ECLAT PRECEDES FORM: THE ONTOLOGY AND THE PERCEPTION OF DESIGNED OBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the study of a new design criterion which can be called "Eclat-Of-The-Designed-Objects". It can be studied on its own merits with other important design criteria such as form, function or ergonomics. Research devoted to the conspicuous or luxury market has sometimes been associated with this criterion. But focusing mainly on the cultural aspects of Eclat it has not thoroughly questioned the ontological status of these Eclat objects (or bright objects) and the complexity of their perception by the user. In this study these objects are examined in a triangulation of Culture, Object and Perception. In particular the section on perception will take into consideration some philosophical and neuroscientific views on the percepts of designed objects.

Keywords: Form; bright objects; ontology; perception; luxury consumption

INTRODUCTION

Search for a design criterion. In this paper I would like to propose the study of a new *design criterion*[1]. This criterion is "Eclat-Of-The-Designed-Objects" and it can be studied on its own merits" with other important design criteria such as form, function or ergonomics. "Eclat" is originally a French word, it means splinter, fragment, also flash, brilliance, from éclater burst out... I have chosen this term because

it has the power to unite physical (bright, glittering, shining) as well as cultural (fashion, exquisite, chic, etc.) aspects of bright objects. According to the Etymological dictionary Chambers[2] this extended cultural meaning of Eclat i.e. brilliant success, fame, was first recorded in English in 1741. In this study I will consider Eclat in constant relation with Form. In some very specific cases Form will be viewed as a background figure and sometimes it can be completely dismissed. But before taking into consideration the relation between Form and Eclat, special attention will be paid to examination of the difference between Form and Shape, Form and Representation, Form and Image, Form and Figure. It is with the results of such a study that we can finally consider how Eclat is "perceived" by the user of designed objects.

The approach. I propose to tackle this thematic on two levels: First of all we have to study the status of the objects with eclat. Or to put it another way, we have to examine the ontological status of these objects in order to understand what is so specific about them. By ontology what I mean is not the "construction" of ontologies — especially in the recent sense in computer engineering — for shared or consensual cognitive representation of a particular domain, as is the case in software development. On the contrary, in this paper I propose an "ontological analysis"[3].

In the simplest sense this ontological analysis can be illustrated by different designations that can have a designed object. From the point of view of industry it can be called a *product*. From the ergonomic point of view a *device*, from the point of view of its structure a *machine*. And finally from the point of view of everyday life it can be called an *object*. In this study we will deepen the ontological aspect of the designed objects in their relation with Form and Eclat.

After this ontological analysis, the second level of our study will be consecrated to *perception*. How the eclat objects are perceived and what significance they bear for their users? In this second level of analysis we will show that, from the users point of view, the attraction for Eclat of the designed object may not be always for the same reasons. There can be many different motives for such *seductive* — and sometimes *fascinating* — designed objects. The investigation of a large spectrum of motives responsible for consuming bright objects will be part of this study and especially with the support of recent clinical psychology and neuroscience research.

Cultural and Behavioral considerations about Eclat. Restricting our study to the ontological and perceptual aspects of bright objects could be viewed as a bit strange when we know that the majority of the discussions on Eclat have always taken place in the cultural arena. For example, we know since Shakespeare (see his Othello) that there is a "pomp and circumstance of glorious war!". Which means that there is "magnificence and splendor" in war, which can be obtained by the floating flags, by music [the British composer Elgar wrote a work called "Pomp and Circumstance"] or by *shining* swords which makes the war attractive or ECLATANT (etymologically "pompa" means processes and something

ceremonious.). In other words in all rituals (including the war) there exists not only a gestural and a postural side, but also a *ceremonial side* which can be called the Eclat (or the Pompa) of a ritual. Social sciences have largely contributed to develop this idea in the modern times. Hence the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen[4] coined the the term "conspicuous consumption" by which he meant the acquiring of luxury goods and services permitted to display one's economic power.

In a recent absorbing research review paper[5] we can notice that objects related to "luxury" are still a very important research subject-matter within the consumers studies[6]. But nevertheless, there seems to be a less interest for the concept of "conspicuous consumption". Research shows that the consumer is more and more focused on "experience, affect and hedonism". And whereas "the (old) luxury market focused on the status and prestige of the brand, the new luxury market focuses on the pleasure and emotional connection the consumer has with the brand". But although there is a visible shift from the cultural and sociological approach to the psychological one, most of the the time the status of the "luxury" objects remains unanalyzed. And paradoxically when some academic research deals with the objects of Eclat (like Bling-bling objects) its not for studying the specific nature of these objects, but its for what these objects "provoke" and how they make people talk about them: the bling object "leaves no one indifferent; everyone has a highly emotional opinion on Bling, regardless of whether it is positive or negative"[7]. In other words, through the category of Bling objects we are invited to the study a subculture (hip-hop culture) or theimpact of the users of this subculture on the society as a whole (or the global society). The above mentioned studies have an important role for understanding the logic of usage of the bright objects, but they remain somehow a bit silent in understanding the bright objects *per se*. I hope this paper will break this silence in order to help us better understand, simultaneously the real nature of bright objects and the complex behavior of their users.

I. FORM, SHAPE AND FIGURE

Before directly considering ontological aspects of Form let us first deal with some of its general issues as it may be treated by the designers. Generally Form is distinguished by its external and apparent surface. More specifically (and according to the dictionary) its the shape or appearance of something. Yet "form" could be even more abstract. We can encounter an abstract form in geometry or in the models of physics. The form that we should look for must take place in the man-made objects: i.e. they should be seen and felt by the sensory organs. A form with solidity will be called a shape.

As for the *figure* its a multi-meaning word. We can, for example, talk about rhetorical figures (*figures verborum*) or about the historical figures. Also, this word is much related, in the Western Culture, to Christianity. For Christianity *figure* is the *prophecy in act*, the becoming of what was dissimulated. Now

as for the artistic meanings. *Figura* can often mean to skim something off (to remove from the surface) or draw a plan, draw a general form of a monument or a person. Also according to Auerbach (1944) a lot of Greek words like *morphé*, *eidos*, *skhema*, *tupos* and *plasis* seems to be converted to the word figura. But the principle meaning of figura is to "shape", like the other Latin words associated to it (*fingere, figulus, fictor and effigies*): *Figura* means to give a plastic form to an object.

II. FORM AND IMAGE

Generally speaking the relation between Form (forma) and Image (imago) is the relation of a *model* to a *copy*. But also in the very old sense, for example in Lucretia, *figurae* can mean a vision, an *oneiric* (dream like) image, a *spectra* or a *phantom*[8]. In the much modern sense an *image* of an object is its representation in a different *medium* than the medium in which it has first appeared. Its like a transposition of an object from one dimension (or medium) to another. Perhaps more accurately, the image is an objective representation of a thing. In this respect it should be distinguished from the representation of an object in the mind — which can be called *imagination*. The image can also be considered as a double of an object. But in this sense what is doubled can still mean the double of its form, or its formal appearing. After all, there must be an *equiformity of the image, i.e. the* least resemblance with the form of the initial object.

III. FORM AND ECLAT

First of all we must underline the fact that the Eclat can emanate from different forms. And all these forms are not necessarily related to designed objects. Hence we can talk about an Eclat related to the *body parts* (gloomy teeth of a mouth), in *designed objects* (such as sword or a pair of woman's shoes) or it can be thought to exist in *nature* according to some mythological or religious writings (like the burning bush, in the Old Testament). See Figure 1.

"The *Shekinah* glory of God was displayed before Moses". Exodus, 3, v. 3).

Figure 1. Examples of Eclat

But to focus on the ontological aspect of Form and its relation to Eclat we can refer to the IXth Century commentator of Aristotle who has concluded that the form of an object can certainly be distinguished from its other characteristics [its *material cause*, *efficient* cause (how its produced) and *final cause (how its used)*]. But also the form can be considered in its double function. Forms are inseparable from their material substrate but a form can also produce a direct emotion not with its figure or shape but by its Eclat. Its perception can be more than a perception of a Form, since the Eclat of the form gives an extra signification to the form to which the object belongs.

The renowned Medieval philosopher, Al-Farabi (872-950) made these commentaries in his classic work on the "Classification — or Enumeration — of the Sciences (Ihsa' al-'ulum)"[9] known in the West as *De Scientiis*, from the Latin translation by Gerard of Cremona, Al-Farabi, discussing the four Aristotelian causes in the man-made objects, introduces a fifth one, which can be translated as the *quintessence* of man-made objects. He distinguishes this specific formal cause — *what we can call the psycho-formal form* of the objects — from the *essential* form. According to Al-Farabi the material cause of the sword is iron, and its formal cause is to be "sharp", so it provides its technical function by being *iron* and *sharp*. But he immediately adds that the sword must also shine "to scare the enemy". Thus, he introduces a psycho-formal element to the argument of Aristotelian Four causes. Similarly, the material cause of a sofa is to be made from wood, and the formal cause is to be rectangular, but also the sofa requires — a quintessence — an "ornament and decoration to be beautiful. "Speaking of drinking vessels Al-Farabi also states that although the shape of a glass is printed in its

material substrate, the transparency of the glass is "in order to highlight the (beauty) content" of this object[10] In one sense Al-Farabi invites us to be more conscious of the *perception* of a form. In one sense the form is ontological when its considered with the other causes (material, efficient and final). But in other sense we should also consider the perception of a form which sometimes appears as more than a form. The senses not only perceives the form but also gives a new meaning to what emanates from a Form. And the entity responsible for this we can call the "Eclat of the Form" (see Figure 2).
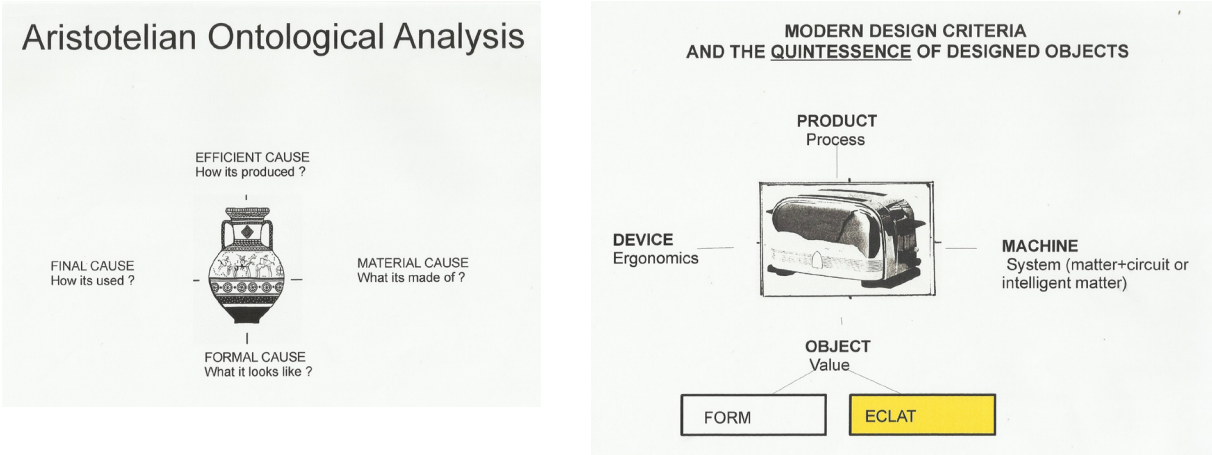

Figure 2. Ontological Analysis of Designed Objects

Other ontological issues. Besides the commentaries of Al-Farabi, we can also discover that Eclat can be *immanent* in the matter of the designed object. On this subject we might recall the debate during the *Ancien Régime* about the patina of objects. During this period there was a long transition from focus on the "ceremony" of objects to their "comfort", a period also called the "quarrel of luxury"[11]. During this era the moral sense of the former regime was completely based on the "patina objects"[12]: namely objects such as furniture or tables revalued according to their age and used as a code to preserve the social identity of their members. These patina objects (which can be considered as part of Eclat objects) are important culturally but also ontologically. They witness a certain modality, or a changing mode d'être of the Eclat-objects: without any intervention or intention on the part of the designer Eclat can appear in some objects through time. An other interesting case is the "representation" of Eclat by a Form. Here it is form which takes in charge the manifestation of an Eclat as was the case in classical art: the shining face of Moses is "represented" by the use of "an" Eclat. Today we see a representation of an eclat on the front of woman's shoes (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Eclat represented by the help of a Form

IV. MULTIPLE PERCEPTS OF ECLAT

The ontological analysis elucidated that the dimension of Form in designed objects can be more complex than we imagined when Form is taken together with Eclat. This complexity also has an effect on the perception level.

Normally what counts for the brain is how the mechanical or the electromagnetic stimuli are perceived as heat, form, shapes, color, light or movement; and how these stimuli enables the firing of the neurons; and how the mind or body gives the adequate (exterior world) reaction due to these stimuli. But the perception theories make in general a distinction between *primary* and *secondary* qualities. Primary qualities are solidity, extension, movement, number and **figure** (roundness, sharp edges). Secondary qualities produce sensations in observers, such as **color**, taste, smell, and sound. The *secondary* qualities do not provide objective facts aboutthings. As is often mentioned in Philosophy of Mind and more recently in neuroscience the *secondary* qualities are subjective properties of experiences which are called *quale*[13] [14] In our case the subjective experience of Eclat seems problematic, because it is hard to place it in one or the other category of qualities, since Eclat can be a *movement* (sparkling) and related to a **figure** (form) but also it can be taken as **color** (light).

Hence, instead of going into the *quale* arguments of Eclat we will try to replace this topic in the framework of The Triune Brain Theory. This theory was proposed by the neurologist Paul MacLean. According to Maclean our skull holds three different brains each representing a distinct evolutionary stratum. He calls this the "triune brain". i.e. the neocortex or neo-mammalian brain, the limbic or paleo-mammalian system, and the reptilian brain, the brain stem. See[15]. In our study this neuroscientific theory will be reinforced by also taking into consideration the perception theories of some well renowned

philosophers such as Kant, Bentham and Hobbes.

V. ECLAT PERCEIVED AS AN OBJECT OF ESTHETIC TASTE

According to the Triune Brain Theory, the major characteristics of the neo-cortex is rationality, delayed gratification, and long-term planning. But we can also attribute some sense of artistic sensibility and creativity to this part of the brain. In the case of the perception of the Eclat, its possible that the creative intelligence can give multiple meanings to bright objects. To have a better support for our argument we will refer here to the esthetic theories of Kant[16]. We recall that in Kantian terms Eclat can be considered as cultural (ostentation, exaggeration) as well as a psychological. Because in one sense Eclat is close to the idea of "Luxury" (luxus). Its the personal preference of an individual "in the search of the good life when its combined with taste" Kant thinks that when this exaggeration it is not accompanied by taste, it becomes a public debauchery (luxuries). And he insists on the fact in both cases its a quest for "outside brightness". In the German text he uses the word "Glanz" *which* literary means "*Eclat*"[17].

Another of Kant's ideas can be related to the perception of objects, namely the "free play of imagination and understanding"[18]. He considers this to be the result of a "Reflective judgment". In general judgment is universal and imposes its law on particular cases; in the case of "reflective judgment" its inversely the individual who, arousing his curiosity in his mind, provides the opportunity to bring forth new ideas. So based on the arguments of Kant and the theory of rational brain we can easily argue that The Eclat of a designed object can be an occasion for the user of bright objects to appeal to his *creative imagination*. The user or the consumer can give different interpretations according to a set of images — which may be "cultural myths" as well as "personal myths" — with an Eclat. So what are the most common interpretations that a user of bright objects might give to an Eclat? As is shown in the following figure the interpretation of a bright object can have reference to religion, to power, to health or simply to arts and esthetics. (see Figure 4)
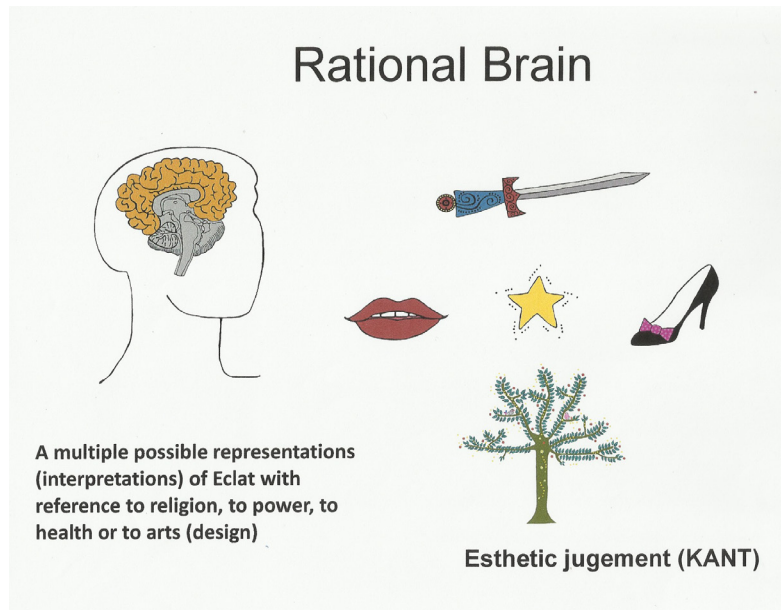
Figure 4. Perception of Eclat Objects by the rational brain

VI. ECLAT PERCEIVED AS A REWARD

The free play of imagination and Reason accentuates "liking" (taste, preference, etc.) for Eclat, whereas when we talk about the reward system (related to limbic system of the brain) we must take into consideration "wanting" an object with an Eclat. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham was one of the eminent theoreticians of *reward* system[19] and its for this reason that there is also an increasing interest amongst neuroscientists in his work. In his book *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* he put forward that all pleasures are commensurable. That is, all pleasures are qualitatively alike in being pleasant, and differ from one another only in their magnitude. According to Bentham "the pleasures (are) derived from the gratification of the appetite of curiosity, by the application of new objects to any of the senses"[20]. But if we want to give a more general view about the reward system as its actually explained in neuroscience we should mention the recent discoveries regarding the the chemical constituents of neurotransmitters. Overall, there are several regions of the brain involved in the mental representation of pleasure. Depending on the type of sensory perception, each region will enable preferentially. In the reward system the pleasure obtained by the satisfaction of a want (need) is due to the activation of the ventral pallidum (related to limbic system), whose stimulation triggers a positive feeling of euphoria and well-being. So the pleasure obtained is a complex alchemy of three neurotransmitters : endorphins, serotonin and endocannabinoids[21].

A recent experiment directly relates to the reward system and feelings about bright objects. The

Research Article called "Taking a shine to it: How the preference for glossy stems from an innate need for water"[22] emphasizes the attraction to bright or glossy objects as due to the ancestral need for *water*. The research underlines the fact that "It is humbling to acknowledge that despite our sophistication and progress as a species, we are still drawn to things that serve our innate needs — in this case, the need for water"[23]. Thus, in light of this research we might suggest that another possible reason for attraction to bright or glossy objects is the primordial need for the vital element of water (see Figure 5).
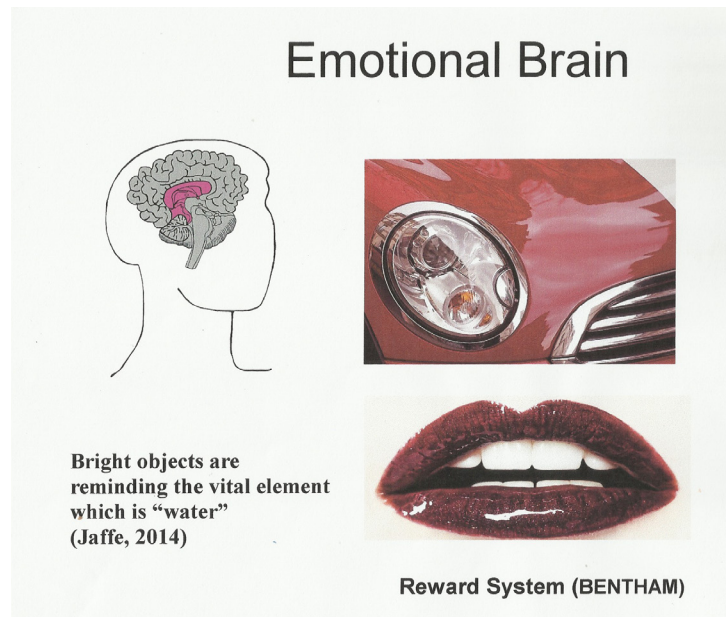

Figure 5. Perception of Eclat Objects by the emotional brain

VII. ECLAT PERCEIVED AS A SIGNAL

We can consider our attraction for bright object as something more profound in the sense that it can be perceived as a signal which triggers our instinctual drives. From the point of view of neuroscience we can associate this reflex to the function of the Brain stem. If the reward system is based on the distinction of *pleasure and pain* we can say that the reflex system of the brain is based on what is called *appetite and aversion*. Initially these words belong to the vocabulary of Thomas Hobbes. On this he says:

> Appetite, fear, hope, and the rest of the passions are not called voluntary; for they proceed not from, but are the will; and the will is not voluntary. For a man can no more

say he will will, than he will will will, and so make an infinite repetition of the word will; which is absurd, and insignificant. … Forasmuch as will to do is appetite, and will to omit, fear; the causes of appetite and of fear (aversion) are the causes also of our will.[24]

Kenneth Burke in his well known book "Grammar of Motives"[25] makes more clear the position of Hobbes by saying that: "Hobbes undertakes to treat "the passions" themselves in terms of motion. He first distinguishes between "vital" motion... (then the) "animal" or "voluntary" motion, "as to go, to speak, to move any of our limbs in such manner as is first fancied in our minds." Since these latter motions "depend always upon a precedent thought of whither, which way, and what,"[26]. And for Hobbes, imagination is nothing "but the relics" of motion". Burke also reminds us the original meanings of appetite and aversion. These are words which "we have from the Latins; and they both of them signify the motions, one of approaching, the other of retiring." The appetites and aversions that characterize our endeavors are thus to be considered as real motions toward and "fromward" something[27].

Today we may have the temptation to associate "appetite" to the rigid and *compulsive buying* — a subject well studied by psychiatry as a pathological conduct. But we would rather consider that *appetite* for bright objects is deeply installed in our brains and maybe its main character is be to be more sensitive to *signals* than to the *message* that signal[28]. An example today is the attraction to a smart phone and especially the Eclat of the smart phone. Here the Eclat can be associated with the Eclat of a sword. In this case the smart phone will be something other than an "object of desire", addressing directly to our emotions, but rather an object which triggers our automatic motor system. And that is, without the need of looking for a *meaning* and without the need for a *feeling* but only with the "will" for *moving around*. *Hence* reflex action involved with the perception of an "Object with an Eclat" becomes simply a muscle activity's response. (see Figure 6) In such a case there is also a possibility that the form of the bright object is completely abstracted from its substance and its form to leave only a "pure Eclat".

If its possible to associate this specific Eclat of an object to The Reptilian brain (our survival brain) in this case we can say that The Eclat becomes something like a "signal of a signal". A small reptile (like a chameleon) can run away as soon as he sees at different angles and at any hour of the day the shadow of an eagle (eagle is the signal of danger, its shadow is the signal of signal). In the same manner its possible that an Eclat of a Bright object when it addresses to the instincts, the form of the object passes to a second plan, the object is remembered only by its shadow — in our case the form of the object is remembered by its Eclat. So we may say in extreme cases like this it will not be wrong to affirm that not only "Eclat precedes Form" but also Eclat becomes distant to its Form, like the Eclat of some stars who continue to send their light although they have in reality stopped to exist.
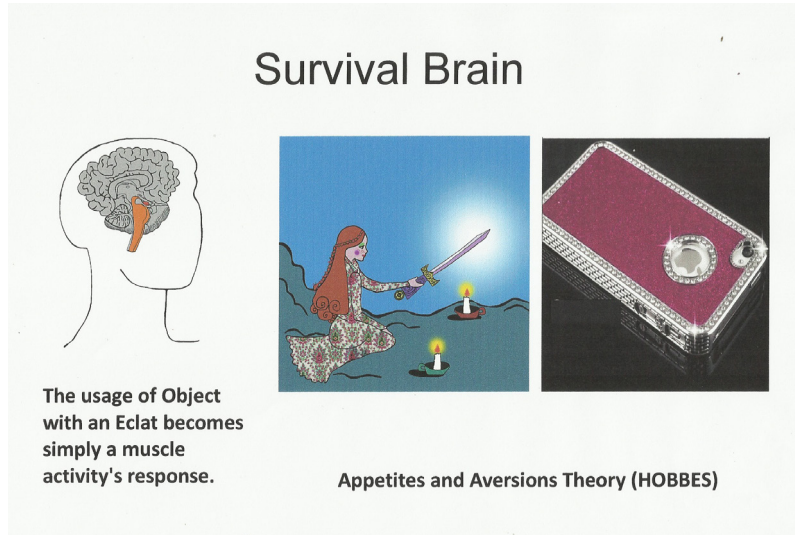
Figure 6. Perception of Eclat Objects by the survival brain

In Conclusion. The main objective of this paper was to open a discussion about a possible new "design criterion" which I have called "Eclat". As we know many Design criteria have their corresponding sciences. For example, the functional aspect of design requires the "mechanical engineering" knowledge. The Criteria about the forms of products requires the knowledge of symmetry and the "science of patterns". And we know that the usage criteria has its "Ergonomics". So we may wonder how we might label the knowledge of Eclat in design criteria. I conclude by recalling a term from ancient Greek: the word ARG. It means something which *glows* or *shines*. So the study of the brightness of objects — their Eclat — as a field of exploration separate from the study of Forms, might be named ARGONOMY or ARGONOMICS A neologism which can be used to determine the design norms and criteria for creating bright objects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Notes:

1

For the main design criteria studies see Orel (1995 and 2016, Chapter VI).

2

Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, 2000.

3

OREL, T., "Ontologies formelles et ontologies matérielles", 2000.

4

VEBLEN, T., *The Theory of the Leisure Class — An Economic Study of Institutions*, 1899.

5

PATRICK, V. M. and HAGTVED, H, *Luxury Branding*, 2008.

6

In another research paper one of the authors of this review, Vanessa M. Patrick (see her article with Meert and Pandelaere, 2013) takes into consideration the status of bright objects. I will come back to this paper later on.

7

CHRISTOFORIDOU, D., *Bling? Rôle and Contradictions in Design*, 2013.

8

WIRTH, J. *Qu'est-ce qu'une image?*, 2013.

9

AL-FARABI, Ihsa' al-'ulum, 1986, pp. 106-107.

10

AL-FARABI, as cited in OREL, T., "Les formes comme présélection et comme transcendance des objets fonctionnels: Design, Mode et Consommation", 1992, pp. 185-194.

11

MEYSSONNIERM, S., *La Balance et l'Horloge : La genèse de la pensée libérale au XVIIIe siècle*, 1989, pp. 61-93.

12

Mc CRACKEN, G., *Culture and Consumption*, 1988, pp. 31-43.

13

On the debate of quale and 1st and 2nd qualities see, ROSS, P. W., Primary and secondary qualities, 2015.

14

The word qualia (singular quale) comes from the Latin meaning, what kind, what nature. According to the qualia debate, for example, the perceived redness of an evening sky can be totally subjective.

15

NEWMAN, J.D., HARRIS, J.C., *The Scientific Contributions of Paul D. Maclean*, 2009.

16

Kant considered Esthetics as something intermediary between rationality and practical philosophy. Yet some of his remarks can reinforce our position especially when he talks about the harmony of reason and imagination.

17

KANT, E., *Anthropologie*, 1798, § 72.

18

KANT, *Critique de la faculté de Juger*, 1790, § 9.

19

Bentham has treated this subject directly in his book "The Rationale of Reward", published in 1825.
MARKS, L. E., *A Brief History of Sensation and Reward*, 2011 Chap.2.

20

Op. cit., MARKS, 2011, Chap.2.

21

SABLONIERE, B., *La chimie des sentiments*, 2015.

22

MEERT, K., PANDELAERE, M., PATRICK, V.M., *Taking a shine to it: How the preference for glossy stems from an innate need for water*, 2013.

23

JAFFE, E., *An Evolutionary Theory For Why You Love Glossy Things*, 2014.

24

HOBBES, The Elements of Law Natural and Politic, 1640, First Part, Chap. 12, 5.

25

BURKE, *K. A, Grammar of Motives*, 1969.

26

Idem, p. 134.

27

Ibidem, p.134.

28

The difference between *signal* and message is like a bottle in the sea who contains a *letter. When you see the bottle you see a signal, and when you read the letter you get the message.*

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