

By Design: Material Historiographies of Media Interfaces and Cultures

@ the Interface, Design Matters

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This roundtable is titled “By Design,” but the discussion questions focus primarily on the media interface. In order to critically locate the interface in media studies, I suggest we have much to gain by not sidelining this roundtable’s first term: what do we mean by design? Typically paired with another term to describe a particular creative practice (graphic design, costume design, interior design, etc.), design is often understood as style, aesthetics, and visual appearance. But in a range of other disciplines from STS to anthropology, “design” has emerged as a provocative keyword that aims to challenge traditional assumptions and methodologies. How might attention to design at the interface help us interrogate and reconfigure some of the boundaries (e.g., production – text – audience) that have traditionally held sway in media studies?

Dating back to the 16th century, design means “to mark out, contrive, plot, intend, execute.” It is simultaneously a process and object, a concept and its material expression. While it blurs the distinction between ideas and things, design nevertheless depends on carving out boundaries. By giving form and order, design “regulates”: it organizes bodies, perception, affective experience, and the spatial and temporal rhythms that orient us in the world (think of the design of city traffic systems, home theaters, or twitter feeds). Design historians see design as the materialization of social practice and the reining belief systems of their time. Modern design, for example, is intimately bound up with specific ideas about technology, rationality, progress, globalization, legibility, neutrality, and morality. As Lynn Spigel argues, these assumptions structure how environments are built, and through which social power is organized and produced.

Over the past few decades, design studies has shifted its focus from the object or designed artifact to understand design more broadly as a historically situated mode of inquiry, one that is bound up with imagining the future. Today, the phrase “design thinking”—figured as a user-centered, prototype-driven process of problem-solving—has become a buzzword in scientific, engineering, and industrial sectors concerned with innovation. Meanwhile, “Speculative Design” approaches try to challenge normative assumptions about innovation by designing prototypes that imagine alternative or more equitable futures. Thinking about “design” then, is an invitation to remap boundaries and divisions between objects, concepts, agencies, people, time and space.

Typically, the interface is understood as a liminal zone, the boundary between the human and the machine. But these binary divisions between technological artifacts and human agents were challenged in HCI research, both in theory and in practice. When an interface works, when it’s usable or ready-to-hand as Heidegger would put it, users experience engaged immersion: “the representation is all there is,” explains Brenda Laurel. In feminist technoscience studies, it was at the interface that the very conceptual boundaries between humans and machines, designers and users, production and

consumption, organic and inorganic materials became hard to sustain. Lucy Suchman argues that the project of design in Western contexts was consistent with the Euro-American privileging of autonomy over relationality as the mark of humanness. Inspired by Donna Haraway's cyborg figuration as a hybrid for critiquing established paradigms and dualisms, the interface was "re-configured" as the mutual (though not necessarily symmetrical) co-constitution of humans and machines. In both STS and cultural anthropology, "design" was uncleaved from a purely professional context of experts. Ordinary humans, Arjun Appanduai notes, design our everyday lives through the daily deployment of energies, resources, ideas, and bodies in order to accomplish results that meet our aspirations.

Machine/human, designer/user oppositions were reconfigured to focus instead on the rich, densely layered landscape of identities and working relations, the contests and alliances, which make media and technical systems possible. In technology industries, this manifests as a shift from designing stand-alone devices (a phone, a television) to designing relations and contexts using new vocabularies (e.g., "architectures of feedback," "participatory design"). We might see products like the "smart phone," "internet-enabled television," or "lifestyle apps," as both the conception and the result of reconfigured boundaries between bodies, data, systems, things, and content. These media interfaces emerge from culturally and historically constituted knowledge practices and often work by reiterating the values and assumptions that went into their design.

If media and technological convergence has altered the way that designers (i.e., professionals and everyday users alike) understand, experience, and produce mediated environments today, then as media scholars, we should think carefully about how we conceive our objects of study and design our own research projects (what is "outside the bounds of this study"). I offer design not as solution to problems that may plague media studies, but as a problematic that may help us interrogate and reconfigure borders and boundaries in order to better understand the complex ways that media and information technologies are entwined and entangled in everyday life. By saying "design matters," I hope to draw attention to both the materiality of media interfaces and also to the broader questions of concern that orient the field.