A postmodernist approach to product semantics
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According to Swann industrial design as profession and as research can be roughly characterized by three discourses starting with an intuitive, operational and applied approach that grew more commercial in the beginning of the 20th century, to the development of rational methods with an engineering background and a positivist canon in the 1960ies and 70ies.
The third discourse: "Postmodernist philosophy - challenged this dogma and urged a more tolerant and pluralistic approach to what might be good for the end-users. The social sciences brought forth a number of alternative ways to investigate and validate research and information, alternatives that have more affinity with design processes than the science/engineering model." [1]

Social sciences as well as semantics offer several alternative ways of understanding and practicing design. This contribution wants to connect product semantics and postmodernism. Some of Foucault's thoughts shall be used to elucidate this connection.

For Foucault, "discourse" constructs the topic, defines the objects of our knowledge and directs the understanding of meaning while simultaneously developing a context of meaning. The discourse also influences how ideas are put into practice. For example, the "discourse" on madness would include writings and drawings by people who are considered mad, writings by doctors and administrative people who work with madness and insanity, novels with mad characters, autobiographies of relatives, as well as writing about madness from other disciplines.

This contribution argues that each of the three discourses described by Swann consists of a specific set of ideas and beliefs, here called ***representation.*** The representation influences both the product semantics e.g. how a designer interprets the meaning of a product and its qualities (physical, social and symbolic) and the practice i.e. how these qualities are integrated in a solution for a potential user.

Product qualities are categorized here in "physical", "social" and "symbolic". Physical qualities relate to function, form, size, motion, and material. Social qualities relate to forms of interactions, rites, conventions, and intersubjective relationships. Symbolic qualities relate to meanings, concepts, beliefs, symbols and signs ((Parsons, T., The social system, 1951).

In the following, I will take up two of the discourses described by Swann, the engineered industrial design (EID) and the contextualized industrial design (CID) discourse, present their representations and consequences and show their relation to product semantics.

EID: The product is a representation of planning.
The designer sees the product as consisting of primary (physical) and secondary (social and symbolic) qualities. The latter adhere to the first (e.g. as "meta-product") and are inherent (prescribed by the designer) to the solution.
The ***meaning of the product*** lies in its technical functionality **plus** its usability, emotional, social or symbolic value.
The ***design solution*** attempts to balance physical, social and symbolic qualities with help of different, often semi-empirical methods.

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[1] Action research and the Practice of Design, Design Issue, Vol.18, No.2.Winter 2002, p.50

CID: The product is a representation of discourse
The designer interprets the different forms of interaction with a product (physically, socially and symbolically) as a form of dialogue.
The meaning of the object lies in its ability to respond to fundamental socio-cultural codes that govern perceptions and values.
**The design solution** supports "good" cultural codes which facilitate communication and interactions between groups.

Employing Foucault's thoughts for industrial/ product design it is important to recognize the product not apart but as a part of the socio-cultural lifeworld. At the same time it is crucial to accept the inexplicability, contingency and polyvalence of product meanings.
I believe that the reasoning for this antagonistic claim is implicit in semantics.
As a subject fails for Sartre to synthesize with recognition and existence, the signified fails for Derrida to synthesize with the signifier and the signification, and each possible coherence is transferred in an undetermined future.
Plainly: The designer gives the product meaning which is, to a certain degree, corresponding with the product but never identical with it.
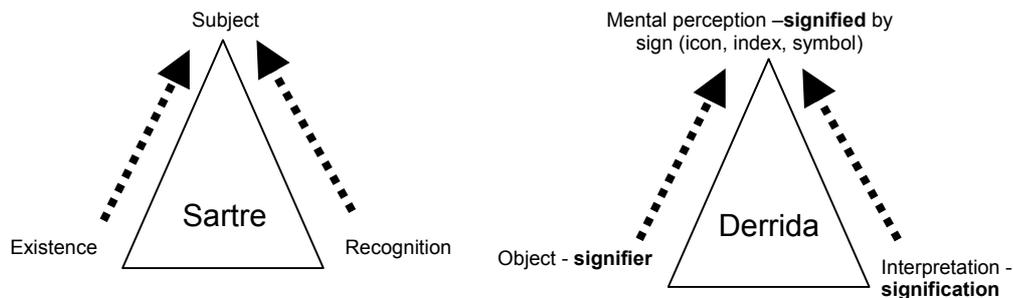
Semantics can be described as the analysis and description of **meaning**, (especially meaning in language) and product semantics as the meaning of products, considering the relationships between a designer and/or user and a product within the physical, social and symbolic context of its use.
The problem, according to Postmodernism, is that meaning is created through the triple impact of signifier, sign and signification which correspond with each other but are not coherent. For example the sign "Venus" signifies a mental perception of the planet Venus (object-signifier) and probably "morning star" or "goddess of beauty" (interpretation- signification), but it isn't the Venus itself. "Bread", "brød", "pane" etc. are different signs for the same signifier and similar significations. "Unicorn" is one sign for different signifiers and different significations, etc.
 So, the real subject of semantics is " ….not what has been said but what could have been said about an object." Foucault, Schriften zur Literatur, Frankfurt 1988, p.95-98

(Product) Semantics have to consider the uncertainty and polyvalence of meanings arising from the incoherence of signifier, signified and signification, which is implicit in language, texts and discourses.
The use of this consideration for product design is, as I see it, at least twofold.
First, it helps to understand that meaning is not contained in objects, which transmit it but is constructed and dynamically changing according to the interplay of different discourses (Das Narrenschiff).
Second, this insight may lead to try out how alternative discourses (e.g. a change of cultural

perspectives, adopting children's' perspectives etc.) can contribute to a better understanding and interpretation of meaning.

I do not see the two representations as general instructions for product design but rather understand them as different perspectives, where the CID epistemology implies the possibility to "Think outside the box".

A conscious alienation from an assumed coherent relationship between signifier, signified and signification is, however, first and foremost a mental exercise:

"In reality these dialectics do not liberate "the other" but guarantee its permanent invasion … you believe to experience the break out of subversion but concealed works the contradiction that works for the sake of identity." (Deleuze, G.. Michel Foucault, Der Faden ist gerissen, Berlin 1979, p.43)

Nevertheless, interpretations and views which are outside the prevailing categories and reality perceptions that characterize the design discourses today can help to cope with the various challenges that design research and practice are confronted with. (see also Ask, T., God norsk design, 2004, p.26)

"There are more ideas on earth than intellectuals imagine. And these ideas are more active, stronger, more resistant, more passionate than "politicians" think. We have to be there at the birth of ideas, the bursting outward of their force: not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggles carried on around ideas, for or against them. Ideas do not rule the world. But it is because the world has ideas... that it is not passively ruled by those who are its leaders or those who would like to teach it, once and for all, what it must think."
In: Eribon, D., Michel Foucault, "Les Reportages d'Idées," Corriere Della Sera, Milan, Nov. 12, 1978.

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