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Critical reflections on design and emotion

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Introduction

In the last few years, design communities have witnessed a growing interest in the role of emotions in design and in the emotional impact of products on users. This interest has resulted in a series of conferences, workshops, projects, publications, and other activities related to emotion in design. (Design and Emotion Society) There is currently an expanding body of work in this domain and a considerable amount of relevant research is taking place in a wide range of application areas. However, a critical approach towards this dynamically developing field raises significant questions regarding its originality, conditions of emergence, and substance. The critical approach is underpinned by recent historical scholarship which reminds us of Lucien Febvre's 1941 challenge, directed to historians, to reflect upon the emotions, as well as Clifford Geertz's phrase that "not only ideas, but emotions too, are cultural artifacts in man." (Bourke, 2003) In this vein, this paper will throw some light on the current relationship between design and emotion, as well as on the respective discourse. The aim of the paper is to unravel some of the current misunderstandings and suggest directions for an expanded and perhaps more effective conception of the "design and emotion" field.

The question of originality

According to Dylan Evans, scientific interest in the emotions underwent something of a renaissance in the 1990s, to the point that now emotion is a "hot topic." (Evans, 2001) As recent publications suggest, "Design and Emotion" also emerged in the nineties as a new and distinctive domain of design practice and research. According to researchers involved in this area, "We can no longer ignore the important role that emotions play in the generation, development, production, purchase, and final use of products that we surround ourselves with." (McDonagh, Hekkert, Van Erp, and Gyi, 2004) Another group of researchers describe the current situation by claiming that "The face of product design is changing. Whereas for the main part of the past century, the relation between physical form and technical function has dominated design theory and practice, the last decades show a shift to use and user. The focus of attention is shifting from a technology-driven, product-centred view to a view that is better described as user-centred, use-centred, and interaction-centred." (Hekkert, Keyson, Overbeeke, and Stappers, 2001) A more careful examination of design's past indicates that we are perhaps "re-inventing the wheel", as the role of emotion in design has been more significant than the



previous quotes suggest. From its very beginning, design has operated as a market-support instrument in a market-led, capitalist economy, by making products more desirable to buy. Design is by definition emotion-based. "Design, at its most basic level, is about rendering objects more desirable." (Greenhalgh, 1993) As such, design, and particularly industrial design, has always been concerned with eliciting emotional responses from prospective buyers and pleasing the users of products. Historical examples of products suggest that emotion in design is as old an approach as industrial design itself. What changes is the way emotion is *framed*. The following examples support this argument.

In a recent project on "Evaluating product emotions", the researcher claims that "Nowadays it is often difficult to distinguish products on the basis of their technological functioning or quality. Consequently, emotional responses to consumer products are often a decisive factor in purchase decisions." (Researcher Pieter Desmet quoted by Hekkert, Keyson, Overbeeke, and Stappers, 2001) To make such a claim is in a sense to misinterpret the whole history of industrial design. Numerous historical examples illustrate the fact that choices of products by buyers have always been predominantly emotional. The successes of styling and planned obsolescence in particular reveal that the choices of consumers in the twentieth century had very little to do with judgements on technical quality. Designer Raymond Loewy had made this explicit by saying that "... we know that logic alone does not sell automobiles, so its immediate appeal is emotional; sheer elegance and design finesse, the wish to feel its slender curves, to love that car, to be known as its discriminating owner." (Loewy) The example of the radio, a paradigmatic technological product of the twentieth century, also shows that consumer choice has depended very little on the technical merits of products (with the exception of the early period when the radio was little more than an assembly of technical parts). Such choice has in fact been much more complex, unpredictable, and certainly emotion-based. (Yagou, 2002) (Yagou, 2004)

The confusion regarding emotional aspects of design results partially from the influence of modernism, an influence which has been uncritically perpetuated for decades through architectural and design education. (Michl) Famous designs from the 1920s are often classified under "functionalism", which expresses "the notion that objects made to be used should be simple, honest, and direct; well adapted to their purpose; bare of ornament; standardized, machine-made, and reasonably priced; and expressive of their structure and materials". (Marcus, 1995) Such a description does not make any reference to emotion, but it doesn't preclude it either. The ideology of functionalism, by choosing to emphasize practicality and austerity, has underplayed the significance of user emotions; but in fact, many of the so-called functionalist objects, if studied carefully, have a different story to tell. A characteristic example is the Chaise Longue designed in 1928 by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand. Le Corbusier himself describes the chair in this fashion: "Here is the machine for resting. We built it with bicycle tubes and covered it with a magnificent pony skin; it is light enough to be pushed by foot, can be manipulated by a child; I thought of the western cowboy smoking his pipe, his feet up above his head, leaning against a fireplace: complete restfulness. Our chaise longue takes all positions, my weight alone is enough to keep it in the chosen position; no mechanism. It is the true machine for resting." (Le Corbusier, 1991) The references to user pleasure are explicit and this is clearly a use- and user-centred discussion of the product; it is however carefully disguised and therefore prone to misunderstanding because of its supposedly machine rhetoric.



Another example is the Barcelona pavilion by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, an icon of modernism and functionalist design. This was a temporary structure that would serve as a ceremonial space where the king and queen of Spain would officially open the Weimar Republic's participation at the International Barcelona Fair of 1929. To underscore the ceremonial function, the designer chose materials suited for royal reception rooms, alluding to the opulence of palatial decoration with richly colored and veined marbles – green for the walls on the exterior and a golden-brown onyx for the interior divider – and used white marble for the floor. To this palette, perhaps having been expected to introduce the red, black, and gold of the German flag, he added a deep red velvet curtain and a black woolen carpet on which he placed two ample shiny metal chairs upholstered in white kid leather. (Marcus, 1995) This example is clearly very far from un-emotional; it is even exploiting patriotic emotions through reference to nationalist symbols such as the flag. Despite the modernist rhetoric that has accompanied it, this space was highly sensual and was apparently designed for sensorial pleasure.

Such examples shed some light on the confusion surrounding emotion and the ideology of functionalism. I claim that the design of industrial products has been emotionally-driven to a great extent, even when it was framed and presented as totally different. Despite their contempt of the user and their anti-user ideology, modernists have in fact embraced emotional approaches when they wished so. This was however underplayed by the emphasis of modernist discourse on utility and function, which were supposedly non-emotional. As Bourke observes, “in historical time, many things actually do (or do not) ‘happen’, but the very act of narrating changes and formulates the ‘experience’.” (Bourke, 2003) Recent theoretical studies further clarify the confusion around the issue of functionalism in design and its formal consequences. For example, it has been argued that functionalism is a myth and its stylistic matrix can only be understood by accepting its strongly metaphorical nature. Speaking specifically of architecture, Pallasmaa argues that functionalism is a fiction which has served to emancipate architecture from its historical burden, an undoubtful misinterpretation or oversimplification of architecture. (Pallasmaa, 1993) In his analysis, Jan Michl has also shown that “the functionalist notion of function did not refer to the world of users but to the world of functionalist design metaphysics.” (Michl) The two aforementioned essays are very helpful in shedding light on the misunderstandings of design ideologies in the twentieth century and deserve further elaboration on the basis of concrete design examples.

Besides the confusion and ambiguities surrounding modernist theories, there is further evidence that functionality and emotion are far from mutually exclusive. The design entrepreneur and guru Terence Conran declared in 1985: “I have a taste for austerity and utility, but that's certainly not to say I have no appetite for pleasure. Quite the contrary. I firmly believe that plain, simple things are superior to flashy, complicated ones, precisely because ultimately they are more pleasurable.” (Conran, 1985) This view is reinforced by the results of a study on the methods of successful product designer Kenneth Grange. According to this study, Grange's designs are characterized by “a concern with designing for purpose, so as to achieve pleasure for the user.” (Cross, 2001) It appears that the divorce between function and emotion has more to do with the social construction of twentieth century design history and theory, rather than with the actual perceptions of designers and users.



The question of emergence

Given the above discussion, it is now possible to comment on the emergence of emotion as a major field in contemporary design research. If emotions have always been a driving force in design, then how could the recent emphasis on “design and emotion” be explained? Sociological and historical studies have revealed that every society has a certain standard of habits and behaviour to which it seeks to accustom the individual. Peter and Carol Stearns have defined “Emotionology” as “the attitude or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression and ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct”. (Rosenwein, 2002) Although the physical and mental capacity to have emotions is universal (Rosenwein, 2002), emotion experience and expression differ from one society to another, and each society defines its normative emotional regime, to which individuals seek to conform. (Kotchemidova, 2005) In the modern period, intense normative action has taken place through different channels, as for example through the publication of a wide range of advice manuals for the middle classes. (Rosenwein, 2002) (Lees-Maffei, 2003). Within the prevailing normative regime, as Kotschemidova has shown, contemporary capitalist societies are increasingly preoccupied with “having fun” and with the pursuit of pleasure. She argues that, in the modern age, cheerfulness rose in value and became the most favoured emotion for experience and display; as such, it was individually sought and socially encouraged until it became the standard emotional norm of twentieth-century America. From there, it has spread to the capitalist world, so that today it constitutes the mainstream emotional regime of consumer societies. Within a capitalist framework, positive emotions serve the whole nexus of production and consumption, as they are both work-stimulating and consumption-activating. (Kotchemidova, 2005)

Gradually, as the mentality of pleasure was permeating contemporary society, emotion was becoming more acceptable as a constituent of good design and was promoted as such. The rise and dominance of marketing and branding which, according to Philips Design research, has characterized the last part of the 20th century, has led to intense preoccupation with emotion. This in turn has favoured the design of specifically “emotional” products. (Green, 2002) Liberated from the scruples of modernist ideology and backed by an increasingly individualistic and hedonistic culture, design in the last two decades has been following the “emotional” path in full force. “User satisfaction” and “having fun” are of paramount importance in contemporary design culture. In other words, the present emphasis on design and emotion has been an outcome of individualism and consumerism in a brand-driven era. Design itself hasn’t really changed that much, but it is framed in a different way than in the past, so one has to be very careful in identifying the ideological underpinnings of products and the accompanying rhetoric. Furthermore, nowadays the methods on which “design and emotion” is based are much more systematic than those used by designers in the past. Formerly, the designer’s intuition was perhaps the main method through which user requirements were identified. Nowadays, the development of sophisticated research techniques and methodologies allows a much more precise capturing and analysis of user desires. This should not however lead to extremities where the “emotional” or “user-friendly” label undermines quality.



The question of substance

This brings us to the third point of concern, i.e. quality and substance. The current design and emotion “movement” is established on the importance of emotions experienced by individuals. Acknowledging these emotions is meant to inform the creation of products. But emotion-based studies often lead to predictable and rather trivial conclusions: “Designers should create products that are not only useful, but also enjoyable. This factor encourages designers to evoke sensory and aesthetic pleasure.” (Schifferstein, Mugge, and Hekkert, 2004) Furthermore, emotion is one of the values that the ideology of consumption easily exploits. With the rise of consumer hedonism, pleasure ceased to be about the satisfaction of needs and became an ideal experience to be pursued for its own sake. (Patlar and Kurtgözü, 2004) Modern Western society overemphasizes the importance of consumption, which has become the only avenue for self-expression. (Heartfield, 1998) It seems that “life is so meaningless for people incapable of experiencing anything for themselves that they have to be supplied with a constant flow of artificial, commercialized, and commodified experiences that take on their own reality.” (Heskett, 2002) This observation appears to be quite true for a large percentage of the population in advanced countries of the West. Is perhaps the modern individual designed as an emotional being (Kurtgözü, 2003), well-adapted to the premises and demands of a consumer society?

Heartfield makes a significant distinction between the categories “need” and “desire”, which he juxtaposes to “subsistence” and “surplus”. (Heartfield, 1998) Whereas the majority of the earth’s population depends on issues of need and subsistence, design is more and more concerned with those few who can afford a lifestyle of desire and surplus. Indeed, researchers of design have identified a shift towards products that enhance “quality of life”. This concept has become a major theme within the research programmes of the European Union. In order to successfully provide design solutions which reflect “quality of life”, designers need to engage with the emotional relationship between product and user. (McDonagh-Philp and Lebbon, 2000) This direction appears to carry the seeds of trivialization for design. Design, already often accused of being superficial, becomes all the more so through the obsession with the emotions of the individuals in their interaction with mobile phones, trekking shoes, perfume bottles, and gourmet foodstuff, among others. (McDonagh, Hekkert, Van Erp, and Gyi, 2004) Are such emotional experiences really significant? Is it worth dedicating such a large amount of research resources and grey matter to the creation of products intended for a minority of the world’s population? In search of a successful product, are we missing the wider picture, such as the pressing social, political, and environmental realities? Is perhaps “emotion and design” becoming yet another style among others? (Patlar and Kurtgözü, 2004) The variety of potential modes of relating design and emotions has been insufficiently explored, as the product-emotion relationship is tied to the demands and methods of an all-embracing consumer culture. Does “design and emotion”, rather than engaging users in a spiritual and prolonged interaction with products, run the risk of becoming a fashionable style, a catchword employed by advertising for the marketing of luxury products to an elite culture? (Kurtgözü, 2003).

Given the above analysis, it is significant to identify research directions within the wider “design and emotion” community which defy its simplistic assumptions and suggest a richer relation between design and emotions. Two recent examples will illustrate potential directions towards a more rigorous treatment of emotion-related issues in design. In the first one, Tüneri realises an ethnographic study of the fridge, a commonplace but



significant item of domestic technology, to reveal a nexus of cultural meanings, values and emotions related to the domestic sphere. User satisfaction is certainly one of the emotions involved, but this is embedded in a historically-informed understanding of emotions which are socially and culturally loaded with a complex range of meanings. (Tüneri, 2004) In the second example, Hanington argues that the tendency toward emotive design based on surface-level details for short-lived positive reactions must be broadened to address more sustained, reflective responses to products. His study on death and catharsis points to the benefits of a broader interpretation and indeed a re-definition of pleasure in applications of design and emotion. The artifacts and rituals surrounding our last rite of passage are relevant to pleasure both in terms of their ability to facilitate positive memories and the need to mourn, and in reducing the effects of psychological pain through the therapeutic or cathartic experience. (Hanington, 2004) Such studies explore a wide range of the emotional spectrum, escape the stereotypical and naïve, and avoid the false scientism of many recent research undertakings. They have significant repercussions on design because of their attention to the richness and diversity of contextual information, as well as to emotional and experiential complexity, which all deserve special attention. (Burns, 2000)

However, nowadays it seems as if a considerable amount of design effort is directed towards an area which only serves to invigorate the consumer orientation of our society. But the consumer society should not be taken for granted, it is itself changing. Big companies realize today the shift towards a knowledge age, where product systems and services converge. Research embedded by Philips into its product development work reveals that between the 1950s and 1970s consumption was crucial in a manufacturing driven model of design. This was succeeded by a marketing/brand driven model since the 1980s, where experience and emotions were of paramount importance, and which triggered much of the current activity in “design and emotion”. However, there are many signs that we are gradually moving towards communities based on diversity, collaboration, and co-creativity. The emerging model is characterised as people/network driven, where people value access and usage rather than ownership. (Green, 2002) (Yagou and Zavras, 2003) In such a model, positive experiences result from collective, collaborative, and creative activities, rather than from individually experiencing “pre-designed” emotions. In this new context, it would be worthwhile to reconsider the current one-sided emphasis on emotion in design. If “design and emotion” is to play a positive role for society in the near future, it should perhaps shift from the apotheosis of personal, individualistic, and commodified pleasure towards the exploration of socially relevant, culturally specific, as well as shared aspects of human emotions.



Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to formulate a critical approach towards the “emotional” trend in contemporary design and research. My criticism has been built around three basic themes: originality, emergence, and substance. Regarding originality, I have put forward the view that design has been emotion-based throughout its history, although the rhetoric surrounding design activities has often claimed different ideological grounds. The history and evolution of industrial products deserves a more thorough consideration and a more rigorous treatment by designers. Re-assessing terms such as “functional”, “emotional”, and “user-centred” might be necessary in order to distinguish rhetorical labels from actual user experiences. Much of design history currently taken for granted is established on certain ideological positions, which are not transparent to most designers and users alike. It is therefore crucial to develop a critical stance towards stereotypical views of the past and the present. A discussion of the emergence of emotion as a significant category of design was then presented, in order to shed light on the increasing importance of emotion in contemporary design discourse, on the social conditions of this emergence, as well as on its cultural connotations. Then, as far as substance and quality is concerned, I have argued that nowadays design tends to deal with the emotional domain by responding to market imperatives in a trivial fashion, rather than addressing fundamental human concerns. Recent social developments suggest that the design community might be less concerned with the glorification of individual pleasure. Instead, design practice could attempt to exploit emotions in order to satisfy pressing needs, rather than market-generated desires.



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