

See me, feel me, touch me: Emotion in radio design

Published in: *Design and Emotion, Episode III: The Experience of Everyday Things*, Deana McDonagh, Paul Hekkert, Diane Gyi and Jeroen van Erp (eds), Taylor and Francis, London, 2003, 382-386.

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ABSTRACT

Sensorial and emotional aspects have played a significant role in the design of radio sets throughout the twentieth century. Such aspects have constituted an attempt to mediate technology and technological change to the wider public.

INTRODUCTION

According to the call for papers of the Third International Conference on Design and Emotion, “it is no longer sufficient to design good products or services; we all want to design experiences and generate pleasurable or exciting sensations”. The call for papers also refers to emotion and experience as the “buzzwords of current design practice, research, and education”, as well as to “this new design paradigm”. However, recent research indicates that emotion and experience have already played a crucial role in design during the twentieth century in many product categories, but haven’t received much attention from design historians and researchers. The radio set constitutes one of these product categories, where emotion can be identified as a crucial design factor.

The radio has been termed “a blind medium”, as neither context nor message is visible (Crisell, 1994). It has also been claimed that in radio all the signs are auditory: they consist simply of noises and silence, and therefore use time, not space as their major structuring agent (Hawkes, 1977). However, the history of radio design reveals that the product developed to embody the radio medium, i.e. the radio set, has provided ample scope for the exploration and application of purely spatial, sensorial qualities. Although the usage of radio is primarily connected to sound and hearing, the design of radio sets clearly points to the fun of looking at, touching, and feeling the actual objects. This paper will present research on radio design and will discuss the relevant issues, by focusing on the role of sensorial and emotional aspects in the design of radio sets throughout the twentieth century.

TPOLOGY OF RADIO DESIGN

Research by the author suggests that radio sets may be classified into five formal types. The first four of these types, which constitute the mainstream radio set production, follow a so-called functionalist approach. The majority of the very early radio sets have a quasi-technical appearance, directly influenced from scientific and technical equipment (“early domestic type”). Radios are later housed into wooden cabinets to resemble furniture, which enter millions of homes and establish the typology of radio as a wooden box with dials (“classic domestic type”). At a later stage, the cabinets are made of plastic, thus expressing modernity

(“modern domestic type”). After the second world war, the emergence of transistor technology allows radios to become significantly smaller (“modern portable type”). These types present strong visual affinities to each other, as well as a sense of formal continuity (Yagou, 1999, 2002). The sets belonging to the last three types can be easily identified as radios and they represent a generic formal model for radio as a neat box with dials. Despite the functionalist approach, these radios bear strong stylistic references to various familiar iconographies, e.g. classicism or art deco. Such references may be interpreted as expressions of emotional qualities; they are however subsumed to the overall “functionalist” label.

The fifth group of radios has been termed “independent” by the author, in an attempt to define its essence by a single word. Another key term that has been employed to express these objects is “rupture”. The main formal feature of “independent type” radios is precisely the absence of any specific standard, their limitless formal freedom. This group is extremely varied, eclectic, and in many senses marginal. It draws visual inspiration from nature, daily life, and popular culture. The respective radio sets take the form of animals, sunglasses, or cartoon figures, to give but a few examples. It is important to note that the “independent” type approach is not limited to radios, but may be observed throughout the twentieth century in most categories of technical consumer products, for example telephone sets in the form of animals or cartoon figures (Clark, 1997).

The origins of this type date back to the very beginnings of radio history, when this new product had not yet developed a specific typology. This period has produced some of the most representative radio designs of this approach. The Radio-Karte is a 1922 postcard crystal set, made by both German and English firms, which appears with a variety of picture fronts (Hawes, 1991). Felix, a British crystal set of c. 1923, is made after a popular character from early animated cartoon movies and it is tuned by moving the leg (Hawes, 1991). Later periods also provide interesting examples, indicating that this unconventional formal trend actually spans the twentieth century. Unless closely examined, the 1934 American Colonial New World globe in old ivory plastic is not easily identifiable as a radio (Hawes, 1991). The pop mentality of the sixties together with transistor technology triggers a whole new range of sensual and emotional designs. Typical examples are the transistor radio in the form of a beetle (Handy et al, 1993), and the transistor radio in the form of sunglasses (Handy et al, 1993). A similar case is the Sony radio of 1975/80 that looks like a microphone (Antique Radio Magazine, 1995). Defying formal and material conventions, such radios remain in the margins of mainstream culture. Rethinking of these sets, which resist classification, leads to the realisation that they actually possess significant sensorial and emotional features.

Furthermore, “independent type” designs and their sensorial qualities have permeated the more conventional, supposedly functionalist design typologies. A mains radio in bent plywood made by Emerson in the United States in 1938 might be mistaken at first glance for a typical wooden set. But its grotesque form with large conical loudspeakers is known to collectors as the Mae West (Hawes, 1991). It is a purely sensual design disguised as furniture. The American Emerson Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs mains radio, intended for the children’s market, with imitation wood carving in a plastic material called “repwood”, is another highly emotional design based on standard morphology (Hawes, 1991). The Radiorurale, a 1934 version of the Italian “People’s Set”, is an example of a functional form treated so as to exploit the nationalist feelings of farmers. It has a veneered cabinet with chromium fretwork featuring a sheaf of corn emblem and the fascism symbol (Hawes, 1991). In the fifties, the British firm Roberts Radio produces small battery portables in real mink fur (Hawes, 1991). Another typical example of a plain

sixties' set with an emotional touch is the Toshiba transistor radio decorated with lace (Handy et al, 1993). Finally, an archetypal example of conventional and emotional typologies merging into a single object is the portable receiver in the form of a pebble, manufactured by GE in 1997 (ID Magazine, 1997).

Therefore, it is obvious that "independent" type designs not only appear throughout the twentieth century, but they also influence mainstream designs. The rich sensorial properties of the unconventional radio designs lead us to the following question: Should we perhaps refer to an "emotional" type, which has no standard formal pattern but is primarily defined by the exploration of emotional and sensorial qualities?

INTERPRETING EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF RADIO DESIGN

This paper has already mentioned the marginal character of "independent" or "emotional" type sets. The marginality of such sets is proved by the fact that design historians have usually ignored them. Sparke (1986), in her discussion of the development of radio design, writes first of radio as wooden furniture, then as a plastic cabinet representing modernity, and then as a miniature object, resulting from transistor technology. "Independent" type radios do not appear in her rather linear history of radio design. Likewise, Forty (1986) discusses radios as furniture and then as plastic and often portable objects evoking modernity. Heskett (1980) and *Antique Radio Magazine* (1995) follow a similar line of thought. All these historical accounts are primarily based on the mainstream production of well-known firms, such as Ekco, Murphy, Philips, Grundig, and Telefunken.

The author has been influenced to a great extent by such accounts and by the strictly modernist academic climate in which prior research was conducted. Due to such influences, "independent" type radios were discussed in that research from a highly critical point of view. Their unpredictable, fun, and often sarcastic forms seemed to represent a negation of the technology they carried. However, having identified the range and intensity of the "independent" forms phenomenon, the realisation came that it shouldn't be taken so lightly. This led to a substantial change of perception, and the concept of rupture, which was initially treated as negative, is now regarded as a deeper and more complex event.

The radios under discussion are often characterised as gadgets, where "a gadget is defined as an object that fulfils the search for physical and psychological comfort" (Larroche and Tucny, 1985). They might also be considered "kitsch", expressions of a reassuring, anti-technological language (Larroche and Tucny, 1985). But why does the "search for physical and psychological comfort" have negative connotations? Also, why does a "reassuring" design language have to be interpreted as "anti-technological", when it may simply be used as an aid to approach and understand new technology? An alternative, more positive interpretation might be developed.

Generally, different designs express various trade-offs between the beliefs that products should be "easily understood and used in an intuitive way" (Fiell and Fiell, 2001), and that products "must make pleasurable emotional connections with their end-users through the joy of their use and/or the beauty of their form" (Fiell and Fiell, 2001). Conventional radio typologies emphasise familiarisation and ease of use through a rational design approach, whereas "independent" type radios aim at familiarity through a radically different, sensual, and enjoyable approach. This is perhaps a response to the austerity of the Modern Movement and an attempt to undermine the supposed seriousness of mainstream radios. Furthermore, conventional types may be criticised for simply packaging technology. The

“independent” designs under discussion may also be considered as packaging technology, though in a manner which is much more sensual and fun.

Both approaches attempt to generate familiar experiences and reassuring feelings towards new technology, which constitutes a potentially threatening reality. In order to facilitate the introduction of new technology (such as valve radio or transistor radio technology) to the wider public, “independent” or “emotional” radio designs emphasise sensorial and emotional aspects. In other words, they imply that a pleasurable object might be more appropriate to introduce a technological novelty to the public. Standardisation and ease of use become secondary, whereas the unpredictable and playful nature of objects arouses the interest of users and provokes more interaction between user and product. The technological object may be approached through humour, surprise, provocation, sensuality, and other properties not usually associated with technology.

The exploration of radio typologies brings to the fore another issue related to the reception and role of technology in daily life. The West prefers speed and effective use, whereas an element of play and the surprise of unexpected results are often experienced and appreciated in objects of the Japanese culture. According to the Japanese designer and thinker Kenzi Ekuan, a complex, multi-functional object of his culture “makes greater demands of its user, but is capable of an infinite extension of its possible functions according to the powers of the human imagination” (Dietz and Mönninger, 1994). This leads further to the possibility of designing a critical and even poetic dimension into technical products for everyday use, including contemporary electronic products. “By poeticising the distance between people and electronic objects, sensitive skepticism might be encouraged, rather than unthinking assimilation of the values and conceptual models embedded in electronic objects” (Dunne, 1999).

In this context, “independent” or “emotional” type radios are in a sense contradictory, because they are poetic in a rather mundane way! They certainly express substantial elements of feelings and imagination, but in most cases commercialisation overrides poetry. Oversimplifying or exaggerating the emotional approach carries the dangers of coming up with superficial styling solutions, of trivialising the technical object, and of eventually negating the poetry that potentially resides in technology.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the design of unconventional radio sets throughout the twentieth century. These have been interpreted as expressions of design based primarily, if not exclusively, on emotion. Furthermore, it has been shown that the emotional approach has systematically influenced the design of mainstream radio production. The paper has also discussed how sensorial and emotional aspects of radio design have been used to mediate technology and technological change to the wider public. This mediation is regarded by the author as partially successful, because of the superficial or extreme nature of most design solutions. However, the emotional and sensorial approach to the design of technical products for daily use appears to be a very promising field for the exploration of poetic ways of living.

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