered under the title ‘design and emotion’, not surprisingly, constitutes a coherent set of definitions concerning their ‘subject’: This presupposed subject is capable of not only ‘experiencing’ the object (as opposed to ‘using’), but also communicating his/her experience accurately. His/her reflections are then collected by positivistic means into a repertoire of sensualities, which forms the basis for further ‘designerly’ operations.

Considering designed-objects and experiencing-subjects having interactions in an economy-proof void, in a laboratory-like medium devoid of monetary relations, design and emotion movement seems to miss that constitutive part of such interaction, which is also the condition of its own existence: Economy. The paper proposes to perform a theoretical critique of design and emotion discourse, emphasizing this purposeful, but not necessarily self-conscious forgetfulness that amounts to a repression, which can be symptomatically read to deeply understand this design approach.

Conference theme: Design and Emotion: Theoretical Issues

Keywords: design and emotion discourse, economy, methodology

“George: All right, but we're not buying it at Bloomingdale's. I will buy it, you pay me back later. I'll sniff out a deal. I have a sixth sense.
Jerry: Cheapness is not a sense.”

- Seinfeld, “The Reverse Peephole”

Introduction

Design and emotion movement today brings together several perspectives and approaches to product-user relationship, imported from various disciplines from behavioral psychology to material culture, from marketing to cognitive science (see Demir, Desmet and Hekkert, 2006, for a short review). The movement thus resists any claim to a singular essence, be it an all-encompassing set of scientific assumptions or a well-structured and generalized methodology. What brings this diversity of studies under one roof, then, seems to be a common research interest; that is, what Demir, Desmet and Hekkert (2006) define as “a profound exploration of the complex and rich experiences people have while interacting with products”, and a common endeavor; that is, designing for “emotionally rich interactions” (Wensveen and Overbeeke, 2001).

Still, following these, one can discover further shared assumptions and implications concerning the direction of research, and certain structural affinities within the wide range of studies. One such common element is a forgetfulness regarding economic concerns throughout the movement. It is the aim of this study to indicate and elaborate on this repressed function, whose implications are critical not only for the success of this movement vis-a-vis the early goals of the movement, but also for the very future of the design profession, unless openly acknowledged.

For this purpose it is necessary, first of all, to outline the more-or-less common structure of the problem design and emotion movement is interested in. Only then it is possible to observe the monetary relations being repressed, first, in the sort of subject that is addressed by the movement, and second, in its treatment of its subject's emotional experiences with products.

Who is the Subject of Design and Emotion?

Let us start with reconsidering what kind of a 'subject' design and emotion discourse deals with, or constructs: The presupposed 'subject' has some primary characteristics. S/he not only uses the object for a 'task' in a 'context of use', but she also 'experiences' the object. For instance, Jordan's (2000) fictitious character "Janet Peters" has, besides her physical and cognitive capabilities, a lifestyle to fit the product to. Only under the so-called "holistic" lens of pleasurable design, she can become a proper 'human': According to Jordan it is "dehumanising" to ignore pleurability, to ignore those "very factors that make people human – for example, their hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations, principles and tastes".

Moreover, s/he is also considered to be able to communicate his/her experiences in fully expressible parameters. These parameters through which the subject experiences the object can be analyzed in a positivistic manner, and accumulated to produce a repertoire of emotional tools which are transferred right onto 'designerly' operations. In this process, emotional responses of the 'subject' to formal characteristics of objects are translated into predetermined sets of (mostly verbal) expressions (see, for instance, Forlizzi, Mutlu and DiSalvo, 2004, for an application of visual anthropological methods to this end; Adank and Warell, 2006, for a similar investigation focusing on sensory experience; Desmet, 1999, for the PrEmo technique that uses caricatures instead of verbal expressions), categorized in many ways (see Crilly, Moultrie and Clarkson, 2004; for a general classification of emotional experiences derived from a number of similar classifications from within the movement; see also Kaygan 2008, for a detailed critique of such classifications), and then utilized as the atoms of a design inventory from which various tools to infuse emotions into product surface and interface are derived.

Throughout the process, it is intriguing to see the utmost important initial phase of the interaction between this subject and the designed object being consistently by-passed: the action and the context of purchase, which is an absolutely dominant determinant, a framing factor in which other experiences exist. The objects are first possessed within the confines of the market economy, not upon the white background supposed by the design and emotion research; they are bought. Thus, the subject of design and emotion, although never mentioned, is first and foremost a customer. Second, she is a consumer. Janet's condition of existence as an proper individual depends on her being a proper consumer.

And the manifested main goal of design and emotion, that is designing pleasurable object-subject interactions, turns out to be a simple motive for purchase.

Universality Transferred: From Natural Selection to Market Success

Paul Hekkert, in his article “Design aesthetics: principles of pleasure in design” (2006), argues that aesthetic preferences of the “normal human being” are in a strict accordance with the evolutionary process, and the rules of aesthetic pleasure should be sought within the rules of sensory development and survival in general. By a basic interpretation of the adaptation principle, aesthetics is posited as a natural and neutral process, in which forms and patterns that are advantageous for the senses are naturally favored. Functional favorability is the indispensable cause of aesthetical pleasure (Hekkert 2006). As from a “survival” point of view the purpose of perception is to inform the human about the properties of the environment, according to Hekkert, aesthetical preferences of the “normal human being” should derive from such functionality. Thus, works of visual art are favored because they bring order to the flow of visual information and help the senses navigate and identify; and, music that is based on principles of repetition, closure and similarity is favored as it helps detect signals and afford communication (Hekkert 2006). The writer, then, attempts to list the universal principles of pleasure according to such evolutionary conceptualization of aesthetics, and advises designers to reckon them while designing products, as the success of the designed object, *the product*, is in correlation with these rules.

Our concern here is neither the derivation (or presumption) of these rules, nor their mode of operation. We would rather like to draw attention to something hidden behind such argumentation. Hekkert not only presupposes a disputable universality in the purpose of sensory perception, but also attributes an unquestioned ahistorical validity to the cause-effect relationship between the aesthetical preference process and the former. In other words, the cultural and historical diversity of aesthetical perception and related preferences are ignored in favor of the idea of a singular natural law.

The further, and more crucial implication of this argumentation would be found in its very function: Hekkert offers a methodology for the design process, and refers to universal principles of beauty, which are derived from evolutionary psychology, in order

to be used in designing a product. Thus, the product would be designed in such a way that its accordance with the aesthetical laws would guarantee its appreciation. The product designed in this manner would be “selected” by the forces of artificial natural selection, which borrows its pattern from the principles of natural selection for Man: He, the “normal human being” operates His senses in such a way that gets him to survive. When Hekkert identifies the laws of this operation, and projects them onto the design process, the very concept of survival is transferred from the biological domain to the realms of products, i. e. the market. The aesthetical preference model as such turns out to be just a tool for purchase motivation. This is nothing but a naturalization of the market, a specific mode of economy.

The ideological effect of the naturalization of the market economy is not peculiar to Hekkert's study. A similar movement towards the natural/instinctual can be found in Norman's (2004) "visceral-level" of product experience, and Desmet and Hekkert's (2007) argument for an essential human motivation for pleasure in the appraisal of products; and it can be generalized to the most of the research undertaken within the design and emotion movement.

The Ceteris Paribus

Thirdly, the technique many design and emotion studies apply to the investigation of the user-product experience borrows from economy the concept of isolation, or *ceteris paribus*. These studies apply their peculiar methodology, which is outlined above, to isolate the emotional experiences in atomic ways to determine which atomic formal factor corresponds to which atomic emotional interaction. This ‘divisive’ operation, and the conceptual hygiene it implies simulate the scientific methodology. As if perceptual, emotional, phenomenal experiences can be analyzed to their indivisible limits, isolated from all other parameters, and considered as distinct units; each emotional-experience-atom is attempted to be explored in a vacuum where *ceteris paribus* works: The behavior of one emotional-experience atom is to be determined when all others are kept constant. Forms, colors, impressions etc. are all tested one by one as if such an operation could

either occur in the mind, or when reproduced in experiments as such, would give a reliable result to be used in design practice.

However, as Merleau-Ponty *philosophically* puts it, an experience cannot be atomized, and defined as the accumulation of these analytically separated parts, since the entity we are experiencing with cannot be understood as the accumulation of its qualities. A lemon, Merleau-Ponty states, is not the sum of its oval form *plus* its yellowness *plus* its sour taste etc., since we cannot trace and observe what gathers these qualities together. All of these qualities are not independent from each other, on the contrary, they are conditioned by each other, and constitute the entity with this very unanalyzable dependence (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). The experience, just as the qualities of the entity we are experiencing, cannot be analyzed and reconstructed in the manner defined above. Besides the usually ignored factors such as cultural difference, contextual indeterminability, the very phenomenal process seems to resist such a *ceteris paribus* operation.

Although the emotional experience cannot be analyzed with such *economic* methods, the economy itself should be concerned while having an experience with an object, since the object is never independent from the economic variant as it comes as a commodity.

George Costanza's Massage Chair

As we have attempted to show by the discussions above, design and emotion discourse has many implications on economy, most of which are implicated in a negative manner, i.e. through lack of reference. Design and emotion circle remains rather silent when it comes to monetary concerns; however, it is not difficult to see that this symptomatic silence conceals a vital connection.

A number of scenes from “The Reverse Peephole”, one of the most product-related episodes of the Seinfeld series, can be revoked here due to their illustrative potential. The episode, as usual, narrates the relations of the four protagonists of the series, Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer, and the events are organized around a series of objects; a man's handbag, a wallet, a fur coat and a massage chair. The protagonists all have very emotionally intensive relations with their objects, meanwhile providing good examples for the emotional categories studied by design and emotion researchers.

1. Despite the backache it causes, George's insistence on using his huge wallet, which is filled with useless tickets, notes, receipts etc., can be easily identified as what Crilly, Moultrie and Clarkson (2004) call a “symbolic association”, or as an example of Desmet and Hekkert's (2007) “experience of meaning”. It is at this level that a product elicits emotions by invoking certain meanings in the user. George feels very connected to his wallet, because it is a symbol of his manliness (“A man carries a wallet!”), and even though it is not usable at all (“It doesn't matter if it [i. e., not using a wallet] is more comfortable. It's wrong.”). Evidently, Jackson's hierarchy that subordinates pleurability to usability does not work for George, for he regards symbolic associations of his wallet higher than its actual utility –though the moralistic ending of the episode where his wallet explodes suggests otherwise.
2. Jerry's handbag, contrarily, carries strong feminine connotations because it looks like a purse (“It's not a purse. It's European!”). Unlike George, however, Jerry prefers the “emotional experience” (Desmet and Hekkert, 2007) he gains through the handbag's functionality to its symbolism.
3. Elaine's boyfriend Puddy's fur coat elicits strong negative emotions in his friends: While Kramer argues that the coat is “dandy”, Elaine argues that Puddy resembles Dr. Zaius in that coat, an orangutan from the movie, Planet of the Apes. In psychologistic terms suggested by Desmet and Hekkert, both individuals assess the product's meaning as harmful to their identities and reject it. Puddy, on the other hand, had probably been seduced by the “visceral” qualities of the coat. As defined by Norman (2004), “visceral-level emotions” comprise direct, natural emotional responses to material qualities of products. This level of experience is also listed as the “aesthetic experience”, the experience of an aesthetic pleasantness intrinsic to the product by Desmet and Hekkert (2007). In the fur coat example, it is the product's soft tactile feeling and warmness that must have caused Puddy to “approach” the product, because he later gives up the coat once he realizes the inappropriateness of its symbolic associations.
4. The fourth and the final product is the massage chair. It is meant to be a housewarming gift for a mutual friend of our protagonists, but the chair slowly becomes a symbol of George's stinginess, or “cheapness” as Jerry calls it. First, George proudly announces that he has found the chair for 60\$ cheaper with his

“sixth sense”. Then, when the chair is delivered to his house, he does not inform its shareholders; instead, he starts using it. Only when his friends, one by one, decide not to participate in the gift, he confesses that he had already bought the chair and had been using it for the last couple of days.

It is evident that George really enjoys using the chair, and that his enjoyment should at least partly be attributed to how well the chair performs; namely, its “emotional experience” as defined by Desmet and Hekkert (2007). However, in George's case, there is a surplus emotion that overflows the emotional potential of the object's function; the fact that he has bought it at a discount and that the product's price has been split among four people seem to have contributed much to his enjoyment of the product. This cannot, of course, be degraded to an “experience of meaning” that roots from his personal experience, his memory of purchasing the product. The discount and the splitting of the price is capable of adding to, multiplying or even generating pleasure of its own. Or inversely, we can propose that the product's utility does not normally compensate for its price, which is apparently assessed too high by George (“Oh, so now I have to buy this whole chair by myself?”). Then, the price presents an obstacle for the pleasurability of the product; it is can be called another emotional stimulus that elicits the emotion of dislike.

The example shows that price is another important factor in the assessment of products' pleasurability, which is not covered in the various taxonomic or structural attempts to systematically analyze and list potential sources of emotions on products. One exceptional reference can be found in a recent study by Desmet (2007), however it is discussed under the section, “Mixed emotions”, where it is not clear whether the author regards price as one of the emotional attributes that belong to the product or an external variable that complicates the problem at hand. Other than that, a number of studies that explicitly define emotional design under the heading of emotional branding and marketing only indirectly include monetary issues that are otherwise avoided by design and emotion researchers.

Droog's Handbags: A Research Potential?

As a suggestion, the *ceteris paribus* that silences the economical factor can be reversed to test that which is almost never counted as a parameter to be tested. An attempt for such a reflexive experiment would reveal the absurdity within the above methodology.

In the Droog Design exhibition at the Milan Furniture Fair 2003, designers presented a storeful of curiosities, from 1€ bottles of water to numbered sugar cubes. Especially two sets of ingenious product ideas in that exhibition explored the uncharted territory we discovered in the Seinfeld episode: In the stall where “you can buy the very same bag for the price of your choice”, and the other in which “you can go for T-shirts that have been marked up in price while you might expect a discount (basic price € 10)”, Droog Design (2007) was selling the same product for varied prices, thus preparing an imaginary stage for a *ceteris paribus* that design and emotion scholars have been refraining from so far.

The additional benefit of Droog's experiment can be to remind design and emotion theoreticians the contextual nature of emotions in purchasing and designing behaviors of the customers and designers. The problem we have been referring to is the homogenizing claim of design and emotion discourse on the human subject. The subject of design and emotion is taken as an ideal, never-changing, natural, neutral and ahistorical subject who is free from cultural and economical determination. The so-called natural abilities, limits and tendencies of such a subject is narrated and explored by these studies, and corresponding design strategies are idealistically suggested thereof.

We, on the other hand, think that design and emotion discourse should acknowledge that it is limited to the contemporary economical and cultural context, instead of leaning on unsatisfactory claims of universality. Only then, the efforts of the movement would be playing in the “scientifically” safe side of the game, not promising much more than they can deliver while arguing for the validity of the results of such researches. An initial manifestation of the limits of such studies should be done referring to contextual, historical, an intangible, even vague nature of such knowledge on emotions.

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