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## THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS FOR DESIGN PHENOMENOLOGY: THE SENSUAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMING OF EXPERIENCE BY DESIGN

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the paper is to conceptualize the means and effects of different dimensions of aesthetic meaning in relation to the experience of design. In doing so, the paper combines two philosophical interests in design, design phenomenology and design aesthetics, in order to promote a framework for discussing the impact of aesthetic meaning construction on experience. First, the paper raises the phenomenological question of the relationship between design and experience, specifically, how design conditions experience. Second, in looking at aesthetics in terms of a) the sensual appeal of design, b) design objects as aesthetic media that frame modes of understanding, and c) contextual factors, such as media, influencing what is regarded as aesthetic, it is the thesis of the paper that a concept of design aesthetics can be employed to differentiate between three different ways in which design frame our experience: We can look at sensual, conceptual, and contextual aesthetic dimensions of design and examine their contribution to the framing of experience, that is, how different dimensions of meaning articulation in design offer different framings of the experiences promoted by design objects and solutions. Further, the concept of aestheticization is introduced and discussed as the way in which something is construed as 'aesthetic' by factors external to the object. A central insight is that the contextual aspect of aestheticization can promote a cultural construction of new conditions and new categories for the way we experience relevant meaning properties of design objects.*

*Keywords: Design Philosophy, Design Phenomenology, Aesthetics, Aestheticization, Aesthetic Categories*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

As we live in a world of design, design frames and stages human experience. The first step is to acknowledge this as a condition for the way humans interact with the modern world; next, we can ask *how* this takes place and investigate common traits of the conditions of human experience in our contemporary 'age of design' – to use the phrase of the editorial programme of the journal *Design & Culture* (2009-).

In this paper, I will raise the phenomenological question of the relationship between design and experience, specifically, how design conditions experience. I will do so by embedding the discussion in the evolving discussion of a specific *design phenomenology*, which can be characterized as a theoretic framework inspired by classic phenomenology but aimed at conceptualizing the conditioning of experience by designed objects, mostly material but also with an extension to

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more immaterially operating design, such as service design or digital design, for example in interfaces. Further, this contribution to the discourse of design phenomenology will raise the question of the role of *aesthetics* in this regard. In looking at aesthetics in terms of a) the sensual appeal of design, b) design as aesthetic media that frame modes of understanding, and c) contextual factors, such as media, influencing what is regarded as aesthetic, it is the thesis of the paper is that a concept of design aesthetics can be employed to differentiate between different ways in which design relate to experience: We can look at sensual, conceptual and contextual aesthetic dimensions of design and examine their contribution to framing experience. In proposing aesthetics as an entry to understanding and conceptualizing meaning construction in design, we may ask how different dimensions of meaning articulation in design offer different framings of the experiences promoted by design objects and solutions.

In the following, I briefly introduce the concept of design phenomenology as an entry to the discussion of how design relates to experience, and then introduce the framework of aesthetics and discuss how it can produce insights into the way design frames experience. Next, I discuss the cultural role of aestheticization, that is, the construction of something as 'aesthetic' by factors external to the object. In this discussion, we may ask which aesthetic categories are produced by the context of contemporary culture.

## 2 DESIGN PHENOMENOLOGY

As a discipline of philosophy, phenomenology deals with the conditions of human experience in relation to what is experienced. Essentially conceived in a unity of subject and object, that often is reflected as a dichotomy, phenomenology asks about the phenomena as they appear to the human subject; the way to the phenomena goes through our experience of them.

When we proceed to *design* phenomenology, the perspective on meaning production changes. Phenomenology contains an inherent paradox in that it aims to get to the objects but seldom takes the actual objects into account. Even in the later phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which by virtue of its corporeal starting point gets one step closer to actual experience, the reflection often remains transcendental in the sense of being oriented toward the basic conditions of experience. Merleau-Ponty does, however, speak of access to the world of objects and of 'getting back to the objects in themselves, that is, getting back to this world before consciousness becomes the constantly speaking consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. iii), even if he does not focus on the specific constitution of the world of objects.

Design phenomenology may designate an approach to design with the focus on how design, in its many types of appearance and its creation of the tactile and visual surfaces of the modern world, affects and structures experience. In relation to this, an interest in the role of objects has emerged in recent years, as Actor-Network Theory has claimed objects to possess active agency in networks with humans, for example in guiding behavior (cf. Latour 2005), and Material Culture Studies have pointed to the steering role of the 'material environment' with regard to the 'development of social forms' (Dant 1999, p. 12).

Further, in a reversal of the interest in the human subject in phenomenology, the philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek employs the concept of postphenomenology

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(initiated by Don Ihde) as a way of pointing to and acknowledging the role of the object in shaping the conditions of experience: 'Things – and in our current culture especially technological artifacts – mediate how human beings are present in their world and how the world is present to them; they shape both subjectivity and objectivity' (Verbeek 2005, p. 235). Or, to further underline the point: A postphenomenological reflection such as Verbeek's is, in part, an attempt at deconstructing the dichotomy of subject and object in experience and thus rejecting the notion of human subjectivity as the origin of the structure of experience.

In relation to design, I suggest the use of the term *design phenomenology*. Thus, to employ the term postphenomenology is to emphasize the internal philosophical debate of phenomenology; to engage in the development of design phenomenology is to relate insights from the phenomenological outlook on the conditioning of human experience to design. Using the concept of design phenomenology, we can examine the impact of design on the conditions of experience: We can examine how we design things, and how we are, in turn, designed by the things we design. This dual perspective is suggested by Prasad Boradkar when he states that the title of his book *Designing Things* 'refers to a reciprocity of agency and an ambiguity of design's locus of action. People and things configure each other' (Boradkar 2010, p. 4). Further, the philosopher Stéphane Vial has proposed that we focus on the *effects* of design in the context of experience and view design as more event than being, more impact than thing, more incidence than property (Vial 2014). The effects of design contribute to the creation of the space of experience, which is mediated and structured by the actual objects of design. In his book *L'être et l'écran*, 'being and the screen', Vial looks at the changes in our structures of perception brought about by new digital media that, for example, offer spaces of virtual perception (Vial 2013).

To apply a phenomenological approach to design is to focus at the dual question of how design, as a medium of meaning formation, both relates to and possibly changes the constituents of experience. Whereas Verbeek's approach aims to investigate the material effects of objects within a framework of 'material aesthetics', that is, to look at the fundamental mediating role of objects with regard to the specific shaping of human 'experience and existence' (Verbeek 2005, p. 211), my attempt in the following is to look at the framing of experience by means of a broader conceptualization of aesthetics.

### 3 AESTHETICS

In this section, I relate the discussion of the framing of experience to the concept of aesthetics in design. First, I discuss how the aesthetic does not have a site or an essence per se but can be seen a meaning-creating relationship between the objective and the subjective; second, I introduce an object-focused theoretical framework of aesthetics in order to provide concepts for the thesis of the paper: that a concept of design aesthetics can offer tools for describing different ways in which design frames experience. In this kind of approach, aesthetics does not deal with beauty or art, as the focus is on parts of the tradition of aesthetic theory, but with the articulation, communication, and staging of meaning in various ways through and around the object.

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### 3.1 THE LOCATION OF THE AESTHETIC

In its philosophical tradition, reaching back to Kant and beyond, for example to Baumgarten and the English empiricists, aesthetics deals with human experience, judgment, and appreciation of specific sensually or cognitively appealing phenomena. Consequently, a dominant discussion in aesthetic theory has been about the location of the aesthetic, its *site* in the act of aesthetic appreciation. Kant's seminal *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790) is symptomatic of this discussion: On the one hand, he speaks of value judgment and taste, that is, of matters of subjective concern. On the other hand, the purpose of his thorough philosophical investigation of the field of aesthetics is to search for transsubjective criteria for aesthetic evaluation in a *sensus communis*. In his conception, the judgment of taste is bound to objective condition and not submitted to arbitrary subjective evaluation.

To take this reflection beyond Kant: On the one hand, we may ask what kind of special subjective experiences aesthetics call for, e.g. coherence, harmony, and unity (Dewey 2005; Shusterman 2000) or a feeling of 'pure presence' (Seel 2000) or 'moments of intensity' (Gumbrecht 2003). In this way, it is a central question in the 'first full treatment of design in the field of philosophical aesthetics', Jane Forsey's important book *The Aesthetics of Design*, what the nature of *aesthetic experience* is in relation to the use-oriented medium of design (Forsey, 2013). On the other hand, determining which concrete elements in design objects are capable of evoking aesthetic experiences is an analytical question. In this sense, the literary scholar Gérard Genette speaks of objects with an 'intentional aesthetic function' (Genette 1999, p. 2), aimed at being perceived and experienced aesthetically. In a general reflection, we can state that aesthetic meaning evolves and can be described as a *relationship* between a subject with an intention to see and perceive something as aesthetic, to have aesthetic experiences, and an object with certain aesthetically coded features.

Taking the relational as a defining point of aesthetics, I will focus on the coded features of the design objects. On the one hand, all sorts of objects (chairs, refrigerators, tables, garden gnomes, smartphones, lemon squeezers, works of art), may serve as vehicles for aesthetic appreciation according to individual and idiosyncratic taste. In this sense, virtually anything can be regarded as aesthetic if we choose to view it with an aesthetic perception and have an aesthetic experience of it. On the other hand, there are differences in the degree of aesthetic coding. This raises the question of how some design objects may encourage aesthetic appreciation more than others. Since my question is how design frames experience, I want to take a closer look at how design objects do this, by various means. That is, my approach to aesthetics is to look at the coding strategies of the objects rather than at the subjective experiencing.

### 3.2 A FRAMEWORK OF AESTHETICS IN DESIGN

In the following, I present an interpretive framework for investigating the formation and articulation of aesthetic meaning in design. I present three levels of aesthetics that are also reflected in aesthetic theory, and which can be related to the framing of experience by design: a sensual, a conceptual, and a contextual dimension of aesthetics. Elsewhere, I have referred to these levels as a sensual-phenomenological level, a conceptual-hermeneutical level, and a discursive-contextual level (Folkmann 2013). Table 1 summarizes these levels

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and how they relate to the following discussion of aestheticization and point to a new emerging discourse on how design objects relate to experience.

DIMENSION OF AESTHETICS	SENSUAL	CONCEPTUAL	CONTEXTUAL
IMPACT ON LEVEL OF EXPERIENCE:	Framing by means of sensual design aspects	Framing of understanding through concrete objects and solutions	Framing of systems of meaning; ideology
IMPACT OF AESTHETICIZATION	Massive sensual effect – even to the point of becoming ‘an-aesthetic’	Staging of reflective meaning as a strategy of design objects	Creation of new aesthetic categories
REQUIRED DISCOURSE ABOUT HOW DESIGN OBJECTS RELATE TO EXPERIENCE	Description of sensual means and effects in design	Description of degrees and strategies of design objects for staging meaning	Description of the various aesthetic categories produced

Table 1 – Dimensions of aesthetics in relation to design

(i) The *sensual* level of aesthetics in design takes its starting point in an investigation of the sensual communication of the form and material-tactile dimension of the designed object. This interest is rooted in a trend in aesthetic theory that revisits Alexander Baumgarten’s original idea of applying aesthetics to sensual matter in the work *Aesthetica* (1750-58; in Old Greek, *aisthetá* means ‘that which can be sensed’). It is found in works by Martin Seel (2000, 2007), Gernot Böhme (2001, 2013), and, drawing on John Dewey’s Pragmatist aesthetics (2005), Richard Shusterman (2000). Also, it relates to investigations of the role of the body in aesthetic experience (Bhatt 2013). These inquiries deal with aspects of sensual appeal and the question of appearance, that is, on the one hand, how people respond to certain kinds and structures of appearance, and, on the other hand, how these are constituted in order to evoke response. With regard to the framing of experience by design objects, this aspect of aesthetics deals with the impact of the sensual qualities of the objects: how the look, the feel of the texture, the application of materials, the execution of the detailing in the assembly and seamless fittings, and the overall physical presence appeal to people and conditions their approach to the world.

Establishing a discourse about this kind of aesthetics in design requires a differentiated vocabulary for describing sensual effects and their impact. In a recent project at the Design School Kolding, design researchers have examined how a group of users/consumers articulate aesthetic qualities and preferences in relation to the sensual, tactile qualities of textiles (Riisberg & Bang 2014). While wearing blindfolds, a group of young users/consumers were asked to verbalize their tactile sensation (Figure 1). The study claims that more reflective users may help inform designers about how to design to achieve greater appreciation by the users, but it also shows that it may be a struggle to create a nuanced language for a kind of sensory appreciation that is often overwhelmed by visual impressions.

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Figure 1: Graphically reworked representation of the experiment with tactile sensing of textiles. Image design: Laura Locher and Alina Breuil Moat.

(ii) The *conceptual* level of aesthetics involves analyzing artefacts as media for the construction of meaning and new patterns of understanding. This notion of aesthetics can be traced back to Kant's *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790), where aesthetics was conceived as a basic aspect of epistemology bridging sensual appearance and conceptually formulated meaning. In Kant, this was transmitted through the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, but it has subsequently developed into a more general question of meaning construction without any association with beauty in the art-oriented aesthetic theory influenced by Kant, especially in a German-language context (e.g. Adorno 1970; Bubner 1989; Menke 1991 & 2013; Seel 2000). A key aspect of this line of aesthetic theory has been an immense interest in the extra- and trans-communicative effects of the aesthetic artefact beyond its normal communicative capacity. This interest thus goes beyond the artefact to explore the effect of communication *and* anchors the artefact as an integral element of the communication of the specific aesthetic medium. Consequently, the main focus is not on cognitive questions of understanding but on the role of the specific aesthetic medium in question.

In relation to the framing of experience by design objects, the key questions are how and by what means design objects enable and construct meaning and appeal to understanding, and what the nature of this meaning is, for example if it transcends any limitations, and what its implications are. Further, in the process of constructing meaning and appealing to understanding, design objects may prove to be reflective of themselves as sites of meaning construction.

Many design objects not only create a sensually operating framing of experience but also engage in framing and challenging patterns of understanding. An example of a product that operates in this manner is Philippe Starck's highly profiled, almost non-functional *Juicy Salif* (1990) (as it is not only a lemon squeezer but also challenges our understanding of it by reflecting the very idea of a lemon squeezer). Another example is a ubiquitous design of our time, the personal mini-computer, the *smartphone* (Figure 2). As a materially enclosed artefact, the smartphone operates by staging processes of understanding, which unfold in the user's interaction with the device itself and its medium-specific interaction platform (e.g. interface and apps). Here, processes of understanding are structured around an exchange of communication and information and

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exceed the artefact and are simultaneously bound to the specific device and its specific internal expandability of meaning (Folkmann 2012).



Figure 2: HTC smartphone. The important aspect is not the brand but the type of product.

(iii) While the two previous dimensions of aesthetics deal with meaning aspects of the given design object, the *contextual* dimension of aesthetics focuses on the wider implications of the circulation of objects on a cultural, social, and political level. According to Jacques Rancière, who has influenced the contextual trend in aesthetic theory, aesthetics can be investigated as a political power issue in relation to the distribution of sensual material and the ability to determine 'what presents itself to sensory experience': Thus, aesthetics can be seen as 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (Rancière 2000, p. 13). Rancière seeks to discuss possibilities that are determined by aesthetic media; these media not only behave as transmitters of new possible meaning but also produce possibilities by defining and conditioning domains of the sensual experience.

In this conception, aesthetic media, such as design, have the capacity to radically reconfigure and transfigure the territories of 'the visible, the conceivable, and the possible' (p. 41) and propose possible models for accessing and experiencing the world in new ways. The contextual dimension of aesthetics deals with the ideological aspect of framing experience as it affects whole systems of meaning. Examples may be found in branding strategies and in the cultural production of 'media-environments' (Lash & Lury 2007), where things turn into and are engulfed by media expressions in a manner where there is no outside, as seen from the perspective of these environments; everything is ordered in new ways and delimited as a space of experience.

I return to the case of the German soft drink company fritz-kola in the following section but would like to briefly mention it here, as its consistent media expression exemplifies this trend perfectly: By presenting the fritz-kola on a black background with the slogan 'koksen ist achtziger' (doing cocaine is so 1980s) (Figure 3), the brand and the campaign steer our perception and delimit

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our space and frame of experience (effects of pleasure are vital; everything is black).



*Figure 3: fritz-kola ad: Doing cocaine is so 1980s. Framing of experience by branding.*

#### **4 AESTHETICIZATION**

In the following, I turn to aestheticization as a cultural meta-level of aesthetics: Aestheticization is the cultural process by which design is made or conceived of as aesthetic by factors that are often external to the concrete objects themselves. In relation to the framing of experience by aesthetic means, I point to aestheticization as a ubiquitous process of distributing sensual meaning with an emphasis on the overall impact of aesthetic media, such as design, on experience. Thus, aestheticization can designate a high degree of aesthetic coding in our everyday surroundings and the transmission of this process through specific media. Thus, aestheticization connects to concepts of everyday aesthetics (e.g. Oldemeyer 2008; Saito 2010).

The concept of aestheticization brings additional meanings into play. First, it describes the moment in cultural history when calculated sensual appeal begins to gain in importance as a means of communicating a new world of goods to contemporary consumers, and we see the boundaries of high culture break down, as devices and form repertoires of art enter the domain of everyday life, and new, calculated surfaces of visual appeal and imaginary simulation appear



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(cf. Featherstone 1991). Thus, the 'aestheticization of everyday life has provided changed conditions for the organization of material culture' (Lury 1996, p. 26). Second, and as a consequence of the first meaning, aestheticization is the cultural construction of an everyday domain such as design as aesthetic, that is, as something that is attributed and imbued with a kind of meaning that can be labeled 'aesthetic'. Here, the emphasis is on a cultural analysis of design and its formative contexts (e.g. Hebdige 1994, du Gay 1997, Julier 2014). Designers, manufacturers, retailers, design magazines, blogs, etc., all the actors in the cultural circuit of design, may employ the term 'aesthetic' in relation to the design object in question and install a notion that the object may be regarded as aesthetic.

Third, we may ask about the specific strategies of coding in aestheticization on the different levels of aesthetics. In so doing, we may use aestheticization as a concept that describes a high degree of aesthetic coding in the everyday surroundings of human beings and the transmission of this process through specific media. In this way, to enter a discussion of aestheticization is to examine how the interface that we apply when we meet the world is changing as a result of strategies of making objects and surfaces more aesthetically coded and asking how this process affects the conditions of experience.

**4.1 ASPECTS OF AESTHETICIZATION**

To take a more specific look at different modes of aestheticization, I will now relate its cultural process to the sensual, conceptual, and contextual level of aesthetics.

On the level of *sensual* appeal, the logic of aestheticization is to seek sensual effects, even to the degree of overwhelming calculation where everything is designed to have maximum impact on the senses. In a cultural-critical perspective, this reverse side of aesthetics has been described by Wolfgang Iser as an-aesthetic, a state of being where the 'elementary condition of the aesthetic, the ability to feel, has been negated' (Iser 1990, p. 10). In this conception, the an-aesthetic ranges from the 'zero phenomenon to the hyper phenomenon of the aesthetic' (11), that is when aesthetics runs the risk of becoming either too little or too much.

On the level of *conceptual* meaning in design, aestheticization can be seen in the tendency to stage design as a self-reflective medium that implicitly or explicitly debates its own conditions as a medium. This tendency is related to the historical development in aestheticization in the sense that design as, a medium of popular and everyday culture, employs strategies of debating and staging meaning through concrete objects that are normally found in art. In this way, many of the explicit endeavours to create reflective design, such as the 1960s Italian Radical Design movement or the more recent Critical Design movement (now dealing with 'Speculative Everything', Dunne & Raby 2013), are affiliated with mechanisms and discourses of art. On this level of aesthetic meaning, aestheticization points to the cultural logic of not just creating forms for sensual appeal but also reflectively positioning them as such.

Finally, and most important, on a *contextual* level, aestheticization implies the creation of new experiential patterns and new categories for seeing and regarding something as aesthetic. This approach has been promoted in recent

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years by the newer conceptualizations of aesthetics. In a philosophical approach to everyday aesthetics, the philosopher Terry Leddy, for example, speaks of the extraordinary in the ordinary and proposes a broad view on aesthetics including 'major league aesthetic concepts such as harmony and balance, but also minor league ones such as neatness and messiness' (Leddy 2012, p. 259).

The cultural theorist Sianne Ngai productively associating cultural trends with aesthetics and states that 'aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism' (Ngai 2012, p. 1). She argues that the change in conditions also changes the aesthetic categories, and that in our 'hyperaestheticized world', aesthetic experience has changed from deriving its models from art and the beautiful/sublime to being based on 'the stylistic triviality and verdictive equivocality of the zany, the cute, and the interesting' (p. 19). In the process of total culturalization and radical commodification, aesthetic experience is about the ordinary and not, as has traditionally been the case, about distance, play or disinterestedness. Further, Ngai points out that styles are culturally produced and codified as such, which has implications for 'our perception of them as stylistic qualities' and, vice versa, that our perception affects 'our language of aesthetic judgment' (p. 29). Ultimately, style is not just a matter of the object in question but can be understood as a way of 'perceiving an object' (p. 29); that is, it can be seen as producing a specific perceptual setting.

With Ngai, we clearly see that the aesthetic categories of contemporary design culture have changed, even if her chosen categories may be debated. To turn to the example of fritz-kola, we see that the company actively aims to create the aesthetic categories through which the product is to be evaluated. In the visual language of commercials and in its social communication, which actively defines cultural parameters, fritz-kola establishes ways of perceiving the product, that is, its style and our reflective judgment of it. Through its reflectivity, fritz-kola engages in – and produces – the activity and flow of the zany and the temporal-anticipatory of the interesting. Thus, fritz-kola creates a structure of meaning around its product that produces the categories for how we can perceive the relationship between the brand, as a vehicle that the consumers can engage actively with, and the overall context of contemporary culture.

In general terms, aestheticization on the level of contextual aesthetics can mean a cultural production of new conditions for experiencing relevant meaning properties of design objects.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In its discussion of the framing of experience by different design-specific aesthetic means, the paper proposes a general framework which may promote further studies. By looking at sensual, conceptual, and contextual aesthetic dimensions of design and exploring their contribution to the framing of experience, we may, as a next step, develop discourses for describing the sensual means and effects in design, the degrees and strategies of design objects for reflectively staging their meaning, and the resulting aesthetic categories. The latter point seems particularly important: Today, design is not just a question of things being beautiful but of the production of meaning and new ways of framing experience.

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## ***The Role of Aesthetics for Design Phenomenology: The Sensual, Conceptual and Contextual Framing of Experience by Design***

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