Aesthetics as Means for Supporting Development in Use - Beyond the Designed Purposefullnes
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I am sure aesthetics should be brought to the interface. Not as Aristotelian rules, but as authentic, emancipatory praxis where unexpected things can happen. The basic aesthetic problem in design of computer artefacts is that everything in an interface is planned, or should be. Unexpected stuff on your screen is the result of bad design and it will cause immediate frustration. While the aesthetics of the modern world is constituted by a contingent stream of experience—truck horns, TV-antennas, paint peeling of a wall—the world of computers only supplies us with over planned images. What is needed in this functional, concrete dessert is more TV-antennas.

Human-computer interaction (HCI) has been concerned with the situation of use. Minimising intrusiveness of the interface has been the goal; users should be able to do their work instead of dealing with the computer. The recurring problem, though, has been that tasks, users, and applications have been understood as more or less stable entities.

Approaches to HCI based on activity theory have emphasised the fundamentally dynamic nature of the use situation. However, most of these approaches seem to be trapped in the notion of purposeful action. Reducing design processes to a search for a solution to a recognised problem and reducing impact of the acknowledged dynamics of the use situation. Historically, it has been important to make the new artefact fit the concerned practice, and it has been important to introduce the involvement of users as part of an emancipatory program for expansive design. However, emancipation seems to be subsumed under the purposeful adaptation of changing technologies to the evolving working culture.

In the same manner, attempts to take the users enjoyable experience into account mostly seem to reduce the aesthetics of the use situation to purposeful means for achieving something else, e.g. efficient interaction.

The problem is the paradoxical one of meeting needs that don’t yet exist, supporting the development of practise that we cannot yet imagine. The claim made in this paper is that part of the solution can be found in modern aesthetics. For the course of the argument we distinguish between classical aesthetics, aiming at catharsis, pleasure and balance; and the modern aesthetics aiming for disturbance, excitement and dynamics.
In the analysis of the relation between perception and action, Wartofsky argues that perception is a mode of outward action. Action and perception, human beings relation to their surroundings, is mediated by three classes of artefacts, of which tertiary artefacts reside in an off line loop, detached from direct productive practice. Tertiary artefacts affect production through their reformation of our perception. Tertiary artefacts define a room without purpose, aesthetics. The key to an (operational) understanding of the radical dynamics in the interface (support for development in use), and the innovative (expansive) potentials in design is aesthetics. In the interface the concept of tertiary artefacts extends the notion of socially mediated development in use beyond the planned and the purposeful.

I would like to explore tertiary artefacts as a key concept in a dialectical and materialistic understanding of modern aesthetics, and how such an understanding can bring HCI beyond its over emphasis on purposefulness.