

Aesthetic Experiences and Technology—possibilities and Potential Regarding Smartphones' Uses and Appropriations

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Abstract

This paper presents observations regarding aesthetic experiences in the Communication Studies field. Possibilities and moving processes are thought from the perspective of mobile platforms' appropriations, smartphones' appropriations in particular. Youngsters' uses and appropriations are mainly observed. Based on authors such as Kerckhove (2009), Manovich (2001), Winocur (2009), among others, communicative experience is considered in a mobile and interactive sociocultural context.

Keywords: uses, appropriations, smartphone, communication aesthetic, aesthetic experience

1. Introduction

Contemporary communication phenomena allow the proliferation of a series of aspects which are directly related to the way we relate to media, objects and technics. No longer can we dissociate daily life from the strong presence of devices which complement, help and conduct social, cultural, political and economic acts. In a time when velocity becomes a value, possibilities created out of smartphones' uses become real necessities. In this multiple context, of appropriations shaped by this equipment, different approaches can be made in order to comprehend suggested communicative resources, as well as movements of this reality, which is lived and mediated by mobile communication.

A possible approach, presented throughout this paper, considers smartphones from a point of view which finds communication aesthetic as a possible way of analyzing mobile communication phenomena. This direction is built out of sociocultural contexts, considering impact, uses and the subjective presence in users' daily lives.

In this respect, the aim is to think over possible aesthetic sensorialities and experiences in the most various symbolic exchange spaces, suggesting mobile platforms' appropriations such as smartphones' appropriations, especially among youngsters, might be one of these sensorial experiences generating spaces. As Jenkins points out, technology may or may not favor interactions. "Each one builds their own personal mythology, from pieces and fragments of information extracted out of media flows and transformed in resources whereby we comprehend our daily life" (2008, p. 28).

The choice to look upon aesthetic experience regarding mobile technology was also made due to the expressive spread of the so called new technologies and new media in the mobile era, online and offline. These media access cyberspace and the web, where uses and appropriations happen and directly impact aesthetic experiences in art and culture. Such experiences reinforce Kerckhove's (2009) postulate that cyberspace ended up being a place for "bodies'" possibilities, including experiences' sensorialities in this place, being:

"[...] communication as a social nature relation, imbricated with its place, with that society's History, with social space's worldview mechanisms, with internal perception models of an equally social world, or of a more embracing society which views a complex process, we emphasize this relation pervades many flavors, but has a peculiar way of seeing things" (Barbosa, 2002, p. 74).

Aesthetic is understood here from Shuler's perspective – etymologically, "the science of sentiment", of feeling, whose "aesthetic value corresponds, in reality, to qualitative and psychological representations data, connected to particular criteria of 'beautiful' and 'pleasant'. These criteria's particularities present many levels. One might think of individual criteria regarding beauty, as well as, more easily, use cultural criteria, which are more common in specific receptors groups" (2004, p. 87). Also:

(...) aesthetic is about the potential any phenomenon presented to us has to activate our sensitive perceptions network, regenerating and turning more subtle our capacity to apprehend qualities of what is presented to our senses (Santaella, 2008, p. 35).

Due to cultural and sensorial criteria, aesthetic, as analyzed by Kerckhove (2009), brings cause and effect characteristics and, more evidently, the quality of contacts' relationship effects, on signification effects. Speaking of effect, other questions arise, such as: what does define a mobile device, or its use and appropriation, as something of the aesthetic field? Is it the design or the information associated to it?

Based on Vilém Flusser's Black Box Philosophy, a parallel may be drawn between the smartphone and the aesthetic experience concept regarding the camera, once the author ponders about people's behavior regarding devices and the results of such relational experience, considering devices are programmed by man himself, using technology. For Flusser, codification device's mediation comes to light and relates to people's world:

The most important characteristic of technical images, according to Flusser, is the fact they materialize certain concepts regarding the world, precisely concepts which guided the making of devices that shape them. Thus, photography, instead of automatically registering impressions of the physical world, transcodifies certain scientific theories into image, or, using Flusser's own words, "transforms concepts into scenes" (Flusser, 1985, p. 45, in Machado, 1999, p. 2).

Here, devices are seen the same way as in the 1980's, as instruments belonging to the dimension of "knowing how to do". They are a channel to transmit information. The concept is reinforced by McLuhan, in his observation about new communication devices' primarily characteristics, such as "its power to wipe out barriers among media and contaminate them among themselves. Digital media also had dissolved limits between reproduction and dissemination machines" (McLuhan, 2004, p. 2, in Scolari, 2008, p. 73).

Like Flusser's camera, smartphones have software, apps and a set of mechanisms able to register, store and reproduce images. Users, when seeing the objects they want to portrait or record, whether people or landscapes, base themselves in previously build mindsets, making the recording device (the smartphone) capture and transform the desired image with the technical resources it offers. Aesthetic experience, in this context, would be more complex, as users would have to explore software's and technical resources' potentials. In other words, for an aesthetic experience with the smartphone, software and apps are not enough if the users do not have the aesthetic component for what they want to register.

Possibilities of smartphone's use are countless, as are observations resulting of aesthetic experiences – as it happened with cameras. As Arlindo Machado (1999) says, in 150 years of photography, cameras' potentials were not yet fully achieved. Similarly, mobile devices' possibilities can be imagined.

2. New Device, New Aesthetic Experiences

According to Santaella: "When new media arise, their yet unknown potential uses must be explored" (2008, p. 35-36). Thus, cutting-edge technology used in smartphones – every day becoming more of a "man's extension", as said by McLuhan (2006) – puts it also as an aesthetics, or aesthetic experience's research and questioning object.

Being an interface to access information, content and experiences is another characteristic of this technology. Therefore, smartphone becomes a research object and is valued by this key element mentioned by Santaella (2008). Smartphone is seen as a device whose young users, mainly, might have aesthetic experiences with, as well as have dialogical and inter-relational processes with their groups. Cognition and touch allow them to approach reality. In this aspect, Kerckhove (2009) looks upon cyberspace and accessing cyberspace and speaks about subsequent relationships – interaction effects, whether they are interior, exterior or interactive. According to him, such possibilities take us to innumerable experiences. One of these experiences is the return of the participation and sharing primitive culture.

Kerckhove's thought reinforces Flusser's speech which says "man communicates with the other; he is a 'political animal', not because he is a social animal, but because he is a solitary animal, incapable of living in solitude" (2007, p. 91). Therewith, he decoded "social solitude", something that seems quite up to date, regarding communication on cyberspace context. Besides, Flusser's approach reinforces individuals' search for collective relationship, even though it happens mostly on a virtual environment, nowadays.

Youngsters' use of this device is observed due to their ability with mobile technologies, and also because of their search for a social identity. They use device's resources and tools sorely and quickly, for they were born practically at the same time as this technology which pervades society. They also follow and adapt easily and eagerly to technology's rapid evolution.

The tendency to use personal technology, recently spread by the popularity of smartphones, explains this device's use

for social interactions among youngsters. Different models and functions like Wi-Fi¹ and 3G² seemingly turn smartphones into dream goods for adolescents, who are eager for novelties. Highlight resources and characteristics – considering content, information and interactivity – are free internet access anywhere in the world, mp3 download, radio, TV, movie making, voice recording, photo camera, e-mails, SMS and multimedia messages, among other possibilities.

Lev Manovich (2001) brings light to interaction between user and device, arguing about how natural it is. If smartphone users use it naturally, not always completely conscious about it, interaction might fairly be considered of unconscious and sensorial aesthetic nature, for it does not demand highly technical knowledge. Interaction is sensitive, not just informational, and any regular user might have access to this aesthetic experience, whether it is a user-device or a user-user experience, which brings us to what Landowski called “infection”:

For “interaction” to happen, something must be passed from one person to another. This is what we acknowledge when we say the kind of infection we are interested in presupposes – lacking causes or reasons – a person’s presence to another one. Being present in someone else is communicating, even though below the level of cognition (Landowski, 2005, p. 24).

For the author, devices appear to receivers as symbolic forms yet to be known. They are a decode of reality’s representation. Devices help users to perceive and present the world. They make users able to reach world’s concrete figures through “acknowledgement processes”.

3. New Technologies, New Experiences

Technology aesthetics have also production and art aspects. Artists have the challenge to create and produce, considering these new technologies’ consumers and thinking of ways to reach art and culture consumers’ senses. According to Santaella, “another artist’s challenge is to confront the still brutal media and materials’ resistance of their time, to find a language of their own, re-launching art languages” (2008, p. 29). New artists increasingly emerge out of this generation who knows how to explore new technologies, technologies considered world representation environments. This generation brings symbolic forms, acknowledgeable especially by themselves. Youngsters recognize themselves in their art and their experience on cyberspace. Thus, as explained by Talon-Hugon: “a concrete aesthetic sensibility exists, and aesthetic fruition experience is not invented by modern times, but philosophy invites us to depart from it in favor of more noble goals and satisfactions of another order” (2009, p. 19). This movement would allow, as the author points out, to comprehend the absence of matters that would become “aesthetic matters” par excellence, such as “aesthetic pleasure” or “taste judgment”, revealing aesthetic experience presents itself in a much larger way than our ordinary, daily experiences.

Considering art, culture and this aesthetic presence, Santaella shines light on contemporary studies, which debate fundamental questions:

(...) 1. Breaking with the idea of fixed, perennial form. 2. Incorporating time, particularly real time, as a work of art’s dimension. 3. Incorporating the relation idea, a communication and information flow which establishes itself among agents who are part of this work (whether it is a relation among people, as in corporative fields, or a man-machine relation) (Santaella, 2008, p. 30).

Through mediation experience, people’s actions during the communication process acquire signification and allow an identity and social recognition forming participation. At this point, users’ mobile platforms appropriations would fit as a communication, aesthetic and aesthetic experience subject-matter. Moreover, “a purely artistic aesthetic would only explore part of this field. Besides art, there is still an immense sense, sensibility and sensoriality domination” (2009, p. 99).

Significations created with these devices’ uses transform dimensions of reality’s building. This interaction between the person and some part of reality or aesthetic allows building new realities from an experience: with mediation, as explained by Silverstone, for who experience is a large part of this person’s life; with aesthetic, as Manovich (2001) says, through interaction between user and device. This process happens between mind and body, through speeches, stories and interlocutions, producing and reproducing a social life in a significations network, by defining signification

¹ Wi-Fi Alliance’s licensed term to explain wireless networks based on IEEE 802.11 default. There is, a technology used to enable multiple devices to be connected wirelessly. See: <http://tecmundo.com.br/197-o-que-e-wi-fi-.htm#xzz1VgdhCcHJ>

² Mobile technology used to have access to high speed internet. It can be used through modem (for desktops and laptops) or with cellphones, smartphones and tablets. See: <http://tecmundo.com.br/226-o-que-e-3g-.htm#ixzz1Vgh6iRXk>

and choosing actions: “Mediation, thus, does not begin nor end with a singular text. It expands, multiplies, spreads until reaching the reader, who actively engages in producing signification” (2002, p. 33).

Experience, as seen by Leal and Guimarães, is the result of interaction between living creature and some aspect of the world he or she lives in, as said by John Dewey, for whom “Experience [...] is implied in concrete conditions and dimensions of the relation between person and environment. Consequently, it cannot be characterized by other aspect exclusively” (2008, p. 5). In other words, in a constantly mediatizing society, users are fully connected to their environment, being both producers and receivers, creating content and signification. Experience demands from the environment “sensorial and physiological mobilization of the human body; it is a practical, intellectual and emotional activity; it is a perception act and, therefore, involves interpretation, repertoire, patterns; experience always exists for the sake of an object whose materiality and social and historical conditions to appear are not indifferent” (2008, p. 5-6).

“Experience” with smartphones exposes a society with constantly changing processes and communication models. In addition to this, another center aspect for Communication – Communication Aesthetic or Aesthetic Experience –, regarding youngsters’ appropriations of mobile technologies, is the expansion of flow spaces and timeless time in current society’s structures, which disseminates social practices in multiple places and creates new interaction spaces among individuals, as Castells highlights: “Due to the fact mobile communication constantly changes its territorial references, interaction space defines itself completely in terms of communication flows. People are here and there, in multiple ‘heres’ and ‘theres’, in an unceasing combination of places” (2007, p. 268).

An interesting point about communication studies is the one saying the medium allows and controls the interference level over human actions, as shows Winocur (2009) when the author talks about cellphone as an experience intermediary. According to her, youngsters use internet and mobile platforms as symbolic or inclusion spaces where they can develop strategies. These are the spaces in which they acquire the traditional institutions’ power theretofore denied to them. In these new spaces, they consummate their potential of being and doing, as well as they feel socially included. Besides, mobile internet creates bonds among youngsters and their interest groups. Content acquired through internet interaction alters adolescents’ solitude and isolation perception. There with, youngsters make clear their desire to belong to society has not faded, but significance and the way they want to be let into society have been modified. “Virtual communities, online social networks and cellphone have been legitimized, particularly among youngsters, as new forms of social inclusion. At the bottom line, it is a battle to shape an identity whose most distinctive meaning is to guarantee visibility and acknowledgement in their social bonds’ world” (2009, p. 69).

Smartphone have the proposal to offer experiences beyond their functionalities, including the “dysfunctional” path. A recent example is Pop Phone³, a retro piece invented by French David Turpin. The device works exactly like an old telephone, but with a speaker and a microphone. Its design and its functionalities enable to live old times’ and old styles’ sensations.

4. Closing Remarks

From the observations here presented, noticeably discussions about mobility and smartphone uses under communication or aesthetic perspectives might be a fine path to pursue, in order to comprehend aspects regarding users, technologies and the convergence context in which communication, art and culture fields are in. Much is still to be considered to comprehend this crucial aspect of historical, cultural, social and communicational evolution of societies.

Thus, a broader perspective becomes relevant to understand, from a Communication Aesthetic studies perspective, the impact mobile technologies have on cultural and social fields, on interactions among youngsters after mobility became present and on these new symbolic exchange spaces. The aesthetic quality of these youngsters’ experiences is of sensitive, not only informative order. This brings us to want to comprehend more broadly these diverse forms of interaction with the world and the technical possibilities surrounding them.

Discussion does not end up here. With this paper, only parts of the imbrication between youngsters and their smartphones were glimpsed. After confronting different authors who discuss the matter, a horizon of new possibilities emerges, due to new elements found in communication processes, as well as in already established aspects. Other interpretive possibilities are hoped to gain space and contribute to the general discussion regarding the practices here presented.

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³ This device emulates an old telephone’s speaker and can be attached to cellphones, computers and tablets to be used as a vintage headphone. See: <http://www.techtudo.com.br/curiosidades/noticia/2012/03/o-que-e-pop-phone.html>

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