Cultivating mediality - a time and a space of the city?

I would like to take a media philosophic perspective to the question of this stream, that of a new esthetic order. Regarding any media in particular, regardless of the criteria according to which one might like to distinguish them, will not provide us the means to consider the possibility of an “order” organizing the various renderings of esthetic experience media make possible. Like any order, also this one, if it should be an order at all, would need to be on a different level of abstraction than the “things” organized by it.

I would first like to reflect on what distinguishes our media reality today from the modern sense of reality; what might it mean, that today we seem to have entered something like the popularization phase of the analytic revolution?

The second episode takes up the often heard claim that we are experiencing the rise of a new rhetorical power, often compared with the sophists in ancient Greece. Characteristic for the situation then was the de-naturalization of speech and the reconception of speaking as something which can be learned, cultivated, crafted more or less well; the phonetic alphabet and its emerging mediality have played a key role that statements could suddenly be constructed to a purpose, a change which transformed the cultural climate at large. The question then will be, if there is any plausibility in regarding our experts in digital analysis, computer simulations and modeling as our new rhetoricians, as our new sophists perhaps, what exactly is being de-naturalized today?

I would like to conclude my paper with the perspective that we might soon come to regard design as a form of urban agriculture based on and bringing about a time and a space of the city, peculiar to our cultivation of mediality as a realm of streaming symbols, deterritorialized capsules of symbolic power, that can be domesticated by learning to grow and crop the codes and the informational make-up of the things symbolized.
Media Architecture Biennale, Wien Oktober 2010

NEO - a new esthetic order

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We are so accustomed to information, that it already feels a bit strange when claiming that information is not. Information has no weight, no extension, no body, it is neither matter nor physical energy. And yet, it has impacts. We are experiencing its efficacy everyday. The informational make-up of things manifests itself on their surfaces, in the very act of surfacing, while encrusting within the orders of habits, conventions, and regulations.

So asking for a New Order seems an obvious thing to do; and so does basing it on the aesthetic, the realm of rendering things perceivable, and real to us.

I would like to take a media philosophic perspective to this question, one which suggests to take as a meta narrative not that of Architectonics directly, but that of culture in its early meaning, in the narrative of Agriculture. I call what lies behind the proliferating media phenomena we experience today mediality. And I would like to suggest, mediality is not an order, but a stream; that means it doesn’t give us the schemes for integrating phenomena, it gives us the ‘material’ to be integrated it. I suggest to view mediality as a streaming of deterritorialized articulations, capsulated as symbols, seeds for relationalities of any kind.

Most importantly, so conceived we can analyze, design and cultivate mediality.

Media allow us to relate between different regimes of signification, explicated in the codes of things, all kinds of things, codes which are today organized mainly by the analytical insights that went along with the modernist revolution of science. What we are experiencing, as the proliferation of a media culture, is something like the popularization phase of the analytical revolution.
Leibniz and Newton invented sometimes throughout the 17th century the mathematics of differential equations. They thereby introduced an analytical method for the description of that which changes, moves, or develops over time, which proofed to be so powerful that it has given rise for an entirely new grammar of thought, very different from the previous kind of thought based directly on the geometrical method. From now on, not to remain faithful to the cultural decorums of tradition was trustworthy, with the analytical method it was usually enough to see whether the differential equations within which the variables are put into experimental constellation, end up as functioning properly. Before that, innovation per se could only be conceived as something like the release of ciminal energy.

The analytical method gave way to the possibility of experimenting with effects by learning how to handle them, operating them. Therefore we are used to referring to the modern, the analytical grammar of thought as the functionalist revolution. The driving force of any modernization movement is the claim that innovation is basically unproblematic, as long as it is orientated towards proper functioning.

It is this claim, however, or rather the second part of it, that our emerging awareness of a mediality dimension of things challenges so profoundly. The reason is simply an incompatibility of information with the modern causality concept.

When dealing with information, reference stabilizes within the probabilistic horizons of many different and possible uses, goals, values and outcomes. The language game of causality on the other hand, in its modern materialist guise conflated to the evidence of functioning, is not infinitesimal and probabilistic but positive¹.

Where there was orientation by functionality, today there is design for a purpose, for one instantiation or another, within one context or another, orientated towards one aim or another. Media offer us analytical insights as ‘pieces of

information’. Yet information is not, strictly speaking. It stabilizes within the symbolized codes and their organizing regimes of signification accepted by populations; any materialist position neglects this, or, effectively, ends up advocating a radical fundamentalism of Common sense or General Intellect.

What seems to be at stake with vast popularization of the modernist analytic revolution, so I would like to suggest, is a de-naturalization of the modern concept of materiality itself.

Our current experience might appear to us perhaps, in some near future, as a process well comparable to another, similar process that took place some 2500 years ago, namely the de-naturalization of oral speech which took place in ancient Greece. With the phonetic alphabet, people suddenly gained awareness of their speech as a medium, and learnt to cultivate and use it as such. People were suddenly able to write as they speak, and in turn, of course, they could learn to speak as they write. The emerging awareness of just how delicately we are able to take influence on any kind of happenings around us by rhetorically crafting our statements gave rise to vast expertise in artistically fabricating and constructing statements-to-an-end.

Somewhat similarly, perhaps, the change in conceiving of materiality in its mediality, by articulating its analytic make-up in the mathematical format of information, has, arguably, already brought forth a New Rhetorical Power, and a respective field of efficacy.

Cultivating the referential gap

The analysis and the design of mediality promise to allow us learning more about the peculiar agility and efficacy not only of things, but also of their appearances and symbolical make-ups. Things considered in their mediality are models of what they might once be conceived as, within the populations for which they are going to be meaningful, to the communities into which they will be integrated.

Such an analysis involves the comparatistic modeling of things not yet actually, not yet fully, specified. In the same vein, things start to lack a completely assigned referentiality. Jean-François Lyotard has famously perceived such a
not-fully-controllable dynamics within the symbolic as a “demonical energy”\(^2\). Yet for him, the symbolic was an order.

Drawing on this notion of autonomy and not-fully-controllable dynamics within the symbolic, we could quite directly conceive of mediality as a streaming, a stream transporting a particular freight. We would find deterritorialized symbol-capsules, power bulbs for relations to-be-established-in-potential, immaterial seeds that can be grown, cultivated and cropped.

This pre-specificity of symbolic mediality as an extensionless and non-territorial dimension of a depth-in-time offers the possibilities for stratifications and relative groundings where neither foundations nor order can be referred to in any absolute way. Design would not be about form, or likewise function, although it gains its performance on that very organon. Yet design would be about mediality, about the cultivation of mediality.

Perhaps it is time, in order to get a grasp on this kind of efficacy proper to medialized matter, to consider the conservation of symbolic values not only in the form of traditions, or their orderings in institutionalizations respectively, but in a pre-representational way altogether.

**A time and a space of the city**

Let us assume we are not living within a symbolic order. Let us assume that all the orders within which we live are permeated by a wild stream of symbols, powering a proliferating process of mediagenic medialization. In many ways, we have already started to domesticate this stream. We are learning how to analyze and design mediality. We are cultivating surfaces FOR and OF symbolizations, so that we can grow and harvest their produces-to-an-end, not at all unlike the ancient rhetoricians when they realized and explored that they can construct statements-to-an-end. What is at stake by all these new abilities is the possibility to finally symbolize a time and a space of the city.

This is an idea, undoubtedly, which must feel quite impossible and even absurd at first. This, however, is the fate of just any new structurally effective

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symbolization. Imagine a tradesman from Rome or Athens some 2000 years ago, who would have been told, preposterously so, to do calculations with the symbol ZERO. The idea to symbolize ‘nothing’, and to even do calculations with it, must have felt completely unconceivable to them. Numbers were conceived as quantities, and ‘nothing’ is not a quantity. For us today it is, in contrast, easy to see: Zero is a symbol, numbers are not quantities, and all the mathematics is based upon that. The zero has opened up a whole new dimension for thought and action. Suddenly it was possible to do calculations not only with reference to the measurement of space in timeless geometry, but also with regard to the actual unfolding of time. The symbol 0 allowed to assume several ‘beginnings’ within one and the same scope of calculation; it became possible to calculate self-referentially-with-variations, so to speak, like in the case of rates and interests for example.

But despite the proliferating and non-ending wave of urbanization triggered by commerce and exchange since then, we still feel that time and space are given to us by the natural rhythms, which are, quite independent from the streaming of symbols, other than the rhythms of urban life. The space and time measures we apply are derived, ultimately, from the course of the stars, or the rhythms of the climate. We deduce them from an order which has allowed us to cultivate our material resources, the produces of agriculture, the materials needed for running urban infrastructures in general. In short, we deduce them from where we find the energy on which the cities live. We may well have formalized these rhythms into calendars and clocks, and we may well measure them with the precision gained from oscillations of the cesium atom. Still they are, so we feel, rooted in an order where we have no impact.

Or are they?

Until very recently it seemed unquestionable: Nature gives us energy. The following and somewhat fantastic, but in no way unimaginable line of thought, dares to consider the possibility of re-symbolizing that truism.
Always on

No matter which philosophical context we look at it in, there’s one particular aspect about nature that is common to them all: we call nature where we take our energy from, where we find our resources. And yet, there is mainly one actual source of energy. And that is the sun.

Looked at purely from an energy perspective, ‘nature’ is a multi-layered system of conversion and storage processes for the sun’s energy stream, in which the earth happens to orbit. All organic forms on earth, whether they are animate or inanimate, whether they are archaenal (these are micro-organisms), botanical or animal, are encompassed within a system, in which energy that ultimately stems from the sun is captured and stored, accessed and used and thus re-integrated into earth’s life cycles.

The cultural techniques with which we humans have learnt to ‘cultivate’ nature, and which we have used to access ever more of the natural energy stores ever more efficiently, have tended to rely on the exploitation of various ‘compartments’ – such as individual resources like wood, coal or oil – within this ecological system we call nature. Now, however, for the first time in our history, contemporary technology makes it possible for us to bypass nature in that sense and – instead of drawing on these energy stores – access the solar energy stream directly.

Solar technology is not a ‘renewable’ energy source, simply because it taps into the infinite stream directly. It changes our attitude to energy, so-to-speak, by 180 degrees. There is no need to think about energy in terms of storages. And just because of that, it is energy additional, additional to that capsulated and stored in what we so far learnt to call nature. The sun stream brings each day about 10’000 times as much potential energy to earth as all of humanity is currently using from nature’s storages.

Why might it not, on that basis, be imaginable to develop something like an urban energy culture? In many ways, electricity marks an important step in that direction. Electricity, strictly speaking, is not a form but the potential of energy. It is the availability of energy. Electricity connects us in a deterritorialized, non-
geometric way; our current forms of urbanity would simply be unimaginable without it.

What we are experiencing thereby is nothing but the symbolization of energy itself. We gradually develop an awareness for a kind of streaming pre-specificity, a streaming that permeates the inner make-up of our cultures in an uncanny way, as if the natural outside invades our sense of interiority. Today, we are gradually learning to articulate consciously, craftfully, perhaps artistically, this streaming of matter medialized, of the symbolic energy it holds, in its double sense.

**Design as an urban agriculture**

The perspective for design I would like to suggest is that design could be viewed as a form of urban agriculture. Urban cropping cultivates the pre-specific energy stream by creating mediating surfaces. These surfaces are like acres, the quality and fertility of their symbolical soil varies from milieu to milieu, from climate to climate, and also between different agricultural techniques and procedures. By learning to cultivate the patterns of symbolical effects within populations of people, design invents a whole agriculture to produce its fruits from within a symbolic energetics. It creates capsules of symbolic power. It captures the symbolical forces enwraps, binds and integrates them by cropping their informational make-up in code. Design is farming by valuation. Its code structures are superficial, they are not meant to accommodate us. Rather it creates a cropping system for cities. It breeds capsules by valuation for other people to make use of, on the grounds that architectonic structures have been articulated symbolically.

In such a context, design does not, at least not primarily, construct and assemble elements by following strictly encoded procedures, natural algorithms if you like. Design domesticates symbolic articulations in a game, where rule-following comprises rule-inventing and rule-breeding. Of course domestication also involves rule-following, yet the rules need to be deduced from a fantastically projected outcome one strives to achieve, not from an assumed natural order whatsoever. The Latin word *articulatio* means “a separation into joints.”
Design learns to cultivate the space of potentials that is opening up from learning how to bend architectonic joints as articles.

Design is less concerned with necessities than architecture. And yet, there is no less precision. Designers of mediality behave playfully within the social codes of habits, norms, morals, of times past. For them, these codes are interesting as codes, they are not interesting as specified content or form. For them, symbolic articulations are merely patterns that might or might not turn out to stabilize themselves within a dynamics of substrates and medialization, by populating the emerging strata.

Design as urban cropping harvests the patterns of symbolic articulations, and it tries to render them into supply systems for appliances of any kind.

Articulations sound and appear, they sprout out of a field of forces of symbolizations past, and prosper if we care for them. Our traditions have decomposed into sedimentation; the richness of this sedimentation is that of former life-forms, stored in the symbols that used to organize them.

The challenge is ours today to consider the design of mediality, to learn how to cultivate and further differentiate this richness. Designing mediality, as an urban form of agriculture, is about learning to cultivate the possibility for a potential to actualize. This potential, however, is that of the Sophists rather than that of Aristotle. The energy-circuit will be an open one in the future. The problematics of exploiting natural resources shifts to that of how energy can be sustainably captured, encapsulated, grown. Design will be an issue of valuation, and of creating shared interests. Not the natural storages of energy are our existential resources and frame of referentiality in the 21st century, but the richness of symbolizations and cultural differentiations of times past are.