DESIGN CULTURE(OF) THINKING

THEORY
HISTORY
CRITICS

DC(S)
DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
JUNE 08.09.10.11, SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Radical Interdependence: learning/doing with things

Jaron Rowan

BAU, Design College of Barcelona. University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC), C. Pujades, 118, 08005 Barcelona, Spain
Jaron.rowan@bau.cat

Abstract | Design research can include a range of actions but has gradually become assimilated into the production of theory. The making of theory in design has been widely discussed (Redström, 2017), but the kinds of cognitive operations that it entails is still to be fully explored. I will argue that contemporary theory entails three different ways of relating to objects: objectivity, critique and affect (Daston & Galison 2010, Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, Massumi 2002). These three ways of knowing, inherited from modernity, protect us from the material reality that surrounds us, from the power of objects over humans. They all contribute together to create a distance between humans and the world we live in. In the following paper exploring the power of erotics, I will propose forms of design research that don't distance us from the objects we are analysing, forms of knowing/doing that allow us to establish interdependent relationships with them.

KEYWORDS | THEORY, INTERDEPENDENCE, EROTICS, DESIGN, EPISTEMOLOGY

1. Introduction

Design research has now established itself as a discipline and a recognizable practice (Rodgers, 2018). It goes along with, interacts with and feeds into contemporary design practices, whether academic, creative or business-oriented. Ever since Christopher Frayling proposed a categorization to differentiate research into, for and through design in his pivotal article 'Research in Art and Design' (1994), the number of debates and academic discussions on the subject have grown continuously. A crucial moment in this debate occurred when Nigel Cross published the article 'Designerly ways of knowing' (2001), opening up the question of whether it is possible to make a design science. Hovering in the background of these debates was the role of theory, or more precisely critical theory. This specific way of engaging with practice has grown to occupy a central role in design research. Essays, dissertations, explanations, exegeses and accounts of how design practice takes place are not not only expected but almost a compulsory activity in any academic context. Design research can include many different actions – it can imply to, for example, prototype, diagram, draft, test or experiment – but gradually it has become assimilated into producing theory. What "making theory in design" is has been widely discussed (Redström, 2017), but what kinds of cognitive operations it entails, I will argue, is still to be fully explored.

It is paradoxical that we have come to expect theory to accompany any form of practice because it seems to function as its dialectical negative. As twins start gravitating towards each other, theory and practice engage into a choreography that materializes as design research. Historically, theory comes from observation. As the philosopher D. N. Rodowick explains, "one finds the noble origins of theory in the Greek sense of *theoria* as viewing, speculation, or the contemplative life" (Rodowick, 2015:7) – the division between viewing and doing is established at the very origin of the concept. Practice needs to be unpacked, exposed and explained in order to gain legitimacy. As Rodowick writes, "Theories seek to explain, usually by proposing concepts, but in this they are often distinguished from doing or practice. In this manner, (Raymond) Williams synthesizes 'a scheme of ideas which explains practice'" (Rodowick, 2015:18). Theory needs to be systematic, consistent and methodologically robust. In this sense it has become a practice in itself, with clear rules, tones, aesthetics, rituals and gestures. Theory is now central to design research, and practice needs to be theorized in order to be validated academically. Currently, the word "theory" has weight, gravity and solidity in the humanities. But, as Wittgenstein might have put it, like every overly familiar word, on closer examination it begins to dissolve into "a 'corona' of lightly indicated uses" (Rodowick, 2015:3). Despite its openness, art and design schools still rely on theory as a tool to unpack and make design a legitimate research practice.

Epistemically, theory can be problematic, as it inherits some of its cognitive modes from modern ways of understanding the relation between objects and subjects, persons and things (Esposito, 2015). In the midst of the nineteenth century, with the colonial projects, the scientific and the industrial revolution at their peaks, Europe was filled with a stream of objects at a magnitude that had never seen before. Extraordinary and mysterious things to

the eyes of the common European. Artefacts, tools, magical instruments, animals, plants, minerals and subjects were being forcefully imported to the European continent from the various colonial projects. At the same time, the industrial revolution was running on full steam, and factories were producing commodities at a rate never seen before. The growth of the scientific discipline was also accompanied by the creation of new and powerful instruments that allowed the human gaze to see a reality for the first time. Confronted by the power of these objects, the European enlightenment could merely try to (re)name, categorize, taxonomize, describe, measure, inscribe, dissect, collect and explain them (Foucault, 1994).

Powered by the belief in rationality, modern ways of engaging with things implied that no object could have or exert its power over a subject. Modern epistemologies were born to neutralize the magic, allure (Goffey, 2014), strength or power of a multitude of objects that now challenged the pretense of humanism that the human, and human agency, was at the center of the world (Braidotti, 2013). To confront the power of these objects and in order to contain them, three different cognitive modes started operating almost simultaneously. In the context of the natural sciences the idea of objectivity started gaining strength. Adopted in the 1850s, objectivity is a strategy to analyse natural objects that implies becoming detached from what one is examining (Daston & Galison, 2010). It limits the impact of human subjectivity on the object that is being analyzed. All traces of magic, animism or material power had to be erased from the human descriptions of natural objects. Only a few years later Karl Marx was finishing his *magnus opus*, Capital Volume I, in which he made us aware of the fetishist power of the commodity (Marx 1990). In order to escape from its attraction, he proposed critique as a way to unveil the underlying ideology that remains latent behind each commodity. Only through suspicion one can get to understand the truth that lies hidden under the surface of any commodity, so theory would imply an act of debunking its magic. The growth of aesthetics during the nineteenth century as a philosophy aimed at understanding how objects affect the body (Eagleton, 1990) shows us that, in order to understand the object one confronting, we have to look into ourselves to see how it affects our emotions and sensations. In front of a painting, a mountain or a poem that can overwhelm us, aesthetics gives us a way to name and contain the affects these elements have on our body/soul.

2. Three epistemic movements

In their exhaustive history of the notion of objectivity, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison note that “to be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower-knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgement, wishing or striving” (Daston & Galison, 2010: 17). In order to achieve this, the scientific community spent time and energy to develop methodologies, instruments and techniques that would allow them to view objects without any kind of interference of the subject. The object in this context is

equated to an accumulation of qualities, for example, weight, height, density, intensity. Reality becomes datafied in order to be comparable and easily archivable. To do this, animals, plants and minerals have to be decontextualized, reduced to parts and understood rationally, that is, as small logic rations. Matter is transformed into information, pure representation that can be dealt with (Latour, 1986). There must be a distance between object and subject; they cannot contaminate each other.

Objectivity has to do away with emotions, sensations or intuitions, which all stem from the subject and could end distorting the qualities of the object put under scrutiny. These objects need to be extracted from their context and introduced into the laboratory, a clean and open space in which matter can be transformed into facts (Latour, 1986). This idea of objectivity and its ambition to constitute a universal and unquestionable form of knowledge has been largely contested and challenged. Since Kuhn's now famous "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", the challenges to objectivity have come from many fronts. Even in the mid-sixties, during the Berkeley student revolts, one could walk around a campus and see the slogan "objectivity is only another word for white male subjectivity" (Gitlin, 1995: 150) written all over the walls. In her now well-known work, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Donna Haraway also questioned the role of objectivity and its uses from a feminist perspective. She opens the paper with a defiant sentence "Academic and activist feminist inquiry has repeatedly tried to come to terms with the question of what we might mean by the curious and inescapable term 'objectivity.' We have used a lot of toxic ink and trees processed into paper decrying what they have meant and how it hurts us. The imagined 'they' constitute a kind of invisible conspiracy of masculinist scientists and philosophers replete with grants and laboratories" (Haraway, 1988: 755). Her answer, in order to escape the objective-subjective division, is to work on situated forms of knowledge, making the researcher accountable for the conditions in which knowledge is being produced but escaping the pursuit of universal forms of truth.

In the same decade as the notion of objectivity started being deployed, Karl Marx published "Capital vol I" with a chapter devoted to understand a new kind of object: the commodity. He writes "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx, 1990). These objects have a fetishistic character; they are able to hide the power relations that allow them to be produced, exercising their power of seduction over consumers. Objects become fetishes when their physical reality is a condensation of abstract productions forces. To suppress their power, to understand these objects, Marx proposes a very specific cognitive exercise: look behind the commodity. Find the production systems that allow it to exist. We must debunk the commodity to understand its real meaning. This cognitive exercise is what we refer to as critique. It implies learning to suspect what an object really is. A commodity is a proxy for a specific ideology that can be unveiled through a critical reflection. Understandably the traditions of cultural analysis influenced by Marxism will look at cultural objects as an envelope for ideology. Critique can unpack and expose the truth behind these objects.

The French philosopher Paul Ricouer coined the term “a hermeneutics of suspicion” to define a specific way of engaging with reality that runs through a genealogy that crosses the works of three of the most important analysts in the 19th century: Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. What they all share is a distrust for how things appear to us (Ricoeur, 1999). Confronted by the power, magic or seduction of the object, this school of thought promoted suspicion, distance and attention. That is why critical theory has normalized critical detachment as a way to engage with objects that could exercise their magic over us. Analyzing how critique has changed to adapt to contemporary academic needs, Rita Felski writes “a preferred idiom is that of ‘troubling’ or ‘problematizing’, of demonstrating the ungroundedness of beliefs rather that diagnosing false consciousness. And the prevailing tone is ironic and deliberative rather than angry and accusatory. The role of critique is no longer to castigate but to complicate” (Felski, 2015:130). In this sense, again, as in the case of objectivity, a distance is created between subject and object, knower and known. Objects are not trustworthy; theorists must always be alert; and this mental operation can push critique into a semi-paranoid state (Sedgwick, 2013). Everything must be put under suspicion, normalizing a detached and cautious way of understanding material reality that surrounds us. As the cultural analysts Eve Sedgwick sustains, “To apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (Sedgwick, 2003:125). This sustained suspicion transforms the theorist into a cautious “paranoid” agent, always ready to debunk objects and expose their dirty tricks. “The first imperative of paranoia is there must be no bad surprises, and indeed, the aversion to surprise seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia and knowledge per se, including both epistemophilia and skepticism” (Sedgwick, 2003:130). This is the main reason why critique does not get along well with practice, with materialities, with the messiness of design projects that will always be contradictory. During the 1990s critical theory was challenged by scholars pertaining to the natural sciences, in the so called “science wars” (Latour, 2004). From the perspective of rationalist scientific disciplines critique lacked “objectivity”, it always managed to find what it set out to debunk, it was seen as a postmodern hoax (Sokal & Bricmont, 2003). But still, one of the most powerful challenges to this tradition came from Bruno Latour in his article “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, in which he signalled some of the main shortcomings of this cognitive mode engaging with reality. The distance between conspiracy theories and critical theory was to close.

As we have mentioned, alongside objectivity and critique, the third epistemic tradition that feeds into contemporary forms of doing theory is aesthetics. Aesthetics deals with sensations, feelings and affect. Ben Highmore writes that “Aesthetics, in its initial impetus, is primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensate body, and with the affective forces that are generated in such meetings” (Highmore, 2010: 185). This philosophy of affect, born against utilitarian and instrumental reason, has devoted much of its time analyzing and understanding how the arts act upon the human body. As Terry Eagleton explains, "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. In its original

formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek aisthesis would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation" (Eagleton, 1990:13). With the industrial revolution on the background, capitalism and utilitarianism gaining strength, philosophy wakes up to the fact that under the regime of ideas there is a sensual body waiting to be explored and understood. Aesthetics allows for the sensible life of humans to be explored; it follows affect, how objects impinge upon the body, how the body reacts to sensible stimuli.

Baumgarten was the first to work for a positioning of aesthetic in the system of philosophy. This new science of perception implied, "detaching and describing a special class of objects— in Baumgarten's terminology, 'perfect sensate representations' (*perfectio cognitionis sensitivae*) achieved through artistic means" (Rodowick, 2015:25). Once we are detached enough from the object, we can start to understand how it affects our senses, our inner being, how it impinges on our subjectivity. In this sense, it epistemically starts signalling towards a relation between subject and object. As "the experience of aesthetic pleasure was conceived both as an external perception of the intrinsic formal qualities of the presented object and as the stimulation of the subject's internal representational and emotional capacities, though in the form of intuitions, not concepts" (Rodowick, 2015:34), still the subject continues to be the active agent, the knower, of a world that needs to be known. Here is where we find the aesthetics' greatest problem, as when it looks at the object it cannot really see it; it instead is a discipline focused on understanding how the body reacts to it. Rather than engaging with the external reality, it folds into the subject, scrutinizing and explaining how a certain note, colour, image of phrase produces specific emotions and sensations. To engage with exteriority, aesthetics produces a complex sense of interiority, forgetting the material reality it is intended to address to instead engage with sensations, feelings and physical states. This is how aesthetics failed to understand the social and political realities of these objects it seeked out to understand. It became self-absorbed in itself as a cognitive exercise. By doing so it lost its status as a philosophical perspective and during the twentieth century and was demoted to being a specific way of doing art theory.

So what we see is that these three modes of interrogation, the three strands of modernist enquiry that converge in what we today call theory, share their discomfort with the power of objects: the hierarchical tension between subject and object; the belief that human rationality can rise above and control and neutralize the magic and force imbedded in materiality; and the perpetuation of a modernist obsession with controlling and dominating the material world in which humans live in. This has led to a crisis that Arturo Escobar describes as a "result of deeply entrenched ways of being, knowing, and doing. To reclaim design for other world-making purposes requires creating a new, effective awareness of design's embeddedness in this history. By examining the historical and cultural background from within which design practice enfolds" (Escobar, 2018:19). They presuppose a superiority of subjects over objects, humans over things. Rationality over sensuality. They incite us to see contemporary problems through a modern lens.

This pushes us to ask, following Escobar: “can design be extricated from its embeddedness in modernist unsustainable and defuturing practices and redirecting toward other ontological commitments, practices, narratives, and performances?” (Escobar, 2018:168). Can we find ways of thinking/doing, leaning/making, researching/producing that escapes the dualist modes of thinking we have inherited from modernity? Can we devise forms of theory that go beyond objectivity, critique or affect? And more importantly, can we develop forms of research that are able to accept the messiness, contradictions and openness of materiality? Can we research design without having to distance or protect ourselves from the power of objects but, instead, allow them to seduce, play and deploy their magic over us? Can theory be evicted from its epistemic sense of superiority, opening research to other ways of knowing/doing the world?

3. Final remarks: Epistemic erotics

Distance, suspicion, affect. Objectivity, critique and aesthetics. Contemporary theory has specialized in understanding the politics, ethics and aesthetics of the objects it analyses. It has tried to define a clear-cut subject in charge of controlling objects. This has contributed to a detached way of producing knowledge that is unable to give a strong account of our interdependence with things, human and non-human entities. To conclude, I will argue that the price we have paid for this epistemic privilege is losing a way to evidence links, attachments and forms of interdependence that make modernist dualists depictions of reality obsolete. It is in this context in which I will argue for the need to engage with an erotics understood as a specific epistemic exercise. As a way to get entangled by the links and bonds that ensemble humans and non-humans, subjects with objects, persons and things. We could define this erotics as the materialization of the bonds that make us part of the world. Erotics signals the subject that is fascinated by another subject, or by another object. It engages in the power of attraction. It casts light on the broken links that modern epistemic modes have enforced on our understanding of the material reality of which we are a part of. Erotics is fuelled by curiosity, attraction, allure, desire. Erotics is a transgressive cognitive exercise as it forces the subject to lose itself in the midst of the object. As opposed to objectivity and critique, it bridges the distance with the material reality it seeks to understand by allowing it to seduce and cast its magic on the subject.

Contemporary design research’s investment in theory perpetuates the division between subjects and objects, knowing and doing. It is in this context that we argue that we need other ways of engaging with design objects or projects. If theory seeks robust confirmation of facts, erotics opens up the possibilities of playfulness and curiosity. If objectivity requires distance, erotics opens the way for presence. If critique is based on suspicion, erotics allows us to explore complicities, attraction. If aesthetics is self-absorbed, erotics pushes us out of ourselves to explore the different forms of interdependence between us and the world in

which we live in. Erotics allows shininess, viscosity, symmetries or lengths to shape ways of knowing the world. If theory needs clear categories and taxonomies, erotics allow us to engage with messiness. Experimenting with materials, with uses, with shapes and functions will always be full of contradictions, openness and uncertainties. An erotics can help define an epistemology of mutual fascinations and unrequested entanglements.

The genealogy of erotics we are pursuing here should push us to engage, entangle and establish intimacies with objects, plants, minerals and animals. In this sense, we are not thinking of an erotics as a steps towards sexuality, but as an acknowledgment of those forces that push us into the world (Bataille, 2013), escaping the self to become part of a complex network of beings. This use of erotics should be understood as a way to develop those radical interdependencies that Arturo Escobar asks designers to engage with (Escobar 2018). A way to create a bond and kinship with non-human beings, as argued by Donna Haraway (2016). A way to build dense ensembles in a Latourian sense (2008). So erotics is not the prelude to sex, but to deep intimacies with human and non-human actors. It is a movement towards thinking/being/doing with others. Allowing ourselves to be attracted by things that do not need debunking or explaining. Allowing the power of materialities to invoke complex networks (Bennett, 2010).

Erotics is a form of knowing/doing that allows the power of others to be felt, to be experienced. Following the ideas of feminist scholar and poet Audrey Lorde, if objectivity, critique and aesthetics were defined in order to neutralize the power of objects over subjects, then she sees erotics as an exercise to gain repressed powers. In her own words, “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, 1984:87). Erotics in this sense helps us to regain confidence in intuition and non-rational ways of knowing, those forms of engaging with the world sanctioned by the modern epistemologies we have previously dissected. Erotics helps us acknowledge the contradictions inherent to material complex realities. As Lorde writes, “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (Lorde, 1984:88). Learning to trust these feelings, inclinations, sensations and propensities, we can start allowing ourselves to escape from a false sense of self and embody interdependent based subjectivities. Without an erotics, we buy into this disaffectionate, distant and ironic mode of theory that inevitably doesn't allow us to fall in love with our practice. That, inevitably, will find evidence of material shortcomings and contradictions.

An erotics affords us to become entangled. It allows the imaginary barriers we have established between subjects and objects to be erased. Through an erotics, frontiers become fuzzy. An erotics opens ways of knowing based on touching, sucking, smelling, biting, measuring or tinkering with things. Erotics implies transgression of rules, disciplines and categories, opening the gates to *indisciplined* forms of research (Camps & Rowan, 2019), challenging limits and expectations. Objectivity, critique, aesthetics and erotic

epistemologies, a repertoire of modes of knowing/relating/caring for objects. Suspicion with complicity, distance with care, affect with responsibilities. This leads us to conclude that design research needs theory, with its objective distance, its critical suspicion and its affective aesthetics, but also needs to engage erotically with materiality, with the contradictions inherent to practice. It needs to open up to playfulness, to material alliances and weird entanglements. Pushing the human to one side, learning/doing with things, through unexpected alliances and erotic pleasure.

References

Bataille, G. (2013). *El erotismo.* Barcelona: Tusquets Editores.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman.* London: Polity Press.

Camps, M., & Rowan, J. (2019). Indisciplinaries: Exploring Practice as a Design Research Method. *Revista Diseña*. https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.14.100-117

Cross, N. (2001). Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline Versus Design Science. *Design Issues,* 17(3), 49–55. https://doi.org/10.1162/074793601750357196

Daston, L., & Galison, P. (2010). *Objectivity.* New York: Zone Books.

Eagleton, T. (1990). *The Ideology of the Aesthetic.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Eagleton, T. (2006). *La estética como ideología*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta.

Esposito, R. (2015). *Persons and Things - From the Body's Point of View.* Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Felski, R. (2015). *The Limits of Critique.* Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1994). *The Order of Things.* New York: Vintage Books.

Goffey, Andrew. Editor. (2014). *The allure of things: process and object in contemporary philosophy* (A. Goffey & R. Faber, eds.). London: Bloomsbury.

Gitlin, T. (1995). *The Twilight of Common Dreams.* New York: Metropolitan Books.

Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. E. (2010). *The Affect Theory Reader* (M. Gregg & G. Seigworth, eds.). Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Haraway, D. J. (1988). *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of PartialPerspective.* Feminist Studies, 14(3), 575–599.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble* (D. U. Press, ed.). Durham, N.C.

Highmore, B. (2010). Bitter after tase: Affect, food, and social aesthetics. In *The affect theory reader.*

Latour, B. (1986). Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together. In *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* (Vol. 6, pp. 1–40). Jai Press.

Latour, B. (1986). *Nunca fuimos modernos: Ensayo de antropología simétrica.* Madrid: Siglo XXI.

Latour, B. (2004). *Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern.* Critical Inquiry. https://doi.org/10.1086/421123

Latour, B. (2008). *Reensamblar lo social.* Buenos Aires: Ediciones Manantial.

Lorde, A. (1984). Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider*.

Marx, K. (1990). *Capital: Critique of Political Economy v. 1*. London: Penguin Classics.

Massumi, B. (2013). *Parables for the Virtual. In Parables for the Virtual.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Massumi, B. (1995). *The Autonomy of Affect. Cultural Critique*. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354446

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds. In *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*.

Redström, J. (2017). *Making Design Theory.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1999). *Freud: una interpretación de la cultura.* Mexico: Siglo XXI.

Rodowick, D. (2015). *An Elegy for theory.* Boston: Harvard University Press;

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Sokal, A., & Bricmont, J. (2003). *Intellectual Impostures.* London: Profile Books.

About the Author:

Jaron Rowan, PhD, is Head of Research at BAU, Design College of Barcelona. Author of *Emprendizajes en cultura* (Traficantes de Sueños, 2010), *Memes: inteligencia idiota, política rara y folclore digital* (Capitan Swing, 2015) and *Cultura libre de Estado* (Traficantes de Sueños, 2016).