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Empathy and Design. A new perspective

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Abstract: In this contribution we discuss the value of empathic experience as a result to achieve through design driven solutions.

Following a phenomenological framework, we draw attention on empathy as an intersubjective experience human relationships are grounded in. Accordingly, we argue that design approach should address the issue of how to create the conditions for the empathic experience, for it is “the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization” (Rifkin, 2010, Chapter 1, Section 2)).

From this perspective we reconsider the role of empathy as it is acknowledged in design, shifting it from being a tool for designing more ‘marketable’ and human centred products and/or services, to a pursued effect for products and/or services concerned with relational issues. To achieve this shift we will review the literature about empathy and design, on the one hand, and the application of the Relational Aesthetics theory to design, on the other.

Keywords: Empathy, Relational Aesthetics, Design Thinking, Socially Responsible Design

1. Overview of the concept of empathy

The Oxford Dictionary defines empathy as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Under the cover of this comforting definition, there is a multiplicity of meanings associated with the concept of empathy in a number of different scientific and non-scientific discourses. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy overviews the meaning and role of empathy in aesthetics, phenomenology, theory of mind and psychology, underlining the different perspectives each discipline adopts.

It can be useful here to briefly review these definitions, starting from Aesthetics within which the concept of empathy was scrutinized at first.

It is well known that Empathy is the English translation for the German term *Einfühlung*. It was introduced in 1909 by the psychologist Edward Titchener, who derived it from the Ancient Greek word *ἐμπάθεια*. This term, in turn, comes from *ἐν* (en, "in, at") and *πάθος* (pathos, "passion" or "suffering"). *Einfühlung* was in German philosophers' circles of the end of the XIX century an

important category in philosophical Aesthetics, describing the human ability to “feel into” works of art and nature in order to aesthetically perceive them. *Einfühlung* became a worthy object of philosophical analysis with Robert Vischer (1873) and then gained refinement with Theodor Lipps who argued for empathy a role beyond our aesthetic appreciation of objects. Lipps transformed empathy in a central category of the philosophy of social and human sciences, accounting empathy as the primary basis for recognizing each other as minded creatures. It’s worthy to note that for Lipps the nature of aesthetic empathy is always the “experience of another human” (1905; 49).

The experiential nature of empathy is resumed by the phenomenological tradition of philosophy. In the attempt to find an alternative to inference from analogy for conceiving the knowledge of other minds, Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein accounted empathy as an irreducible “type of experiential act sui generis” (Stein, 1917; 10) which allows us to perceive directly the Other analogous to ourselves. For Stein empathy is an intentional intersubjective act, through which “foreign experience is comprehended” (Stein, 1917; 6). It is a way of knowing another’s present experience (Meneses, 2011). We will deepen the phenomenological interpretation of empathic experience later in the text, since it seems to fit better than other interpretations to the arguments proposed in this contribution.

Simulation theorists revived in the 1980s the idea that empathy is the primary epistemic means for understanding other minds. Using the neuroscientific finding of “mirror neurons” (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004) as a biological evidence for human ability of inner imitation, the simulation theory argues that we use ourselves as a model for the other person’s mental life. The system of “mirror neurons”, interpreted as playing a central role in establishing intersubjective relations between minded creatures, has been frequently accounted as the mechanism of basic empathy (Gallese, 2001, 2003; Stueber, 2006). In this perspective, empathy seems to be the psychological mechanism that allows us to apprehend directly another person’s emotions in light of his facial expressions and bodily gestures.

The discussion on empathy related phenomena within psychology mainly concerns with their role in interpersonal understanding and in driving prosocial behaviours (e.g. see Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; and Batson, 2009). The most widespread distinction we find in psychological literature stands between Affective Empathy and Cognitive Empathy, the former referring to the capacity to respond with an appropriate emotion to another’s mental state; while the second one identifies the ability to know and understand another’s perspective or mental state. Affective Empathy can be subdivided in Empathic Concern (sympathy for someone) and Personal Distress (emotional reactive distress at the sight of another’s distress). While Perspective-Taking (assuming another’s perspective) and Fantasy (projecting into the experience of fictional characters) are the two scales of Cognitive Empathy (Davis, 1983).

The amazing amount of different definitions and shades of meanings associated with empathy is an evidence of its importance for human and social sciences, for it is a response to the problem of the acknowledgment and understanding of the Other. At the same time, the difficulty to achieve a convergent signification of the concept of empathy keeps open its declination and interpretation in different domains of knowledge.

2. Empathy and Design

Design, particularly Design Thinking (DT), is one of the fields in which empathy is applied. In this contribution we will attempt to identify what types of empathy design has considered. Afterwards we will argue that another perspective on empathy in design could be advisable.

Empathy gained momentum as design began to account a more user-centred approach in the development of products and services. Methods and tools for building empathy with users are increasingly adopted in design practices such as user-centred design (UCD), human-centred design (HCD), participatory design (PD), and co-design (Co-D).

The adjective ‘empathic’ in relation to design was introduced in the late 1990s (Battarbee & Koskinen, 2005) when companies started to realise that customers’ responses on questionnaires were not enough to develop successful products (Leonard & Rayport, 1997; Sanders and Dandavate, 1999). Empathic design has rapidly evolved in response to the popular notion of design for user experience (Postma et al., 2012). Empathy is seen as the key for understanding others’ experiences and emotions. Therefore, designers are expected to focus on their empathic abilities in order to make interpretations of what people think, feel and dream, and to envision the experiences triggered by products or services.

In Empathic Design, the meaning of empathy that is called into question seems to be close to Cognitive Empathy discussed above, especially in the scale of Perspective-Taking. That is the ability to assume another’s perspective, imagining his/her emotions, thoughts, feelings. Toolkits for empathizing continue to evolve, yet they continue to be essentially based on various role-playing techniques.

Empathy has been acknowledged as a relevant skill also for Socially Responsible Design (SRD) (Cipolla & Bartholo, 2014). SRD stresses the value of empathy between designers and users to gain insights into users’ needs so as to answer to these needs more effectively. The various approaches to SRD aim at improving people’s life circumstances or living conditions. Transformation design (Burns, Cottam et al, 2006), for instance, focuses on the practice of design thinking applied to societal transformation on a local scale. The HCD toolkit (IDEO, 2009) comprehends procedures to gain empathy with communities’ experiences in order to identify their unmet needs. Still, this kind of design practices recalls Cognitive Empathy and Perspective-Taking as skills to develop within the design process.

Efforts to consider empathy in a different perspective can be found in some participatory design scholars. Ho and Lee (2012) draw attention on intersubjectivity and empathy as means by which opening up a communicative space between designers and users in participatory design processes. They refer explicitly to Husserlian empathy, i.e. a condition of possible knowledge of an existing outer world. In this perspective they suggest the practice of

“empathy in participatory design as the way of advancing the individual’s knowledge and experience through a reciprocal reflection between a person and the other” (Ho & Lee, 2012).

In this case, empathy is acknowledged in its phenomenological meaning of intentional intersubjective act, aimed at enhancing the quality of the interactions between designers and users within co-construction of solutions.

Taking empathy into account as a quality of intersubjective encounters represents a completely different viewpoint on the role of empathy itself in the design process. If Perspective-Taking is a skill designers should acquire and practice in order to develop more impactful, enjoyable and pleasurable products/services, the ability to relate more empathically with participants in co-design processes attempts to establish a dialogic design culture (Manzini, 2016) that results first and foremost in relational goods. In this respect the focus is transferred from the designer's ability to step into the Other's shoes, to the capacity of establishing a qualitative human relationship with other people (co-designers from different backgrounds within which designers are just some among others). The quality of the mentioned relationship should be congruent to the empathy degree, as empathy is the means to acknowledge and to experience the Other intersubjectively.

In this paper we will attempt to make a further step, arguing that the conditions for empathic experiences may be designed in order to make sense of human relationships.

3. Design and Relational Aesthetics

Why design should care for human relationships and their meaningfulness?

In recent years the concern of design culture with social issues has come to comprehend the very basis of society, i.e. the nature of social relationships.

Service designers in particular are increasingly aware of the central role that sociability plays in highly impactful projects. Scholars like Manzini and Cipolla noticed the emergence of a special kind of service configuration – defined as relational services – which requires intensive interpersonal relations to operate (Cipolla and Manzini, 2009). The term relational indicates that these services are based on face-to-face and non-anonymous interpersonal encounters. Meaning that, in these services, it is necessary to consider the participants mainly for their “presence” rather than for the “role” they perform in the service (Cipolla, 2009). To further understanding the interpersonal relational qualities of these innovative services, Cipolla provides an interpretative framework from the philosophy of Martin Buber. Buber's dialogical principle is based on the statement that “all actual life is encounter” (Buber, 1921) and identifies the nature of social relations in the “I-Thou” attitude that happens in-between two human beings.

The Buberian framework is an attempt to go beyond conviviality intended as an approach to service design (Cipolla, 2009). The reference to conviviality in turn recalls some key points of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics (1997).

The notion of Relational Aesthetics was coined by Bourriaud in the late 1990s as a category for understanding those contemporary art practices “which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context” (Bourriaud, 2002; 113).

According to Bourriaud the relational artwork takes intersubjectivity both as a point of departure and as an outcome, producing inter-human experiences. Moreover, relational artworks generate “moments of constructed conviviality” (Bourriaud, 2002; 44) and “new models of sociability” (Bourriaud, 2002; 28). The focus on sociability as an outcome of art practices has been taken by Eun Ji Cho (2013) as a theoretical foundation for approaching collaborative services design. Considering that service design has widened its attention from making services more useful, usable and desirable, to “supporting the emergence of a more collaborative, sustainable and creative society and economy” (Sangiorgi, 2011; 29)

Cho identifies a blind spot in the related literature with respect to the specificity of interpersonal interactions that collaborative services require to operate efficiently. Questioning how design can contribute to the quality of this interaction, Cho argues that service design, given the commonalities between relational art and collaborative services, could take sociability as a primary object following the conceptual framework of Relational Aesthetics.

4. The value of otherness and sociality

One of the fiercest criticism to Bourriaud's theory is Claire Bishop's argument for the impossible assessment of the intrinsic quality of the relationships produced by relational art (Bishop, 2004). Bishop focuses on the "criteria of co-existence" (Bourriaud, 2002; 109) that, according to the French theorist, we should question in front of any aesthetic product. Given that art produces human relations – she argues – "then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (Bishop, 2004; 65). Actually, the quality of the relationships in Relational Aesthetics are never examined or called into question. The communities generated by relational artworks are ephemeral, dependent on the duration of their exhibition. The members of these transitory communities identify with each other because they have something in common, i.e. they are art lovers and gallery-goers.

Sociability in this case is mere togetherness, determined by the occasion, harmonious and purified from conflicts and "antagonisms" (Bishop, 2004) which face-to-face encounters usually bring along in actual life. In other words, the concern of relational art with providing opportunities of physical encounters is a tentative response to the virtualization of human interactions brought by the Internet, social networks and augmented reality, but it fails to face the profound commodification occurred to the sense of sociality. Relational artworks set up "scenarios" in which indeed social relationships occur, yet in a superficial form that misses the actual sense of co-existence. On Bishop's account, relational artworks, addressing people who already share common interests, do not trigger any constructive debate or discussion that human diversities bring about. They connect people, create interactive, communicative experiences just for their own sake, never calling into question their profound social implications.

Supposing a similar criticism could be applied to design approaches resting on Relational Aesthetics, we argue that a different perspective on the role of empathy in design could be of crucial importance.

At this point it is useful to clarify what we mean by empathic experience and what interpretation of empathy we refer to. As we mentioned above, the phenomenological reading of empathy fits best for our argument, that stems from the experiential nature of empathy.

Within the phenomenological tradition empathy is taken as a unique kind of experience announcing, in the most direct possible manner, the actual presence of the Other's experience (Zahavi, 2009). For Husserl and Stein empathy is a basic, irreducible form of intentionality that is directed towards the experiences of the Other. This reading of empathy differs from both the aesthetic tradition and the psychological one for a fundamental aspect, i.e. that empathy is accounted as a basic interpersonal experience not entailing a total identification or a merging with the experienced object. It does not imply a blurring of one's self identity with the identity of another person (as it is, for instance, in Lipps). Empathy is the condition of a connection rather than a fusion self-other. In Husserl and Stein's view, empathy entails by necessity a difference between the subject of empathic experience and the subject of the empathized experience. In other words, empathy allows us to understand the Other's experience although without providing us a first-personal access to it. As Husserl wrote, "had one

had the same access to the other's consciousness as to one's own, the other would have ceased being an other, and would instead have become a part of oneself" (Husserl, 1973; 139).

And when I do have an authentic experience of another subject, I am exactly experiencing that the Other eludes me. To use the words of Dan Zahavi, "the otherness of the other is exactly manifest in his elusiveness and inaccessibility" (2001; 153).

In this perspective, the otherness of the Other is a value to be preserved in order to keep alive the primary conditions for meaningful social relationships to happen.

Following this reasoning, we intend empathy not as the possibility to be another and to experience how is it to step into his/her shoes. Rather we account empathy as the skill to be with another, to be really involved in the face-to-face encounter with a concrete Other, acquainting and accepting his/her otherness.

From this viewpoint, the empathic experience becomes the basic condition of disclosing intersubjective relationships, and consequently grounding the sense of sociality. Moreover, this reading of empathy seems to answer to Bishop's concerns about the lack of dialectical encounters that contribute to the construction of social identity.

5. Conclusion

If it is quite clear to what extent our account of empathy differs from the HCD toolkit prescription of the empathic approach to design – ultimately based on Perspective-Taking abilities of the designer – it may be not evident as well the discrepancies with the above mentioned design practices emphasizing the value of intersubjectivity, dialogue and sociability. Nevertheless, the main difference could be synthesized in our suggestion to shift from design WITH empathy to design FOR empathic experiences. The empathic experience, in our view, is per se an end to pursue, rather than a means designers can use to gain insights about end-users.

Given that an urgent issue to face today is the loss of the sense of sociality, we may need to find tools to design the conditions of empathic experiences to happen. If "what we need is a new design culture able to catch the profound sense of sociality" – to use Manzini's words (2015; 172) – then we argue that designing empathic experiences should be part of this culture as a way to face these meaningful challenges.

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