Privilege and Oppression: Towards a Feminist Speculative Design

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Abstract

Though critical and speculative design have been increasingly relevant in discussing the social and cultural role of design, there has been a distinct lack of both theory and praxis aimed at questioning gender oppression. Departing from an intersectional feminist analysis of the influences and origins of speculative and critical design, this essay questions the underlying privilege that has been hindering the discussion on gender within the discipline and its role in propagating oppression; it then goes on to propose the concept of a "feminist speculative design" as an approach aimed at questioning the complex relationships between gender, technology and social and cultural oppression.

Keywords

During the past few decades there has been a fundamental shift in the way we understand design and its cultural relevance. From Ipads to smartphones, from automatic hoovers to intelligent fridges, we now have increasingly complex objects governing essential parts of our lives. In this world, where objects mediate most of our experiences, design has been gaining increasing significance - highlighting the necessity for research on the roles that designed objects have within society.

This increased interest in the sociological and cultural aspects of design has been a fundamental catalyst for the development of design research and its many related fields - from research through, for or about design (Frankel and Racine 2010) to constructive design research (Koskinen *et al.* 2011). Prominent among these ever-evolving fields are speculative and critical design, two closely related approaches to design practice (Auger 2013) that, usually departing from prosaic observations of our everyday interactions with technology, aim to provoke insightful analyses of the profound impact that designed objects have on our lives (Dunne 1999; Dunne and Raby 2001). This essay focuses specifically on these two approaches, questioning their shortcomings from an intersectional feminist perspective; it challenges speculative and critical design's aspirations to sociological critique within the larger framework of diverse oppressions in capitalist, heteronormative, sexist, racist and classist societies. Though a deeper understanding of how the politics of oppression influence human relationships with technology is essential to the development of a field that aims to be critical, projects mentioning these oppressions are astoundingly rare. This flaw may be associated with the fact that speculative and critical design have been, up until now, practiced and theorised largely within the privileged walls of costly universities in developed countries (Prado de O. Martins and Vieira de Oliveira 2014).

The primary focus of this essay is how gender is portrayed and approached in speculative and critical design practices - an analysis that cannot be disengaged from the portrayals of other forms of oppression. Thus, the previously mentioned intersectional feminist perspective advocated here stems from two key beliefs: that taking up an apolitical position means complying with and contributing to the *status quo,* and that oppressions (of gender, race or

class, among others) cannot be understood separately. Hence the importance of not only a feminist perspective, but a feminist perspective firmly grounded in the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989): as a strategy for understanding how "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice." (Collins 2000 p.18). The essay thus proposes the idea of a "feminist speculative design" as a strategic approach to addressing issues of systemic gender violence and discrimination within speculative and critical design practices.

On semantics and SCD

Design's peculiar, fluid position as a discipline capable of benefiting from both humanistic and scientific knowledge has long been one of its most distinctive traits. This innate ability for combining distinct fields of knowledge has recently led to increased interest in developing theoretical discourse that supports design as a method of research in its own right. As part of this, speculative and critical design - the two approaches to design research and practice this text takes interest on - design have been gaining momentum as strategies to think critically about the essential role of objects within society. Anthony Dunne, who first coined the term 'critical design' defines it as an approach to design practice that "uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life" (Dunne and Raby 2008, p.265). By challenging pre-established ideas, critical design works in the unstable, murky territory that is the intersection of politics and culture; Dunne and Raby (2008, p.265) go on to state that "[s]ome relatives are: activism, cautionary tales, conceptual design, contestable futures, design fictions, interrogative design, radical design, satire, social fiction, speculative design." Auger (2013, p.11) discusses the semantics of some of these relatives, highlighting that "[t]here is much overlap between these practices, the differences are subtle and based primarily on geographical or contextual usage". He goes on to argue that most of these terms are detrimental, acting to "dislocate the object from everyday life, exposing their fictional or academic status" (*ibid*, p.12). As such, he writes that "the choice of 'speculative' is preferable as it suggests a direct correlation between 'here and now' and existence of the design concept" (ibid). Though Auger's argument is sound, this essay uses the term 'speculative and critical design' for the sake of drawing a clear parallel between critical theory and speculative design as a starting point for discussing the problematic stance of a discipline that aims to be critical and yet ignores essential facets of our relationship with designed objects. For the sake of practicality and style the term will be referred to as 'SCD'.

Critical theory and critical design

Critical theory, a western school of thought first originated in the early 20th century, has had a profound impact in contemporary knowledge. In its initial proposition, critical theory was aimed at "emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion, thereby freeing them from that coercion and putting them in a position to determine where their true interests lie" (Geuss 1981, p.55-56); it asserts that "the world should be understood, not by accepting unthinkingly the teachings of authorities such as the Church, but through individual reasoning." (Sengers *et al.*) Critical theory argues for critique as both part of the fabric of the world and an agent of change capable of altering the weave of this very fabric; as such, its influence in a wide range of fields in contemporary thought - from queer theory (Turner 2000) to critical architecture (Fraser 2005) - comes as no surprise. SCD is no exception to critical theory's wide-ranging impact: Dunne's original formulation seems to be profoundly influenced by the work developed at the Frankfurt School (the birthplace of critical theory), mentioned directly and indirectly (by referencing its main theorists) in several instances throughout Hertzian Tales (Dunne [1999] 2008, p. 36; 83; 94; 96; 98). Dunne argues for designed objects as means of

inciting a critical perception - sociological, psychological, cultural or otherwise - of the man-made world. The parallel to critical theory is quite clear: objects are designed as embodied critical discourse - and their very existence has the potential to change the world they are part of. Curiously, Dunne and Raby (2010) have tried to distance themselves from the Frankfurt School and from critical theory; Bardzell and Bardzell (2013, p.02), however, point out:

"[T]heir formulation of critical design has unmistakable affinities with [critical theory] Their language "illusion of choice," "passivity," "reinforces the status quo," "easy pleasure and conformist values," and "fuelled by the capitalist system" bear the unmistakable stamp of the Frankfurt view of ideology."

The relationship between critical theory and SCD is further explored by Bardzell *et al.* (2012) and Bowen (2010). By borrowing critical theory's approach to social and cultural change, however, SCD risks to incur in the very same mistakes for which critical theory has already been criticised: "promoting elitist views of a 'better world' that society should aspire towards" (Bowen 2010, p.04). This tendency to elitism, well documented in the writings of critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno[1], seems to affect Dunne's ([1999] 2008, p.94, my emphasis) work as well:

"[...] this approach falls foul of a central contradiction of radical work, as Adorno demonstrated in his contrasting of modern classical music and popular jazz. *Because a mainstream film has to be immediately graspable by a broad audience, the fact of achieving this diminishes its critical potential.*"

Granted, any author undertaking the task of offering a critical view of the world incurs in the risk of sounding and acting in a patronizing, classist manner. Ignoring issues of race, class or gender when looking from a place of privilege is surprisingly easy, for that is the case with privilege: it is privilege precisely because "the very processes that confer privilege to one group and not another group are often invisible to those on whom that privilege is conferred" (Kimmel 2003, p.04). Geuss (1981, p. 82) writes that most criticism on the Frankfurt School was aimed at the fact that it proposed a critical perspective on society "not because of the suffering it imposes on some oppressed group but because it fails to satisfy the neurasthenic sensibilities of a cultural elite". Pointedly, Bowen (2010, p.04) asks of both SCD and critical theory "a 'better world' according to who?" (*sic*).

Dunne's elitist views seem to be shared by colleagues in the field, as demonstrated in a comment thread on MoMA's website for the "Design and Violence" exhibition[2]. The blog post, written by John Thackara, starts with a discussion on Burton Nitta's project "Republic of Salivation."[3] The discussion in the comment section rapidly evolved to a criticism of SCD's self-centered, privileged understanding of the world - a criticism promptly responded by designer James Auger with the question "What is this obsession with class systems? The UK may have its financial problems but most of us stopped obsessing about these divides in the distant past."[4]

This patronising, classist and self-centered attitude within SCD may be explained by its history as a discipline theorised within the safe confines of developed, european countries and practiced largely by a privileged and mostly white, male, middle class crowd. Exceptions to

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[1]"[...] under the conditions of later capitalism and the impotence of the workers before the authoritarian state's apparatus of oppression, truth has sought refuge among small groups of admirable men." (Horkheimer [1937] 1972, pp. 237-238)

[1]"The consumers are the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class. Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them." (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p.133)

[1]"the general intellectual level of the great masses is rapidly declining." (Horkheimer [1937] 1972, p.238)

[2]http://designandviolence.moma.org/republic-of-salivation-michael-burton-and-michiko-nitta/ (accessed March 10th 2014)

[3]http://www.burtonnitta.co.uk/repubicofsalivation.html (accessed March 10th 2014)

[4]http://designandviolence.moma.org/republic-of-salivation-michael-burton-and-michiko-nitta/ (accessed March 10th 2014)

SCD's narrow understanding of privilege politics are rather rare, though notable. Superflux, a studio founded by designer Anab Jain is one such exception, undertaking a string of admirable collaborative projects with small communities in Jain's native India[5]. The bottom-up empowerment of communities seems to be one of the trademarks of Superflux's projects, in stark contrast to the paternalist stance so common in SCD. Royal College of Art alum Sputniko is one of the few practitioners in SCD who overtly tackles issues of gender, though sometimes still under a definitely questionable perspective, as evidenced by her "Menstruation Machine" project[6]. Sputniko describes the project's video as featuring

"a Japanese transvestite boy Takashi, who one day chooses to wear 'Menstruation' in an attempt to biologically dress up as a female, being unsatisfied by just aesthetically appearing female."

Though the project might have promoted the discussion of a few issues related to gender, its very description shows the lack of a basic understanding of gender and queer theory. Mistakes such as the use of a derogatory term - transvestite - to refer to the character Takashi[78]; the uncritical use of the concept of "biologically dressing up" as a gender - an affirmation that unwittingly hints to the heated discussions on biological essentialism versus anti-essentialism that have since decades divided theorists and activists in the feminist movement (Stone 2004); or the very portrayal of a gender-nonconforming person (by a cissexual woman, nonetheless) for shock value highlight the project's problematic approach to gender identity.

Though many discussions on the future of SCD have appeared recently, many of them seem to ignore these problems entirely (Antonelli 2011, Stevenson-Keating 2011); resistance to SCD's privileged ways is, however, bubbling: in February 2014 the aforementioned discussion on MoMA's Design and Violence website spawned several response articles (Prado de O. Martins and Vieira de Oliveira 2014; Revell 2014; Kiem 2014). Though SCD's future seems to be mostly that of white, european, cissexual, heterosexual people, this reality might be rapidly changing - a change of attitude that might just help build a more equal future.

Intersectional feminism and speculative design

This section of the essay introduces a central concept to its proposed discussion: intersectional feminism. The term "intersectionality" is generally considered to have been first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) though the concept was not new - having already been advanced by others (McCall 2005). Intersectionality refers to the manner in which several different types of oppression can intersect and interact, defining one's social position. A european transgender woman is, for instance, the subject of different types of oppression in comparison to a latin american disabled woman. The objective of taking these distinct forms of oppression into account is not to compare them; comparing the sufferings that individuals derive from the oppressions to which they are subjected is as useless as it is sordid, for the manner in which we experience oppression can be as subjective as it can be factual. Rather, taking the intersectional character of oppression into account is necessary in order to develop a better understanding of the way one navigates the world through the way in which these oppressions interact with each other.

Though much has been written about intersectionality, it does not, as of 2014, constitute a discipline in a by itself; rather, it is considered a theoretical stance, an approach to feminist activism: most researchers "use the term 'intersectional approach' to refer to the research application of these concepts" (Berger and Guidroz 2009, p.01). Its importance to the development of a solid and inclusive academic discourse in the analysis of inequality is

[5] http://superflux.in/work/lilorann (accessed March 11th 2014)
[6] http://sputniko.com/2011/08/menstruation-machine-takashis-take-2010/ (accessed March 11th 2014)
[7] https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender [accessed February 26th 2014]
[8] http://www.nlgja.org/files/NLGJAStylebook0712.pdf [accessed February 26th 2014]

unquestionable; McCall (2005) claims that "[o]ne could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far."

As mentioned in the previous section, SCD has long suffered from a blindly patronising and privileged perspective on technology. This is not exclusive to SCD either: design, as a product of a patriarchal, classist and racist society, is a discipline where the contribution of women has seldom been recognized throughout its history. Buckley (1999, p.109) writes:

"[...] the few women who make it into the literature of design are accounted for within the framework of patriarchy: they are either defined by their gender as designers or users of feminine products, or they are subsumed under the name of their husband, lover, father or brother."

This historical silencing of women in design does not limit itself to its women practitioners either: Buckley (*ibid.*) goes on to state that "women's needs as consumers/users often remain unaddressed". In the past few years this stance seems, fortunately, to be changing, with design taking a keen interest in the needs of minorities. Efforts in this direction have been made by Buchmüller (2013) in design research, Bardzell in HCI (Bardzell and Bardzell 2001; Bardzell 2010) and Rothschild in design and architecture history (1999), for instance. The creation of the International Gender Design Network by Uta Brandes and Simone Douglas[9]; the development of new fields such as inclusive design (Imrie and Hall 2001; Clarkson *et al.* 2003), of projects like Tom Bieling's Mobile Lorm Glove at the Design Research Lab[10] or Marcelo and Andréa Júdice's work at Vila Rosário (Koskinen *et al.* pp.70-73) are all testimonies to a newfound understanding of design's role in propagating and counteracting oppression. SCD, however, remains a field where such initiatives still seem to remain few and far between.

Understanding privilege is essential in order to build a theoretical discourse capable of truly overcoming injustice. The problem lies in how difficult it is for the privileged to understand their own privilege, for privilege exists precisely because it is invisible to those who benefit from it. A white, heterosexual man will never know the hardships through which others have to go through. He will never be afraid of being raped while walking home alone at night; he will never be afraid of not being hired for a job because of his skin color, he will never be afraid to introduce a same-sex partner to his family. These privileges work silently for the benefit of those who fit into the narrow standards of an excludent society, and to the disadvantage of those who do not. When SCD ignores these issues it complies with oppression and works for a future of inequality.

The recent wave of unnecessarily gendered products - such as the Bic for Her Pen[11], the Powerful Yogurt[12] or the new, gender-segregated Kinder Surprise[13] - doesn't help design culture either. The misguided marketing strategies behind these products are fueled by packaging and product designers eager to associate genders to colors, shapes and stereotypes. Dunne and Raby (2001, p.58) claim that "[...] all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view, or way of seeing and understanding reality". If all design is ideological, what kind of ideology are we, as designers, propagating to the world when we participate in the development of such products? By designing a world for exclusion and discrimination "[t]he systems and artefacts produced by technoscience" are able to provide "the material foundations for gender inequality" (Kirkup 2000, p.XIII).

As much as design can be a tool for oppression, it can also be an effective agent for social change. SCD, as previously mentioned, tries to do this by using artefacts in order to incite

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[9]http://igdn.blogspot.com/ [accessed March 10th 2014]
[10]http://www.design-research-lab.org/?projects=mobile-lorm-glove [accessed March 10th 2014]
[11]http://www.bicworld.com/us/products/details/420/ (Accessed November 5th 2013)
[12]http://powerful.yt/ (Accessed November 5th 2013)
[13]http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/kinder-surprise-in-stereotyping-row-over-pink-and-blue-eggs-8747331.html (Accessed November 5th 2013)

critical thought; the full accomplishment of this goal, however, seems to be hindered by the issues of privilege previously discussed on this essay. Curiously, while SCD's roots in critical theory may be a reason for its virtually nonexistent concern for issues such as gender or class (Fraser 1985; Fleming 1989), both feminist theory and intersectionality also take inspiration from critical theory. These disciplines have, however, gone a step further by building their own inclusive paradigms based on the initial propositions of critical theory, like queer theory (Turner 2000) or critical race theory (Collins 2000).

Intersectional feminism aims to to empower those that are subjected to discrimination by understanding oppression as a highly individualized, unique experience; similarly SCD questions traditional notions of the user as a mere average number and as a mere receptacle to the actions defined by the designer, in a clear hierarchy of power. Instead, SCD proposes the notion of "[...] user as protagonist by embodying unusual psychological needs and desires [...]". Addressing issues of gender discrimination through an intersectional perspective is, thus, an essential strategy to further develop SCD's original project.

Feminist Speculative Design: Methodologies and Discussion

As part of an ongoing PhD on body extensions and the politics of designed artefacts, this essay aims to propose an intersectional feminist approach to SCD; it intends to point out the problematic position of a discipline that, despite its very valid aspiration to question our relationships with designed objects, focuses this critique on a purely aesthetic level. This essay therefore proposes the concept of a "feminist speculative design" as a potential strategy that might help addressing these questions. Feminist speculative design would be, first and foremost, an approach to SCD aimed at inciting critical thought on how electronic objects might propagate gender oppression under an intersectional perspective. Though it may seem at first a broad term, the word "feminist" is herein used as a bold political statement as to feminist speculative design's goals, proudly aligning this approach with those that have been derided, silenced and dismissed throughout history. This feminist approach to speculative design would allow for a better understanding of the interaction between the various facets of oppression related to the use of designed objects as part of our - in Cross' (1982) unsurprising choice of words - "man-made world".

Whereas the beneficial influence that an intersectional feminist perspective could have on SCD is clear, the profitable contributions that SCD could bring to the further development of intersectional feminist discourse need to be equally discussed. Being disciplines rooted mainly in the humanities, with strong ties to sociology, philosophy and political sciences, feminist and women's studies have a long tradition of textual research outcomes. This confines most of the production of knowledge in the field within the academic realm of books, papers and journals. The issues at hand are, however, much more tangible than this would suggest; oppression is a real, daily experience, capable of provoking serious consequences on the lives of those it affects. Although this is not to say that the academic production of knowledge in the field is not relevant to the lives of those affected by discrimination, rendering ideas of intersectionality and feminism inaccessible or difficult to understand defeats the very purpose of these approaches. Collins (2000, VII) writes in the introduction to Black Feminist Thought:

"I could not write a book about Black women's ideas that the vast majority of African-American women could not read and understand. Theory of all types is often presented as being so abstract that it can be appreciated only by a select few".

A book written in an accessible manner, free of unnecessary academicisms or extravagant wordiness might be a good start, but there are certainly other strategies that could help develop intersectional feminist discourse. McCall (2005) claims that "there has been little discussion of how to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology". Intersectionality is a difficult subject, for it sets out to analyse the issue of oppression by taking into account the several axes that

compose one's identity instead of compartmentalising these axes into separate groups. This leads to a complex net of possible paths for research that could only possibly be managed through an interdisciplinary approach to the problems at hand. McCall goes on to argue that "[t]he pressing issue then is to overcome the disciplinary boundaries based on the use of different methods in order to embrace multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality". Feminist critical design could thus represent a very beneficial approach to intersectional feminist research: technology, artefacts and the "man-made world" with which design occupies itself are, after all, both results and propagators of "matrixes of domination" (Collins 2000, p.18). The study of systemic inequalities cannot ignore the profound influence that the new behaviors and rituals created or modified by the ubiquity of electronic artefacts have in gender roles. From revenge-porn websites that publish unauthorized nudes complete with the victims' home addresses[14] to hackers who install malicious programs on women's computers in order to spy on them through their webcams[15], the concerns that women have to face when using technology are entirely different from those of men[16]. Though a few scholars have been developing research on how technology intersects with gender oppression (Kirkup 2000; Du Preez 2009; Balsamo 1995), most of the outcome has been purely textual: there is a distinct lack of tangible, non-theoretical perspectives in the field.

Feminist speculative design would focus on using artefacts to provoke reflection on the privileges that give undue advantage to one part of the population while oppressing another. Recently, the swiss women's organization Zürcher Frauenzentrale created a media campaign in order to raise awareness to the issue of wage gap where men using an ATM received 20% less than their desired sum[17] that could be used as an interesting inspiration for feminist speculative design projects. Objects discussing issues of gender-related internet privacy, questioning meritocracy, addressing gender-based violence or deconstructing the male gaze (Mulvey 1997) might also be some of the many possible paths for feminist speculative design projects. The spontaneously dystopian nature of SCD is particularly suited for approaching such issues: feminist speculative design could focus on questioning the already dystopian nature of the present for minorities, and ask how their futures would be like; through the poetic, subjective and abstract dimensions of the designed artefact, it would challenge observers to question their own roles in maintaining social injustice.

Overcoming the academic nature of feminist theory and the elitism of SCD poses a challenge that is inextricably associated with whether design can truly provoke social change. Embodying critique in a physical artefact may indeed be an interesting strategy from the perspective of feminist theory; the question as to how these objects are presented, however, remains. In order to remain faithful to the essential premises of feminist speculative design, it would be essential to avoid presenting these artefacts merely within academic settings, galleries or museums. Feminist speculative design projects would, ideally, take up a life of their own; they would need to be shared, commented upon, questioned and criticised in order to be culturally relevant. Representation, another highly problematic issue in SCD, would also need to be carefully addressed through an intersectional perspective: if a video or a photo series on a future scenario only depicts white, european, middle class people, what does that say about the future of minorities?

Granted, changing a society is not an easy nor brief task, for structures of oppression are

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[14] http://gawker.com/5961208/revenge+porn-troll-hunter-moore-wants-to-publish-your-nudes-alongside-directions-to-your-house (Accessed November 5th 2013)
[15] http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2013/03/rat-breeders-meet-the-men-who-spy-on-women-through-their-webcams/ (Accessed November 5th 2013)
[16] http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2013/nov/08/online-abuse-women-free-speech (Accessed November 8th 2013)
[17] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/11/equal-pay-day-commercial-prank-from-zurich-womens-center_n_3060740.html (Accessed November 5th 2013)

deeply ingrained into everything that surrounds us - from language to architecture. Departing from the premise that a designed object can be capable of generating resounding and immediate change within society would be naive at best. Change does, however, come in small steps; it happens first in our insular realities to only later become palpable. Design alone is not capable of changing society; nonetheless, as both a product and a producer of societal values it could trigger visible cultural shifts when approached with an interdisciplinary and critical stance. Artefacts that question oppression are able to produce small waves of change; it is these small changes that feminist speculative design would concern itself with, for they are what could later grow into a tangible shifts in society.

While feminist speculative design would certainly not be the only possible path into developing a truly critical discourse within design, it has the potential to be an effective one. Whereas words might be difficult to assimilate - especially words that incite us to leave our comfort zones -, experiences are far more effective tools for provoking estrangement, discomfort and, ultimately, reflection. The mediation of electronic objects on our daily interactions with other individuals is built around a skeleton of complex hierarchies of power; it is the bone structure under the attractive and glossy skin of technology that feminist speculative design could expose, reflect upon and, hopefully, alter.

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