

Design as a Device.

Sidney Newton

University of Western Sydney

There is growing interest in design as a process of engagement with the world, which permits creativity and innovation and recognises the increasing complexity of emerging phenomena. The 'creative industries' espouse design as a key practice. So-called, 'wicked problems' embrace the methodologies of design. Other disciplines are enticed by the multi-disciplinarity of design. Design academics then seek to map and describe design from within, defining and revealing to those outside of design what makes design what it is. An alternative perspective is to look at design from the outside. This paper looks not at the particulars of design, but rather at design in the sense of a characteristic device. Specifically, it looks at the phenomenology of design applied as a device to generate (disclose) new possibilities in a humanities research project. A case is developed conceptually that sets design, not as some intrinsically configured, particularly articulate methodology for the future (a so-called, 'third way' within itself), but rather (and merely) as a device that effects disclosure through 'introducing'.

The paper draws on a particular case study. The case study came about because of a collaborative research project between communication, media and design academics. The research itself is fundamentally a humanities project, and aims to develop a re-imagining of a given text. This text describes a specific journey through Central Australia, undertaken in 1922, and represents a significant contribution to Australian historiography. The project involves providing a digital repository of cultural knowledge and materials spun from the book, composed of critical interpretations, supplementary documentation, illustrative photographs and video, and oral histories. Interestingly, the incorporation of an explicit design methodology for the visual mediation of the text to its various communities of interest has had an impact well beyond the specifics of the project itself. The academic participants have had to negotiate a common vocabulary in order for them to mediate the differences between communication and design as professional practices, and between the theory-guiding research principles of the project and its active realisation. This reveals an interesting perspective on design. The design methodology, based on visual mapping techniques, has been extended as a more formalised process of user engagement and knowledge representation within itself. This offers an interesting potential for visual communication design.

This paper will describe the collaborative research project as a case study in how design and other disciplines intersect. Critically, it will argue that what design brings to such a situation may have less to do with design as a particular methodology, and more to do with design as a new device for understanding and engaging with the material content of the project. The paper will argue that significant qualities otherwise (and typically) attributed to 'the nature of design', can in fact be accounted for through the phenomenological concept of 'introducing'. This alternative account has clear implications for the future ground of design, where design is either not able or cannot find ways to continue to function as this 'new' device.

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Introduction

There can be little doubt that interest in design as a particular form of engagement in the world is already significant, and growing. Such interest is hardly surprising when design is often characterized in terms of its capacity for creativity and innovation, dealing with messy and ill-formed problems, accommodating multi-disciplinarity, providing an authentic agent of change, and so on. Design is perceived and presented intentionally in these terms, as a potent riposte to the emergent character of phenomena more generally in our rapidly changing world. The design research agenda (designs 'future ground') largely constructs itself around the study of the factors most directly implicated in design thus configured.

To set a research agenda in this way is both constructive and destructive. It is constructive in the sense that it aims to build a body of robust, empirical knowledge: providing an important structuring, and fleshing, and articulation of design. But it is also destructive in the 'defuturing' sense of Tony Fry (1999), in that it configures design instrumentally, performatively, as some particular 'thing', capable of such rendition. To configure design in this way is not only to prefigure what design might be, but also what design might then become. This paper looks to open design to different possibilities, and to better provide for other conceptions of design. It seeks a different way of characterizing design: a different form of disclosure. It is not the intention of this paper to deny the potency of how design is currently (being) configured, although it does imply an impotency. Rather, it is to encourage and facilitate new conceptions.

How might we figure design otherwise? Fry (2003) describes a 'moment' for design (a 'moment' which he claims is now underway). A course is mapped (anthropologically) from the emergence of design in prehistory (design as an innate aspect of being human, and prior to its naming as design), through multiple and various configurations (in language and in practice), to its current manifestation (as typically characterized above). The significance of the current manifestation over previous configurations is in the relationship it maintains with technology. The present configuration of design, it is argued, is being appropriated by/through technology. Technology, not human nature, is now becoming the directive force in figuring design. This signals a profound moment in human agency. In so far as technology does indeed appropriate the configuration of design, it also appropriates a fundamental aspect of human agency (Heidegger, 1977).

In any event, configuration is central. If the design research agenda continues to structure, and flesh, and articulate design as some 'thing' (if it continues to configure), then it will inevitably (given the status of technology) continue to bind design in/through technology: human agency will continue to seep away. For the design research agenda to escape (or at least to challenge) this prefiguring, there must be a shift of focus away from such configuration, away

from design as any 'thing' at all. Design must be studied as it attends in "... the very ontic nature of things." (Fry, 2003)

Design as no 'thing' at all? Design research that does not configure? Design without definition or discourse? Of course such questions/suggestions border on the ridiculous, because they are already set within themselves: within the agency of an already constructed categorisation of what might constitute 'things', research, configuration, definition, discourse. It is an intensely difficult task to move our collective understanding beyond such categories, and impossible to step outside of them in the current moment. At best, we might study such questions as phenomenon: phenomenologically (van Manen, 2002). The phenomenological view (unavoidably) is also located in the current moment, but it does at least turn very directly towards the constructed nature of that moment, rather than away from it. A phenomenological consideration provides a comprehension of things in their pre-constructed state. This paper seeks to articulate one phenomenological view of design, using the notion of design as a device.

The Phenomenology of a Device

The phenomenology of design is almost invariably considered, as it might well be, literally. That is to say, design is considered as and of itself. This is typically manifested in terms of either some generalized ontic state within itself (as with Fry, 2003), or more specifically as some condition of how we come to understand the world: the so-called 'third way' (Dilnot, 1998). Metaphor offers another, potentially richer, arguably more authentic, form of articulation than the literal (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This paper proposes to consider the phenomenology of design metaphorically. That is to say, it will seek to consider the phenomenology of design through (as) the phenomenology of some other phenomenon. Specifically, it considers the phenomenology of design in terms of the phenomenology of a device. The phenomenology of a device is intended to disclose, metaphorically speaking, a phenomenology of design.

The choice of metaphor, design as a device, is motivated by the conception of a device developed in the design context by Coyne *et al* (2000, 2002). That conception looks in detail at disclosure: the propensity of a design device to reveal and conceal. In particular, it examines how the introduction of a design device (in that case a computer-based design device) is implicated in disclosure. The study considers the phenomenology of 'introducing' as key. That phenomenology is articulated by Coyne *et al* (2002), in the following terms:

- (i) new practices – the introduction of any new device has the potential to introduce new practices. Each new device attends a particular operational process, and prevailing practices have to be modified to some extent to accommodate those new operational imperatives.
- (ii) new terms and definitions – new practices and newly introduced components bring with them a particular language of description. Each new device imposes a new lexicon, places a different emphasis on how existing terms are considered, and serves to revitalize the discourse.

- (iii) generative metaphors – according to metaphor theory, the metaphorical relationship is not only descriptive but also generative. When a new device is introduced, it sets up new relationships that fracture the coherence of what previously obtained, impelling a new search for more robust theories that account for such relationships.
- (iv) a catalyst – the introduction of a device can act in a directive sense, to prompt a series of subsequent changes and developments. The introduction of one device can lead to the development of a string of devices or new device combinations.
- (v) an inhibitor – where the introduction of a device can act in a directive sense, it must also be acting to deny other directions of development. As certain possibilities are brought to the fore, inevitably other aspects are sent to the background.
- (vi) narrative - structure and restructure – the devices themselves can feature in how practices and future practices are conceived and related. The introduction of a device opens new trajectories for development and affords new conceptions (new narratives) of self.
- (vii) sign - structure and restructure – devices stand as a reference and signification of the practice. The tripartite system of signification itself (sign, signifier and signified) is disturbed and animated by the introduction of new devices that introduce new signs and new significations.

Thus the phenomenology of a device is articulated in terms of the phenomenology of introducing. Whilst Richard Coyne et al employ a particular device (a prototypical ‘electronic drawing board’) as the case study around which the phenomenology of introducing is examined, it is apparent that the argument extends to all design devices, indeed to all devices *per se*. The same phenomenology of introducing should then attend any such device.

Design as a Device (through introducing)

Design in its current manifestation, as some (any) particular mode, method, process, practice or disposition (a configuration), is readily conceived of as a device. A device is any such contrivance or ‘thing’ having some purpose (creativity, innovation, change, etc.). Bringing design and device together in such a metaphorical relationship serves to disclose new aspects of both design and device (for an example of such a process, see Newton, 2004). But that is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, in casting design as a device the intention is to attend the phenomenology of introducing, to a phenomenology of design. In other words, what Richard Coyne *et al* articulate as a phenomenology of introducing, and employ in a case study of a particular design device, this paper seeks to employ in a case study of design *per se*.

At this stage the current case study (unlike that of Richard Coyne *et al*) is neither formalized nor robust. It is more correctly the reflective study of a case in point, and it is related here to demonstrate the possibility for such studies (when made more formal) to represent a viable direction for future design research. A research direction that, in the nature of phenomenological perspectives, appeals to an understanding of design without configuration,

prior to its labeling, description and definition: prior to design becoming any 'thing'. Such an agenda would usefully subscribe to the broader (de)futureing manifesto articulated by Tony Fry.

The case in point for this paper is an otherwise conventional humanities research project, into which design (a visual communication designer) has been introduced. The primary aim of that research project is to develop a re-imagining of a particular text: *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*, by TGH Strehlow (1969). This text describes a specific journey through Central Australia, undertaken in 1922, and provides a significant contribution to Australian historiography. The project then involves a textual analysis, supported by the development of a digital repository of the cultural resources that relate to the text, and the design of an effective interface to that material. The digital repository comprises of the text itself, critical interpretations of the text, supplementary documentation relating to the text, cultural artefacts (or representations of such), illustrative photographs and video of locations and characters within the story, links to other digital repositories, and a collection of related oral history recordings. The role of the visual communication designer is to contribute to all aspects of the project, but particularly to negotiate how the visual re-imagining of the text, and the interaction with the digital repository are to be realised.

What did the introduction of design to this research project reveal about design? What transpired could certainly be accounted for in terms of creativity, innovation, wicked problems, multi-disciplinarity, an agent of change, and so on. But such an account would miss the full interplay between the traditions of design and humanities research. It would also configure design in a particular way, when our intention is to rather let design 'be', phenomenologically. Instead of addressing the constituency of design directly, we take the same set of parameters as provided by Richard Coyne *et al* to describe the phenomenology of introducing design, in this case:

- (i) new practices – the introduction of design into a humanities research project has affected both design and humanities practices. For the design practitioner it forced a more disciplined and explicit account of the design process. For example, the framing of the visual representation of the narrative as a whole was initially expected to emerge through a series of exchanges between the designer and the community of people with an interest in the narrative. Instead, the existing research agenda cast the visual representation along a particular trajectory: as three distinct, though intertwined layers of Aboriginal, Pastoral and Lutheran narratives. Working with humanities researchers disclosed new opportunities for visual communication that draw directly from established visual ethnographic processes.
- (ii) new terms and definitions – the most immediate and apparent disclosure provided in this project was a difference in use of terms such as visualisation, representation, interface, etc. Much of the early exchanges between the designer and the humanities researchers involved the negotiation of a common vocabulary. In particular, one proposal for the design of an interface to the digital repository was to adopt an interface

as totem metaphor (Newton, 2003). For the designer this relationship offered a rich source of representations, emerging from the totemic systems employed by Aboriginals. In Aboriginal culture, totemic artefacts act to relate places with ceremonies with kinship with language. The introduction of those totemic dimensions provide for a novel conception of the media interface. At the same time, the notion of an interface immediately played back into the humanities conception of the totem: the totem as an interface to culture.

- (iii) generative metaphors – the notion of visual ethnography that is so central to the humanities engagement with this project provides a powerful metaphor for visual communication design. Visualisation can be seen more directly as both a reading and a writing of the situation being represented. Thus, the visualisation as ethnography metaphor puts particular emphasis on issues of authorship, subjectivity and ethics that are otherwise typically back-grounded in design.
- (iv) a catalyst – the introduction of visual communication design into an otherwise communication media project, has presented new possibilities for a convergent discipline around communication. The collaborative project, for example, signals one point of convergence within a School of Communication, Design and Media. The same researchers are also now involved in a project that seeks to visually analyse a word list dating from the early 20th Century, of an Aboriginal spoken language of Central Australia, presented with English and German glosses.
- (v) an inhibitor – this interaction between design and communication has tended to downplay possible interactions between visual communication design and industrial design within the same institution. It also highlights a convergence between visual representation and media production at the expense of other possible convergences in the same School: between visual design and audience analysis, image and affect, new media and information design, etc.
- (vi) narrative - structure and restructure – the methods and material of a design situation, structure the design conversation (Schön, 1983). The analysis of the text in this project puts an emphasis on information architecture and prompts the development of dynamic diagrams (Kahn and Lenk, 2001) as the basis for negotiating an appropriate visual representation. The use of such diagrams is novel to the designer, in this context, and impact directly on the structure of the conversation between designer and the design situation, and between designer and humanities researchers.
- (vii) sign - structure and restructure – what this project is developing is a hybrid conception of research. It draws on the traditions of visual ethnography, visual analysis and visual representation to create a new demonstration of what ‘research’ might signify in the broader community.

Concluding Remarks

What constitutes design? We might seek to answer such a question in terms of the particular factors through/with which design is configured. Any such configuration today will draw heavily, and increasingly, from the technological context of design. Technology is usurping the directive force of design, away

from its human agency. Moreover, technology increasingly displaces the idea that there is any other way (Fry, 2003). We might reasonably suggest that it is technology that constitutes design, both in content and in agency. Design research is too bound-up in/by the language and concepts of technology for any configuration of design to be anything other.

How might design be other? For other conceptions and potentials to surface, our focus must switch away from design as any 'thing' at all, to design as some innate and tacit state of human agency. Like consciousness and cognition, such states can never be read/studied directly (Polanyi, 1966). Rather, we must attend to the various traces and effects such activity has on what can be studied: we must study the phenomenology of design.

A phenomenology of design? Rather than study the phenomenology of design in a literal sense, this paper proposes a metaphorical treatment: a study of design as a device. It suggests that the phenomenology of a device provides one effective point of purchase on design more generally. Drawing on the work of Coyne *et al* (2002), it seeks to illustrate this possibility, in broad compass, through a consideration of the phenomenology of introducing. Design is considered as a device being introduced into a humanities research project. Of course a myriad of alternative 'points of purchase' is possible, each in turn speaking of a distinct 'other' design. That is the point of the exercise. The pursuit of difference and negation, in an equivalent sense to the pursuit of refutation in science (Popper, 1968), is paramount.

What this, or any other, phenomenology of design says about design is best judged individually in terms of the propensity it offers for individual design action. Such judgement will change across the choice of phenomenology and between individual value systems. However, the utility of the approach as a whole is best judged in terms of its capacity to let design 'be', as a non-configured, non-constituted, innate practice of human agency.

A formal account of design may be possible: it might even be unavoidable. That is not the debate. The point of contention is how any such formal account will sustain the unanticipated and dynamic nature of design: the nature that gives design its currency as a creative, innovative, agent of change, etc. The moment design is crystalised (given coherent configuration), signals the moment its effectiveness as 'design' is surely doomed.

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