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The contribution of material culture studies to design

Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to look closer at how design is conceived in material culture studies (MCS). Texts belonging to MCS by, i.e., Appadurai, Attfield, and Dant will be examined. However, it should be pointed out that our intention is not to try to cover the whole field of MCS and to present an overview, but to scrutinize some of the central new books within MCS for a start, and examine, on the one hand, how the field of design appears in the texts. On the other hand, the aim is to discuss the fact that these texts seem to contain important knowledge for designers, but designers are not familiar with it. The authors of this paper have deliberately chosen a design point of view, and design is considered a cultural phenomenon.

Another point of our concern is the conception of semiotics in the same texts. Many concepts used in MCS are also semiotic concepts. And so, a question concerning how semiotics is seen in these texts seems crucial. MCS uses semiotic terminology, but refers mostly to a limited part of its literature. When doing so, a partial tradition, i.e., the French one that goes back to Saussure, Barthes, Baudrillard and also Deleuze, is noted.¹ It seems that a more fruitful application of semiotics in our view, namely the philosophy of Charles Sander Peirce, is not well known to the writers. At this stage of being a work in progress, our paper will, however, illuminate relationships between only two fields, design and MCS, and point at concepts they seem to share as well as at their different emphases.

A design brief often directs a task directly towards a concrete product. An example could be the design of a parking meter in the street. The designer usually starts by looking at the materials, construction and interface of the object for better ways of forming it. Nevertheless, a designer does not only question the lay out and form of an existing product, but looks at the product's function from a wider perspective. He/she asks then, what kind of object a parking meter represents and what kind of relations it has to time and space and the users. It is in this contextualizing process that MCS enters the design picture, in our view. MCS can provide understanding of the social world of things, because it researches the ways people appropriate to it (living with objects in everyday lives, interacting with them, using them, allowing them to mediate between us) (Dant,

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure is evidently the key figure in this branch of semiotic research tradition.

1999, 201). In addition, we provocatively claim that the meagre intellectual life of the design world would benefit from closer connections to MCS and even promote design.

Our aim in this paper would be, first, to look at how knowledge from MCS could be helpful for designers and, second, to shed light on how design is conceived in material culture studies (MCS).

Material Culture Studies (MCS)

Although it is not easy to give a short definition of what material culture studies encompasses, we may point at the subject matter by reading some seminal books within the field. To begin with, we will focus our reading on the following texts that we conceive as representative for an understanding of MCS. These are *Introduction: commodities and the politics of value* (1986) by Arjun Appadurai, *Wild Things. The Material Culture of everyday Life* (2000) by Judy Attfield, and Tim Dant's *Material Culture in the Social World* (1999) and *Materiality and Sociality* (2005). Each author has a different taking on the subject field and thus provides design studies with diverse answers concerning relationships between material culture and design. Appadurai's background is in anthropological studies, Attfield's in British design history and feminist studies, and Dant is a sociologist. Their texts are examined in order to make their design conceptions and usefulness for design purposes known.

The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective (1986)² can be taken to be one of the seminal works within MCS.³ Although written in a period where the concept of material culture, in the sense here discussed, had only just materialised (where did it first materialize?)⁴, it nevertheless contains most of the major concepts discussed later. Appadurai's text addresses, of course, an appealing topic for design, because it deals with material objects, "... the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses ..." (p.5). Many times the examples referred to in MCS are extremely exotic, whereas designers (coming, for example, from the Nordic countries) look at actual things and are interested in the future uses of the m. Appadurai, nevertheless, also refers explicitly to modern design objects, to modernism and the Bauhaus (p.28). More indirectly he writes about design in a chapter called Demand and desire (especially p.31), when he discusses consumption of objects as sending and receiving messages. He states that *demand* can manipulate both production and consumption. Evidently it happens by means of design, among other things. Later on Appadurai argues⁵ that "taste, demand and fashion are at the heart of ... the origins of occidental capitalism ..." (p.38). These (design) concepts put design right in the centre of cultural production, in our view. Interestingly Appadurai continues by characterizing luxury goods as principally

² Edited by Arjun Appadurai, including his article mentioned above. Already the titles of the texts sound intriguing for designers nowadays.

³ See also influential books by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (*The World of Goods*, 1979), and Daniel Miller (*Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, 1987), to which all authors chosen for this paper refer.

⁴ See Dant's discussion on the concept *material culture* (1999, 11).

⁵ Referring to Mukerji, 1983.

rhetorical and social in their uses, and “not so much in contrast to necessities” (p.38), an argument, which also touches design directly⁶.

Wild things

According to Judy Attfield the wild things of material culture “store memories and interrupt the flow of time to restore a sense of continuity as well as to reflect change and contain complex and apparently irreconcilable differences” (2000, 264). With her background in the developing of Design History towards a broader conception of design objects, including not just industrial design in its narrative, but also craft, and artists’ products and activities, the question is “how to theorise such an endeavour to encompass a wider band of things” (2000, 2).

Keen to avoid accusations of fetishism, Attfield’s object of study is “... not really about things in themselves, but about how people make sense of the world through physical objects” (2000,1). Her general definition of design is “the integration of artefacts into the social world beyond the empirical study centred on physical features, through the acquisition of social meaning within specific cultural/historical contexts.” The key concept in understanding design objects and processes is *appropriation*. This is an essentially postmodernist cultural studies stance (i.e., Foster, 1985), and it is based on the idea that the form of design objects may be produced according to certain designers’ intentions. In various cultural and individual practices these intended meanings are, however, transformed into something else. Thus even mass produced products acquire new meanings in the hands of (social) consumers located in different ‘pockets’ of society. Thus meanings are produced, which designers will never be able to control or even take into account. And so, these meanings require special addressing and research, which surpass the traditional design process proper.

It follows that Attfield distinguishes between Design and everyday design. The first, Design, is assigned for a basically modernist stance towards improving the World by still producing new forms within design’s mainstream discourse. The second is the kind of design, which all of us produce every day, the “wild” things of everyday life, the kitschy, the chic, the commonplace, etc.

Another central concept for Attfield is *objectification*; a concept that aims at describing how objects are used to construct personal identities, memories and emotional maturity. It is a concept that stems from Miller’s (1987) interpretation of a Hegelian concept.

Finally, Attfield points critically at studies within MCS that generalize and provide insights into “group identities”, e.g. consumption based studies of things. Such studies (Hebdige, Clarke) tend to reproduce (the self-reflective) life styles represented in business oriented marketing practice rather than to show how people use objects for appropriation. At this point a broader issue concerning design’s autonomy is noteworthy. The autonomy or self-rule of design can be discussed and the outcome of the discussion

⁶ Compare to Veblen, 1953.

will influence design studies and research. Attfield diagnoses object appropriation as an autonomous activity that creates “wild meanings”. Designers, in turn, create the objects of appropriation and are regarded as un-autonomous, because they often merely follow the mainstream outlined by design history (Forty, 1986, 7). Attfield argues for the study of design products as objects among other things in a material culture (2000, 29).

Social values of objects (Dant 1999)

As late as in the year of 1999, Dant still wonders why research on material things (in sociology) is scarce. He emphasizes the importance of looking at them “as allies, artefacts and meaningful objects that make up a substantial part of the context of our social life” (a relationship even more continuous and intimate than with people) (pp.14-15). A key example in the book is the home and Dant looks at its material properties that form actions of those who live in it (p.61). In our view, this chapter could be conceived as a starting point for studies in MCS for design purposes. Another passage in the book discusses clothing, an almost equally significant topic in design. It illuminates the importance of analyses of objects in the context of lifestyle. The meanings are constructed by placing garments-in-a-situation (p.97). Surely many of the points presented above, may seem familiar to designers. Nonetheless, the explicit argumentation of these matters, so central to design in our view, can improve intellectual activity in the design world. Design research could undertake a task to bridge between the two fields of knowledge.

Later on, Dant examines the human interaction with things more deeply (p.120). In his view the relation can be called *interaction*, although not in same way as humans do with each other. The objects invite and “call out” responses. People have quasi-social relationships with them. In addition, he draws on the “pushiness” and “pulliness” of objects that people may experience in (inter)action with them. All in all, Dant’s conception comes close to our view on design in connection to material culture, which he studies throughout the book. His conception of semiotics, on the other hand, differs from the tradition that has proven useful in design contexts.

The material as sensual interaction with things in a context (Dant 2005)

The aim of Tim Dant in his book *Materiality and Sociality* (2005) is to move away from a macro analysis of material objects and their relations to users in the light of their socially and historically attributed meanings. Instead, the focus has moved (from the abstract value systems) to the meanings that arise from close interaction between users and things. The concept *interaction* is brought up instead of the concept *sociality*. Or rather, sociality is conceived as a bottom-up phenomenon similar to its use in the methods of ethno methodology and similar approaches. Thus meanings are seen as arising from the close encounters between human and inanimate objects. Both are called somewhat theatrically *actors* (originally by Kopytoff and others). The vast majority of interactions between material objects and humans are conceived as primarily work-related, i.e. related to the

sustenance of human life by acquisition and maintenance of different items. The most important case study in Dant's book is an auto repair shop. It reduces, on the one hand, the creative genii of design, and on the other, moves away from domestic feminine associations of consumption within MCS. Although interaction is a central issue, Dant is keen on broadening the concept (from the exchange of information between actors) to include qualities such as emotion, sensation and pleasure.

Conclusions

To sum up, we point to the concepts of *appropriation*, *objectification*, and *interaction* and to the idea of things as active contributors of meaning (*actors*) to be useful (note the limited MCS literature presented above).

There are still valid reservations to be taken with regards to a transfer of these concepts into design analysis proper. For one thing, it is hard to find any explicit aesthetic stance within MCS literature towards objects, which is clearly a major concern for designers. Moving into the areas of sociology, anthropology, etc., invariably confuses any naive conception of aesthetics. On the other hand, the focus on objects in MCS clearly opens the space for supplementary aesthetic reasoning, if that would be the concern.

Another reservation is the difficulty to transfer the interpretive and descriptive approaches to the aspect of producing change, to actual planning and design processes, because MCS seems to offer only more complex solutions rather than easily applicable methods. A possible counter argument, following Attfield, would be that the idea of change understood as improving is really a habit of thought, which has to be balanced with the competing habits of use in the wilderness of everyday life.

Having taken the reservations into consideration, we think that MCS relates positively to at least two possible programmes within design research. One is the suggestion of a broader kind of user analysis than *usability* as conceived in mainstream user-centred studies, which too often focus on reduction of 'interface friction', mistakes or on aspects of pleasure. Another programme would be to look at the practice of design from a material culture perspective. This could be useful for designers in strengthening their self-reflection concerning the use of design technologies and materials, i.e., the things that build up the material culture(s) of designing.

On the whole, *material culture* has the potential of a powerful concept for various strands in design analysis. It seems to offer a perspective that reverses the routine discourse on objects, and indicates a social and cultural sense of objects, which in turn, demand design to be placed in the context of use and habit.