

## **The Meaning of Style:** How an analysis of the etymology of the term *style* could be used to define the line of demarcation between styling and design

### **Introduction - from unlikeness to likeness**

Out of the chaotic flow of nature's singularities, we humans try to impose order by means of classification. We classify in categories based on perceived qualities<sup>1</sup> — similar colour, shape, behaviour etcetera. The likenesses do not have to be immutable. It is up to each culture and time to decide what belongs to each individual category<sup>2</sup>. This creates a mutual frame of references — “ethos”<sup>3</sup> — that affects individuals' behaviour and way of thinking regarding aesthetic experiences, and also how we perceive and react to consumer goods, as well as to styling and design.

Nature is chaos and uniqueness, but culture as a human creation is similarity and order. The first likeness in the Bible is the human being, created in the image of God. Maybe this godlike image is a symbol for a human need to seek likeness. But likeness can not exist if there is not first unlikeness, i.e. difference. The Bible accordingly begins by telling how God created differences by separating things from one another: heaven from earth, light from darkness; land from sea.

The corporate world has not always been particularly sympathetic to the needs and aspiration of designers, but has rather seen design as mere styling, or the adding of aesthetic value, whereas designers will perceive styling as merely one aspect of their professional performance. Different work cultures and problem approaches can be a just cause for this incongruity. As a designer I am often annoyed when people speak of styling and design as if they were synonymous. The differences that exist between the two working processes do not seem clear and distinct. Can the etymology of a word be used to increase the understanding of the demarcation between styling and design? This text suggests a possibility to identify and visualize differences in work processes between styling and design by showing how the term *style* and its meaning can relate to different working processes.

### **The transfer from difference to resemblance in the term *style***

*Styling* derives from *style*, which originates from *stylus*, a writing tool that was used during antiquity and medieval times for writing on wax tablets. Because the manner of writing was not standardised, the visual appearance was highly varied. The word *style* referred to the differences and characteristics of the individual. The connection between style and the distinctive features of the human subject remained in the use of the word, even after the meaning was transferred from handwriting and the text to deal instead with the way of talking, the way of living, the personality or the skill of an individual artist.

Around the shift to the nineteenth century *style* instead appeared as an attribute for describing common features of visual appearance. This new connotation came in connection with the emergence of historicism and the revival of past styles of architecture and ornamentation. Research in art, architecture and archaeology reinforced the use of the term

---

<sup>1</sup> Whitfield, A T W; 2000

<sup>2</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C; 1996 (1972)

<sup>3</sup> Cowen, T; 2002; p.48

*style* to group objects, rather than to differentiate. The aim of exploring the material world by making comparisons of morphological elements has been successful, and in a field like archaeology it has been essential. By the end of the nineteenth century, the understanding of style as something that primarily had to do with likeness was sanctioned by usage.

### **Styling as creating similarity – styling for industry**

Due to economic reasons and rapid market changes, industry mainly focuses on the present and the immediate future. The consequences of that strategy are seen not only in industries that produce goods for the consumer market, but in all forms of production. The quest for optimal market share makes companies search for what the consumer already likes<sup>4</sup>, and styling is thus often used to make profitable modifications of already functioning products. The media authority David Docherty illustrates the result very well<sup>5</sup> when he describes how broadcasting companies in a consumer-centred system aim at the broadest possible target group by asking: “What do you like?” but not: “What might you like?” or a question even more open-ended like: “When was the last time you changed your mind?” Companies wish for prompt and clear answers when it comes to the question of style. To understand and master how trends change is seen as a way to increase the possibilities of profitable alteration of product appearances. Companies use marketing researchers or buy forecasting from trend analyzing services in their quest for reliable predictions that can help them to maintain a market position or improve it.

### **Design work as creating difference - styling for designers**

Is there anything particular in the design profession that can cause differences in purpose or viewpoint between designer and industry? In order to describe a possible starting point I would like to call attention to two concepts that could serve the understanding of design work: deconstruction and bricolage.

The analytical part of design practice will always to some extent be deconstructive<sup>6</sup>, which implies looking for differences. The divergent phase is carried out in order to increase knowledge and options for optimal design solutions, and to prevent one from being stuck in false assumption about the task. This divergent phase creates a huge amount of information. The deconstruction can remove established meanings from objects, which makes it possible to reinvent them with completely new connotations<sup>7</sup>.

A designer's way of working is also very similar to what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*<sup>8</sup>. Panagiotis Louridas points out four connecting points between design and bricolage<sup>9</sup>: Design is a form of art and also a form of science; design is extensive and depends on the interplay of structure and event. In addition, the design process makes it easy to use skilled intuition, which is also true for bricolage.

Every object conveys a message through the choice, amount and combination of decorative components used or not used. During the design process the designer performs a task, trying to make the object and its prerequisites translucent, in order to be able to add a contributing idea without concealing the others. This mental layering of ideas makes it possible to incorporate “whims”, which from a strictly intellectual point of view can seem out of place, but in time will be perceived as the right thing to do, or right in time. The concept of bricolage

---

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, R & Press, M; 2001(1995); p.154

<sup>5</sup> Docherty, D- in Palmer, J; Dodson, M (Ed); 1996

<sup>6</sup> Jones, J C; 1992; pp. 64-66

<sup>7</sup> Attfield, J; 2000; p. 209

<sup>8</sup> Lévi-Strauss, C; 1996 (1972)

<sup>9</sup> Louridas, P; 1999; p.534

in fact means that any past or newly found knowledge can and will be used to create a solution to a problem or a design task.

## Discussion

Can the change of meaning in the term *style* be related to different ways of using style in design and styling processes? When the word *style* is used in everyday language, we tend to forget its origin and focus on the common features of visual appearance in objects, rather than on variety and unlikeness. Style becomes a tool for grouping features in order to make them manageable. Style can be applied to products after a deconstructive effort or after a typological effort, i.e. after focusing on differences or looking for similarities. Similarity and difference are of course interdependent conceptions, but there has to be a distinguishable representation first — something that differs from the usual norm — before one can see similarities.

The proficiency of a designer can help to achieve results that are perceived as unexpected or unpredictable. He or she can be more sensitive to a growing trend, and perform design work emanating from an impression of what will come. But design is not about predicting future fashion, and it is not pure pragmatism. Because design is an artistic activity, the imaginative journey a designer makes does not have a fixed destination, and a profitable outcome is not guaranteed.

Each expression of style is time-bound. That is why a pragmatic search for profit by discovering the right gimmicks will find it difficult to make a real difference. The term *styling* is often used for describing work that is adapted to the present or the immediate future. Design is not about how things are but how they might be, and in the practice of a designer, style will be used to understand the future, not to master the present. Styling is positing the object in an abundance of products that are manufactured in the world every day. When styling is used to give customers new products based on style as the lowest common denominator, it is necessary to look back at product history in order to be able to structure details into groups of appearance or expression. A designer will not work with styling only to create variations and resemblance. Design is an exercise in connecting time, shape and value to place and event. To understand the semantic content of style is not a purely visual activity, nor a question of finding the lowest common denominator. Styling has relevance to design only if one can use it to say something about today or the future.

## Literature

**Attfield, Judy:** Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life, Berg 2000.

**Baxandall, Michael:** Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy, Oxford University Press 1972.

**Cooper, Rachel & Press, Mike:** The Design Agenda, John Wiley & Sons Ltd 2001 (First edition 1995).

**Cowen, Tyler:** Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2002

**Docherty, David:** Cartographies of taste and broadcasting strategies, in **Palmer, Jerry and Dodson, Mo** (Eds.), Design and Aesthetics, London 1996).

**Hacking, Ian:** Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science, Cambridge University Press 1983.

**Hebdige, Dick:** Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Methuen & Co. Ltd 1979.

**Jones, John Chris:** Design Methods, John Wiley & Sons Ltd 1992 (First edition 1970).

**Lévi-Strauss, Claude:** *The Savage Mind*, Oxford University Press 1996; first published 1972.

**Louridas, Panagiotis:** Design as bricolage: anthropology meets design thinking. *Design Studies* 1999; volume 20; issue 6; pp.517-535.

**Moulson, Tom; Sproles, George:** Styling Strategy; *Business Horizon* September- October 2000.

**Simon Herbert:** *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 2nd ed. by Herbert Simon, MIT Press 1981.

**Walker, John A.:** *Design History and the History of Design*, Pluto Press 1989.

**Whitfield, Allan T. W.** Aesthetics as pre-linguistic knowledge: A psychological perspective, *Design Issues*: Volume 21, Number 1, 2000.