

The following are general comments about the structure and content of an academic essay written for university – they are not prescriptive and intended as an educational guide only.

How can emotions be incorporated meaningfully into design practice?

Introduction

My research question is "How can emotions be incorporated meaningfully into design practice?" This was refined from my original question at the presentation stage of "How does emotion play a role in shaping aesthetics?" I chose to specify the relationship between emotions and design practice as this gave a greater focus to the practical opportunities for meaningful agency in the emotional domain of design. As my initial question indicated, the scope of my research is largely centred in the concerns of aesthetics visual communication.

Emotions are a relatively unacknowledged aspect of design practice; both formal education and design literature tend to align with modernist ideals of rationalism and scientific objectivity. Additionally, the domain of aesthetics tends to be considered mere "decoration" or "prettying up". This research intends to explore the true potential and importance of emotions and aesthetics in creating a holistic and socially active design practice.

Research Process

Primary research

I conducted an interview to establish how other students position themselves regarding emotion and aesthetics. Since my other forms of research focus on formal and largely historical theory, I chose to contrast this research with more informal and contemporary questioning, focusing on process, practicalities and the reality of design. I also undertook an activity where I sought a ranking of a series of images of teapots that were modernist, rococo and kitsch by how emotive or compelling they were, and then by their level of "taste", to determine how emotions and taste are linked.

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Commented [u2]: Some background to the reason you chose this question. It may be necessary to define your key terms at this stage.

Commented [u3]: Any particular elements in your question that are important

Commented [u4]: The student is indicating the scope of the question.

For advice on writing an introduction, go to: <http://www.uts.edu.au/currentstudents/support/helps/self-helpresources/academic-writing/essay-writing>

Commented [u5]: This paragraph is largely about why your question is important - its relevance and significance. Here, the student is identifying it as a gap in the literature.

Commented [u6]: Your topic in the context of current literature.

Commented [u7]: This section concentrates on the methodology of your research or how your research was done. It could include any methods, including visual mapping, but also your primary sources, which are your peer interviews and interviews with designers, writers or academics. Notice the use of the past tense.

Commented [u8]: The student should consider whether one interview is sufficient to effectively achieve this goal.

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Secondary research

My literature based research began by looking at theory I am familiar with, such as Malcolm Barnard's (2005) *Graphic Design as Communication*. I also focused on areas that interest me, such as camp aesthetics, and parts of readings that caught my eye. For instance, the focus on "magic" in the Barnard (2005) reading led to choosing the book *Exposing the Magic of Design* by Jon Kolko (2011). I also used a variety of databases to find peer-reviewed articles.

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My research led me to focus on anti-establishment and subversive forms of design. I informally surveyed my media consumption and creation - particularly of sketches and work that I would consider "unprofessional" - and found that many of the pop culture secondary sources I was analysing presented many of the same patterns, methodologies and ideas that I was researching. These greatly influenced my approach to my academic research.

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Commented [u18]: Results of this process

Visual Communication Design

Findings

Emotion in practice

- In "Introducing the student designer to the role of emotion in design" by Denton et al. (2004), it is noted that "it is crucial that designers are equipped to deal with the emotional domain of products and users" (p. 415).
- However, they also recognised that "students did not seem to recognise the full implications and potential for emotion in design work" (Denton et al., 2004, p. 415).
- The transient, intangible nature of emotion makes it difficult to conceptualise and engage with as a part of design practice (Denton et al., 2004).
- Both personal experience and the student interviewed corroborated that design practice is strongly influenced by mood and emotional status. This was not viewed as a negative thing; in fact, the student found that it opened up new forms of creativity if they were creating work in different emotional spaces (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014).

Commented [u19]: Results of the student's research in topic areas, starting with secondary research.

Note: Use of bullet points has been explicitly allowed in this assignment. If this is not the case, always check with your lecturer. Otherwise, use well-developed paragraphs which show the relationships between the results.
For help on synthesizing ideas and how to paraphrase, go to: <http://www.uts.edu.au/currentstudents/support/helps/self-helpresources/academic-writing/paraphrasing>

Commented [u20]: Primary results are indicated here.

components of the designer's process of synthesis and transformation. A "performance-centred

- An embodied view of design practice allows for new insight. For example, the student noted that their experience and practice as a dancer was part of their design practice and was a large part of their creative process and idea-making. (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)
- A strong correlation exists between design practice and the everyday: the student surveyed noted that "I feel like I'm designing all the time." (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)
- A constant, experimental and experiential design practice was identified as a positive methodology.
- The idea of fun as part of design practice was responded to positively; the student stated "whatever feels good and right to you, I think is most beneficial." (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)
- The student noted issues with "wasting time" on projects they were more interested in. They observed that they focused more on things where they felt engaged and excited and got "carried away with the things [they] love." (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014). The power of engagement and excitement-very visceral and natural reactions -as part of design practice was noted, and coming up with a framework to manage and balance this would be useful, particularly as the student expressed the feeling that it led to negative impacts such as inefficient time allocation.

Evidently, emotions are a powerful force in design practice, and provide modes of creativity and making that should be explored. However, to make emotion part of a meaningful design practice, it must be managed with a framework that addresses its negative impacts and utilises it most effectively.

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Modernist Aesthetics and Minimalism

- A highly influential text in modernist discourse on aesthetics and emotion is *Ornament and Crime* by Adolf Loos (Long, 2009). Loos positions minimalism as the peak of human aesthetic development and rejects ornamentation as decadent, wasteful, erotic and intolerable. His ultimate

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components of the designer's process of synthesis and transformation. A "performance-centred statement is that "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects." (Loos, 1908, p. 20)

- Loos rejects the notion that ornamentation and style are the path to joy – and in fact rejects the importance of joy in aesthetic consideration. Values of modernity and rationalism are held as the priority in design.
- Another text vital to understanding modernist discourse is Beatrice Warde's (1955) *The Crystal Goblet*. In it she rejects the notion that typography is about expression. Instead, it is about providing a "crystal goblet" for "wine" or the meaning of the text. Warde very clearly rejects the idea of design as art. She positions art as "expression of beauty for its own sake" and typography as the most efficient and invisible conveyance of meaning possible.
- This "false dichotomy" of transparency versus decoration has come under heavy critique (Rock, 2009), but continues to shape discourse on minimalism and design aesthetics, particularly the role of designer in imbuing texts with character.
- In the student interview, the student confirmed their general tendency towards ornamentation by rejecting Warde's "transparent" glass, instead choosing to describe their practice as one more similar to the decorated goblet. (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)

It is clear that modernist discourse values minimalism, rationalism, and objectivity in design, rejecting the concept of the designer as an active agent that can shape meaning in the emotional domain. While this outlook does not assist in building a positive, practical framework for including emotion in design practice, it does illustrate the issues with current design discourse and provide an understanding of the opposition to emotion in design.

Aesthetics in practice

- The concept of aesthetics in both my own research and during class discussions tended to prove to be a challenge to conceptualise.
- The student interviewed defined aesthetics as "how something looks, the visual nature of an object" (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014), acknowledging the role of

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Commented [u24]: Summary of these results

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Commented [u27]: Acknowledgment of research limitations - in this case, the difficulty of defining what was being researched.

components of the designer's process of synthesis and transformation. A "performance-centred appearance in aesthetics but not linking it to philosophy, meaning-making or morals. However the student did explore the link between taste and aesthetics.

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- The student defined a "tasteless object" as lacking in emotional investment or effort. (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)

It is clear from both my research and interview process that students struggle to engage with the concept of aesthetics even if their work itself explores aesthetics. In making a framework for emotions as part of design practice it is essential that a practical, understandable working definition of aesthetics that interrogates concepts of is arrived at.

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Aesthete's movement (19th c) and Decadent movement (late 19th c)

- The aesthete's movement and decadent movement can be summarised as "art for art's sake", or more precisely, "art for the sake of beauty and its elevating effects." (Landow, 2012, para. 1) with a focus on emotion and pleasure and a search for an experience of the sublime.
- The decadent movement is very similar, but while the Aesthete's movement was defined by its apolitical status, the Decadent movement "wages a guerilla war against the dominant culture" (Cohen, 2012) and is defined by political nature and aggressive subversive positioning.

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The development of a political, subversive form of aestheticism in the Decadent movement demonstrates that subversion of modernist ideals of minimalism is possible. A practice focused on ornamentation and style does not necessarily mean it is apolitical; in fact its prioritisation of beauty is a political statement itself.

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Camp aesthetics

- Susan Sontag's (1964) seminal text *Notes On "Camp"* defines Camp as an esoteric sensibility, the essence of it being "love of the unnatural." Sontag positions Camp as a mode of aestheticism that is all-encompassing, seeing all modes of expression as opportunity for stylisation.
- Love and self-love are seen as integral to the camp aesthetic (Sontag, 1964).

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- Integral to Camp is its sense of irony and play, particularly in how it problematizes dominant concepts of "good taste" (Sontag, 1964).
- In item number 54 of her list, Sontag asserts that "The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating" (Sontag, 1964, para. 73).
- However, despite her assertion that Camp and its focus on emotion and expressiveness can be a force for liberation, Sontag (1964) ultimately sees Camp as "apolitical" due to its privileging of style over content.
- In contrast, Bruce LaBruce criticises Sontag's assertion and states that his "perhaps idealized conception of camp is that it is, or was, by its very nature political, subversive, even revolutionary" (LaBruce, 2013, para. 3).
- This re-conceptualisation of Camp is widely discussed in queer discourse. Notably, Moe Meyer (1994), in the introduction to *Politics and Poetics of Camp*, makes a strong case for Camp aesthetics being the essential signifying vocabulary for a Queer praxis.
- Meyer (1994) establishes that Camp aesthetics provide a way to challenge dominant discourses through parody and notes that the joy of Camp comes from its anti-establishment challenge.
- Meyer (1994) also advocates for a "performance-centred methodology" (p. 9) in documentation, an ontological shift from the objectivist and empiricist modernist ideal to a process that privileges process and experience.

Ultimately Camp aesthetics can be understood as a political practice that problematizes gender, "taste", aesthetics, experience and the politics of emotion. Adapting elements of camp aesthetics to a design practice involves acknowledging that joy and emotion are a vital part of a political praxis that challenges dominant discourses of power.

The magic of design

- In Barnard's (2005) *Graphic Design and Communication* he discusses the concept of "magic" as a role of graphic design. In essence, he describes graphic design as a practice of transformation much the same as a magician's. He also discusses a secular iteration of Aumont's assertion that "symbolic

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- It is clear that students consider their work naturally "apolitical" despite acknowledging that the majority of design has a moral or political standing. The student also drew a link between taste and morality, noting that "prestige" of an object- or lack thereof- could determine whether it possessed a moral position (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014). High class or forms of design considered traditionally "elite" or "artistic" are considered more meaningful and valuable, and therefore more powerful in politics and creating change.

When considering agency in design as part of design practice it is clear that a more holistic and involved view has to be taken. A rejection of the modernist ideal of a "neutral" position is required to fully interrogate the political impacts of design work. By acknowledging that all design has a political position and that the link between taste and politics is a problematic one, rather than natural, a more positive and effective model for socio-political design can be achieved.

Image Reaction Experiment



From *American Decorative Arts*, by J. Richardson, 1745-1755, Yale University Art Gallery (<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/5565>). In the Public Domain.

The student noted that it was "probably" the most high class, but found it too overdone and extravagant. (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)

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("Price Kensington Cottage Ware," 2013)

This example stood out the most to the student because of its use of colour and its organic appearance. They found it the most emotive due to its use of colour, and described it as telling more of a story; they stated that it had "life" in it. It was judged to be the most low class (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)



(Weihrauch, n.d.)

The modernist example resonated the most with the student's design work due to its clean, neat, tidy appearance. They also stated that it resonated with their work because it appeared functional. It was judged to be the most high class in the design world. (Anonymous Student, personal communication, April 17, 2014)

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Discussion and analysis

I found it relatively surprising how open the student interviewed was to the idea of emotions as part of design practice. A large amount of design literature on the topic emphasises that it is often seen as inconsequential or ineffective. This is largely a relic of modernist discourse that values rationality and scientific objectivity. The student's own focus on emotion in their own design practice led to a positive dialogue about how emotion could be utilised in design practice. Key elements of an "ideal" design practice that included emotion were: perpetual, experimental, and embodied.

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Modernist understandings of the value of emotion and an emphasis on minimalist aesthetics is still very prominent in current design discourse, both academically and amongst students. Adolf Loos' rejection of ornament is still valued, and Beatrice Warde's prioritising of minimalism is still prominent throughout design discourse, particularly in education. There is a lack of critical engagement with the political aspects of minimalism and how it creates a narrative of a western, white, upper class aesthetic as universal. However, academic sources show that post-modern design theory has begun the work of critically unpacking the value systems of modernism. (McVarish, 2010) Most vitally, the notion that there is such thing as a "neutral" or "transparent" form of design has been challenged-McVarish establishes that if design is "invisible" it only "blinds us to the impact of its forms on our reception of a text" (2010, para. 33).

The Decadent movement and discourse on Camp aesthetics displays the strong tie between emotions, aesthetics and politics. The emotional domain can be incorporated into design practice in a proactive, socio-political manner that utilises design's full potential as an agent for change.

The discussion of magic raised the importance of considering the "fun" side of design, and trying to discuss the more amorphous aspects of design practice. Instead of avoiding these relatively hard to pin down experiences, it is important to work towards a design practice that explores the transient, the ephemeral, the sublime and the transformative. Visceral reaction and emotion were identified as vital

components of the designer's process of synthesis and transformation. A "performance-centred methodology" put forward by Meyer (1994, p. 9) assists in reconceptualising design practice to emphasise these qualities.

The taste experiment showed that all three approaches of design have their appeals. The connection between taste and politics is clear throughout the findings, and was demonstrated when the student determined what was "high class" and "low class".

Reflection

I found that accidental research was surprisingly successful and important to developing my report. I began reading into camp aesthetics out of interest rather than as a direct strategy in working on this report and found that it became central to my research process. By staying engaged with my research in informal ways, such as considering the role of emotion and aesthetics in pop culture - I found myself thinking about my research in a more complex and nuanced manner.

The students' interest area was similar to my own and they had many useful insights towards my topic. However, they also approached questions and concepts very differently, forcing me to consider topics that I had considered fairly simple in a much more complex manner. I found the interview process integral to my final report. The process of being interviewed forced me to think differently about a lot of things I hadn't considered, and the process of verbalising thoughts was illuminating both in regards to opinions I hadn't thought about and my own thought processes.

Conclusion

My research process was useful but at times lacked direction. The interview process was more enlightening than I anticipated and if I was repeating this I would conduct interviews earlier as it provides better direction on research. It's clear that emotions are important in design, but there are difficulties such as designer's knowledge, the limitations of current discourse, and the transient nature of emotion as a

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domain. However, it cannot simply be ignored; instead, an assisting framework must be developed to make it an active part of design practice.

Commented [u41]: Here, the student is making a recommendation for future work on using emotion in design.

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