The Aesthetic and the Poietic Elements of Information Design

Anna-Lena Carlsson
Mälardalens University, Sweden
{anna-lena.carlsson}@mdh.se

Abstract

In this paper I address two types of perspectives on the aesthetic that are of relevance for a discussion of contemporary information design. Firstly, the 'aesthetic' understood as aesthetic perception of beautiful form. Secondly, the 'aesthetic' recognized as the poietic activity, i.e. the production of an object, in which the recipient also takes part. These perspectives are discussed, in brief, in relation to questions of form and content, and I argue that aesthetic elements in some contemporary information designs cannot be understood as aesthetic perception of beautiful form. The aesthetic is still present, but as poietic, creative, elements. Finally, I discuss the poietic activity in the light of McLaughlin's Heideggerian view, that the passing on of information is never neutral.

Keywords--- **aesthetics, aesthetic, poietic, art, form and content, information design, information visualisation, McLaughlin, Heidegger**

1. Introduction

Pettersson (2002) describes information design as including "analysis, planning, presentation and understanding of a message – its content, language and form. Regardless of the selected medium, a well designed information set will satisfy aesthetic, economic, ergonomic, as well as subject matter requirements" [1]. The goal of information design should be clarity of communication. Horn's (1999) definition is: "the art and science of preparing information so that it can be used by human beings with efficiency and effectiveness" [2]. With reference to Tufte's work in information design, Horn argues: "communication can be both beautiful and useful" [2]. With reference to these definitions, it is the role of aesthetic matters in information design that will be addressed.

Concerning information visualisation, Ware's (2004) definition is "the use of interactive visual representations of abstract data to amplify cognition" [3]. This definition incorporate information visualisation into the field of information design, *if* "visual representation" is regarded as designed information, in contrasted with mere data that in itself does not inform of anything.

One of many definitions of the term 'information', according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "[k]nowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event" [4]. As we shall see, the aesthetic understood as a creative activity, rather than a passive sensuous perception vis-à-vis beautiful form, is linked to the understanding of information as an event.

2. The Aesthetic and the Poetic

2.1. Aesthetic Quality and Experience

For an understanding of the term 'aesthetic', we have to turn to philosophical aesthetics. Welsch (1997) writes that aesthetic perception refers to "connections and contrasts, harmonies and correspondences, counter-supports or analogies […]. Questions of form and proportion constitute its domain. Thus, wherever 'aesthetic' refers to such perceptions, a *form- and proportion-related* element shifts into the foreground" [5]. Beauty "denotes the perfecting form of the sensuous, and this perfection consists of a free joining of the pieces to a whole" [5]. How has this come about?

Baumgarten (1954) coins the term *aesthetics* in the eighteenth century. He uses the Greek term 'aisthesis' [E. sensuous perception] to designate aesthetics as the autonomous science of sensitive knowing. Baumgarten focuses not only on works of art, but also on sensuous perception in general [6]. Kant's (1952) use of the term 'aesthetic' later became of great importance for the succeeding aesthetic paradigm. In *Critique of Judgement* 1790, he writes that an aesthetic judgement does not have to do with objectivity, but with the feeling of pleasure and pain in relation to beauty and the sublime in nature. He associates the aesthetic experience with disinterestedness, i.e. an aesthetic judgement is detached from subjective interests or desires [7].

The term 'aesthetic' soon became associated with *artworks*. Aesthetics became synonymous with

philosophy of art. Binkley (1977) writes: "The work of art has come to be construed as an aesthetic object, an object of perception. Hence, the meaning and essence of all art is thought to inhere in appearances, in the looks and sounds of direct (though not necessarily unreflective) awareness. The first principle of philosophy of art has become: all art possesses aesthetic qualities, and the core of a work is its nest of aesthetic qualities" [8]. According to this, the aesthetic paradigm concerning art that grew out of the eighteenth century sustains a notion that aesthetics has to do with the perception of a work of art. After Kant, the aesthetics, according to Beardsley (1966),''aimed to carve out a sphere of autonomy for art'' [9], and art became separated from the sphere of utility.

The development of the theme of disinterestedness continues in the idea of the autonomy of art. Art should be valued for itself, not for external purposes. The movement "Art for art's sake" was allied with the cult of beauty. ''Nothing is really beautiful, unless it is useless,'' the French author Théophile Gautier writes in 1835 [10]. This is an approach to art that claims to be ''contextless''. Aesthetic values were considered to depend on properties internal to the work of art. Bell (1949) writes that aesthetic emotion arises from forms, relations of forms, and relations and combinations of colour and lines. The qualities shared by objects such as the windows of Chartres Cathedral, Giotto's frescoes and the art of Cezanne are called 'significant form' [11].

This short overview only underlines some of the important thoughts that have located the aesthetic perception of beautiful form as the dominant idea regarding art, from the early eighteenth century until modernism in the late nineteenth century. To summarize:

- aesthetic qualities are located in the *form* (in a separation of form and content/function), which makes the

- aesthetic experience *disinterested*, i.e. detached from subjective interests or desires

Today, beautiful form is (again) rather an issue *outside* the realm of art. (Some contemporary movements in philosophical aesthetics have turned to everyday- and environmental aesthetics, and analyse aesthetic experiences in relation to, for example, sport, weather and landscape.) As we shall see, the understanding of the aesthetic quality as beautiful form - separated from utility - is also found in discussions on information design.

2.2 The Poietic Activity

The 'poietic', or 'poesis', is also a term used in ancient Greece. It refers to the "making" of an object, as opposed to the term 'aisthesis', which regards the sensuous perception of that which is already constructed.

With a few exceptions - for example in early romanticism and in the writing of the Friedrich Nietzsche - the poietic activity was not in focus during the eighteenth- and nineteenth century's thoughts about our interaction with art.

Art changes with modernism and the beholder of art cannot remain passive, but must participate in the creation of the work. Aesthetic experience corresponding to qualities in the work is replaced by a poietic activity. Jauss (1982) writes that the aesthetic understood as the poietic can *transcend* the classical aesthetics where the focus was on perception of beautiful form. With reference to Valéry's aesthetic theory, Jauss points out that this is seen in modern art's forcing of a change, with shock values, upon the former contemplative viewer. Modern art has abandoned the perfect beautiful form and the observer cannot remain passive. Acknowledging the poietic perspective thus also means *participating in the creation* of the work. Jauss' examples are Dada and ready-mades, in relation to which the beholder has problems in attempting to establish aesthetics perception of beautiful form, but not in participating due to the poietic element. With reference to Valéry, Jauss also writes on how the poietic activity comes to mean an abolishing of the distinction between content and form [12].

There is no *essential* difference between form and content. How could information even be *understood* as information, if it was not creatively designed (with participation of the reader/viewer) on the level of signification? It is pragmatism and contextual competence that establish these differences. Form and content are not separated, because content would not be *understood* as content, as in a message, if it were not *formed* (in this case by both the sender and the reader). Just the same way as a (semiotic) sign isn't a sign if it isn't *constructed* as such.

A change in content is a change in form. Consider two textual examples *Style* (classified as a litotes and a notation) from Raymond Queneau's (2009) famous *Exercises in*:

1) A few of us were travelling together. A young man, who didn't look very intelligent, spoke to the man next to him for a few moments, then he went and sat down.

2) On the S bus, in the rush hour. A chap of about twenty-six, soft hair with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been tugging at it. People getting off. The chap in question gets annoyed with one of the men standing next to him. He accuses him of jostling him every time anyone goes past. A snivelling tone which is meant to be aggressive. When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself onto it [13].

To say that these two texts have the same content is to say that *there exists a pure, i.e. non-styled, not designed*

and possible to change, version of the content. What would this original, not designed piece of text, look like?

Consequently, a meaning of a message is not only restricted to a formless content, but must also be a matter of the form. The form then *cannot* be separated from meaning. The poietic activity (just like the act of communication according to the semiotic school), sustains this perspective. To summarize:

- poietic activity does not set up a distinction between form and content

- poietic activity is not a passive disinterested contemplation, but a participating in the creation of meaning

3. The Aesthetic and the Poietic in Information Design

The aesthetic understood as the experience of beautiful form is frequently acknowledged as an important part of information design. Communication, it is argued, for example by Horn (1999), can be both beautiful and useful [2]. This is a result of a *separation* of content and forms, i.e. a division of "the meaning of the message" and the "decorative and aesthetic" [14]. The founder of the website "Information is beautiful" [15], David McCandless, says that graphic design must have meaning and integrity, be interesting, structured, beautiful, and aesthetically attractive" [16]. The aesthetic quality, i.e. beauty, is related to form in his graph "What Makes Good Information Design?" Form is not entirely distinguished from function in "successful information design", according to McCandless. In this graph, however, is it also possible for something to have function but *no* form [16] - which enforce a separation between form and function.

Sven Ove Hansson writes, in "Aesthetic Functionalism" (2005), of a similar position regarding form and function, as an Independent Thesis, because aesthetic and practical values are independent of each other [17]. This has its roots in Kant's thoughts of the aesthetic judgement as disinterested, which were later applied to art. In the separation of form and the useful content, the aesthetic is restricted to form, and usefulness has nothing to do with beauty. In theory, the aesthetic then belongs to an embellishment that can be taken away, leaving an intact message.

In the context of design, we also find the reduction of the aesthetic form to the function. This Reduction Thesis, Hansson continues, is found in architecture and industrial design, where "objects are created with the intention to satisfy not only aesthetic criteria but also, primarily, criteria of utility and practical function" [17]. In 1941 Herbert Read stressed: "Fitness for function is the modern definition of the eternal quality we call beauty" [17]. According to this position, where form follows function, the aesthetic decoration that can

theoretically *not* be taken away in favour of a "pure" function. If function is there, so is aesthetics - and it is understood as beautiful form.

Turning to the poietic activity in information design, it can, for example and to a *certain degree*, be seen in a comparison between the "aesthetic collaboration of image and text" [18] in Jule Chéret's famous posters (such as "Bal de Moulin Rouge" from 1889) and Dada's break with beautiful forms in the early twentieth century (for example in "Kleine Dada Soirée" from 1922, by van Doesburg and Schwitters). The role of aesthetic in Dada requires something else of a recipient, in order to inform about the upcoming event. Lester (2006) writes that Dada's "critical examination of the social structures that allowed [the horrors of World War I] to occur", is seen in the "use of absurd, asymmetric designs". Their graphics were intended to both confuse and gain attention, but also to *educate* [19]. Dada's then aimed at activate the recipient through form.

In comparison, we can turn to a contemporary example from Sweden, an ad from the Swedish Armed Forces *advertising* for new employees as well as *informing* of certain important qualifications. The text-message is grammatically incorrect. The correct sentence *should* be "Are you good at solving unexpected problems?" ["Är du bra på att lösa oväntade problem?"] but the ad says "Unexpected solving at problem you good are? ["Oväntade på lösa attproblem du bra är?"] The inaccurate grammar attracts our attention. But when the message *is* understood, although it is not present as clear communication in the ad itself, it is a message created by both sender and the reader, fused with the *form*; i.e. the *problem solving* is the poietic element here.

Yet another example is the following (middle) road sign, saying "It hurts" [S. "Det gör ont"], was sited in Stockholm (and a few other Swedish cities) 2004. It was advertising for the play *War* [S. *Krig*], directed by Lars Norén. The signs consisted of quotes from the play. It was also part of an information campaign from "The Living History Forum", a Swedish public authority, on the subject of war crimes against civilians. The road signs had discrete stickers with the word "Info" and a number to the information phone at "The Living History Forum". Posters were also placed nearby the signs.

Is this an artwork or an object of communicating information? It is indeed an artistic duo, FA+ (Ingrid Falk and Gustavo Aguerre), that created the signs. Influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, one might say that our discourse is in need of a separation between, for example, textual information on driving instructions and a poem. These texts might even be identical, but they would still be treated as different texts depending on the discourse. In the circulation of novels and poems (i.e. art) the author is given a certain function, which is lacking in another context [20]. It is our cultural competence, not something essential in the words themselves, that differentiates them. This competence also establishes our behaviour in relation to novels and poems. A certain *function* of the object is highlighted concerning designed information –

something else is underlined in the realm of art (including novels, poems etc.).

Contemporary art (since modernism) has nonetheless come to *play with* - as well as within - different contexts. The information campaign by "The Living History Forum" can illustrate this change in aesthetics - both in art and information design. The aesthetic is not always to be understood as aesthetic perception of beautiful form – in a separation of form and content - but sometimes as the integration of form and content, in a poietic activity involving both the one whose intention it is to inform and the recipient.

3.1. The Relevance of Poietic Activity in Information Design

Does it really matter if we have the perspective of the classic aesthetic or the poietic outlook in regard to information design? In answering this question, we can turn to McLaughlin (2009), who's perspective on human being's interaction with information design can indeed be considered as a poietic activity, when she discusses how our understanding of information design can be seen as an ethical question.

McLaughlin aims at revitalising information, so that it matters for us in our lived experience. In this attempt, she turns to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who underlines human beings fundamentally *creative*, i.e. poietic, existence in the world. Heidegger stresses that technology reveals the world in certain ways, i.e. that technology is not neutral but cultivates a particular outlook on the world - that of pure presence. When we conceive of information as neutral facts, we "by into" this metaphysics of presence. Our lived experience is thereby set aside. Art is an alternative to technology in Heidegger's philosophy, in that it is a form of making that unveil the world of importance to us (this was also Nietzsche's perspective in nineteenth century German philosophy).

Being in the world [Ty. *Dasein*] for Heidegger, is awareness, an openness, that allow the world to "show up" for us in relation to our interests. Accordingly, our understanding is always a matter of perspective. McLaughlin writes: "In the context of information design, data, statistics and images show up as resources to be organized and presented" [21]. But when we reveal something of the world, for example in information design, at the same time we conceal something else: "To view a series of names as a list, as a data set, or as the basis of a statistic, is to conceal other possibilities" [21].

Heidegger argues that instead of encounter with things as objects with properties, we are more true to our existence in the world if we acknowledge that the world shows up to us related to our interests. Information, in this perspective, becomes equipment for "drawing attention to aspects of the world" [21]. This, McLaughlin writes, is in fact what information designers *already do*; they are "constantly involved in searching for appropriate forms to express aspects of the world as they

show up from different perspectives" [21]. Information understood like this, is an activity, not an entity.

Heidegger contrasts the Cartesian space, as an empty container, with space of lived experience. Concerning the former, McLaughlin writes: "It is only when we come to think about these areas of light and shade in the form of plans and elevations, in the context of shading diagrams or developing plans for landscaping, say, that we might begin to think of these regions as areas of space laid out in pre-given dimensional 'space'" [21]. This is a quantitative measurement of space, which cannot capture the way space is turn up in our everyday experience, i.e. as qualitative space in the light of our concerns. It is in the interacting with things of our concerns that the space of our lived experience is created [21].

McLaughlin draw out some implications of these thoughts, by referring to Tufte's *Envisioning Information* (1990). Information is understood as an entity, for example when he writes that colour is "'carrying information'" [21]. He equate information with "data and images that have been refined or effectively arranged, but he also – towards the end of the book – expand the concept 'information' when 'envisioning information' is associated with the "portrayal of 'interesting worlds" [21].

Tufte (1990) writes about Constantine Anderson's *Isometric Map of Midtown Manhattan* (1989), that the "only major concession to paper flatland is the widening of the map's streets to reduce masking of some buildings by others" [22]. Mc Laughlin argues that this is *not* merely a compromise by the designer, but a possibility to locate oneself in the drawing: "From a Heideggerian perspective the widening of the streets show up as an important strategy for organizing the information, allowing the viewer to activate their own understanding of the world referred to in the map, allowing the viewer to bring that world close" [21]. For the purpose of clarity in regard to our lived experience, not for the purpose of revealing exact data, the form is altered and a "flaw" (in regard to perspective) is added to the map – making it truer to our lived experience.

In this Heideggerian perspective, described by McLaughlin, the aesthetic of information design can be considered as poietic; the perspective of aesthetic matters here is not linked to disinterestedness, but a participation in the creation of meaning.

McLaughlin writes: "If information design is to be anything more than the unreflective passing on of data, then consideration of mood [as in frame of mind] should be a central aspect of both practice and critique" [21]. This perspective must be considered by the designers of information: "If information design is conceived primarily as technology then the task of the information designer is to organize and present information in such a way that the information gets passed on. The issue is an *ethical* one, for to merely pass on information is, at best, to circulate those perspectives on the world that allowed the information to show up and, at worst, to pass on information devoid of any meaningful context. The passing on of information is not neutral" [21]. One of the

questions the information designer then should ask is: "How do I create a space and a context where people are able to consider the way in which the information might relate to a larger ethical context?" [21]

In the light of the twofold perspective pictured earlier, and considering McLaughlin's Heideggerian perspective on information design, aesthetic matters in information design are *not* innocent matters: We reveal a world (as in a perspective) - and conceal something else - in regard to how we design information.

Conclusions

In this paper I have addressed two types of perspectives on the aesthetic that are of relevance for a discussion of contemporary information design: The 'aesthetic' understood as aesthetic perception of beautiful form and the 'aesthetic' recognized as the poietic activity, i.e. the production of an object. These perspectives have been discussed in relation to questions of form vs. content and the role of the recipient. It has also been argued that aesthetic matters, in some contemporary information designs, cannot be understood as aesthetic perception of beautiful form, but as poietic, creative, activity. In the light of McLaughlin's Heideggerian perspective of our creative *Dasein* in the world, aesthetics in regard to information design are not to be considered as harmless matters, but can reveal as well as *suppress* – perspectives of the world.

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