Being and Nature. The Aesthetic Ecocentrism

Adriano Pinho
University of Aveiro
adrianopinho@ua.pt
ORCID   0000-0002-6368-1523

Francisco Providência
University of Aveiro
fprovidencia@ua.pt
ORCID   0000-0002-6411-5267

Abstract
This article aims to understand how design aesthetics can actively contribute to a more sustainable and resilient society.
　　The methodology uses a tripartite analysis: literature review, case studies, and analysis of historical context.
　　The literature review was supported by an analysis of the philosophy of aesthetics and sustainability, case studies through examples of the ideals of ecocentric aesthetics and historical research as an ethnographic observation of the emergence of activism and its socio-artistic repercussions.
　　Ecocentric aesthetics is based on constructing an aesthetic language through sustainability, using "ugliness" to overcome social alienation by identifying beauty as the aesthetics of reception (mercantile pressure).
　　Propose through formal innovation, an activist role escaping the social functionalization of hyper-industrially, promoting a more conscious and accessible society, and a new language and knowledge that promotes resilience and preservation of life.

Keywords
Ecocentrism
Design aesthetics
Design theory
Circular economy
Sustainability

Introduction

This article aims to understand how aesthetics can promote resilience and the circular economy.

It resides under the hypothesis of ecocentrism as an ethical plan capable of guaranteeing the preservation of biodiversity and anticipating climate change. In its communicative urgency, it seeks an aesthetic suitable for the visibility of a new world. This means dealing with how humanity wants to experience its place. Aesthetics can play a crucial role, signifying ways of feeling and perceiving (Morton, 2007).

Form (aesthetics) results from two technical tasks: interpretation and communication; the first creative and the second productive. (Flusser, 2010). The form is the truth content (Adorno, 2020), it does not mean the outward appearance of which the content is clothed but rather the active, profound, determining and enigmatic principle of being (Suassuna, 1972). "Our analysis is directed at the claim objectively contained in its products to be aesthetic formations and thus representations of truth. "(Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 20).

Design insists on drawing the form revealing meaning justified by the symbolic, functional and constructive dimension it attributes to it. It humanises the world and anticipates time, invoking an intention (Providência, 2015).

Design appears to question customs, technologies and mentalities as an aesthetic practice. A design object is not for pure contemplation (Pombo & Calvera, 2019); there are many aesthetic issues involved in our relationships with objects, some of which have ramifications: moral, social, political or environmental (Saito, 2007), countering the alienation resulting from the hyper industrial age (Stiegler, 2018). Aesthetics inform the mediation of Design's artistic objectivity (Francalanci, 2006) and is essential to the human capacity to imagine more sustainable futures (Lehtinen, 2021).

Design takes the role of creator of the artificial through an abductive investigation, designing the artefacts, devices and services for cultural mediation (Providência, 2015), acting as a symbolic mobiliser for the progress of the ideas that materialise, promoting the future.

Is the discipline of concretion translating the collective imagination into forms through visual metaphors.

Aesthetics is knowledge through the senses that operate on the appearance of things. It is the way "things appear and is phenomenological, rather than structural, of the relation to what exists (Francalanci, 2006)".

Methodology

The methodology Fig. 1 used the analysis of the historical context (artistic, sociological and political), case studies and literature review, ensuring the triangulation of the information collected and its respective validation.

The literature review research focused on the philosophical nature of the issue, intending to find aesthetic theories in the context as proof of the defended thought.

literature review

research
methodology

case study

historical overview
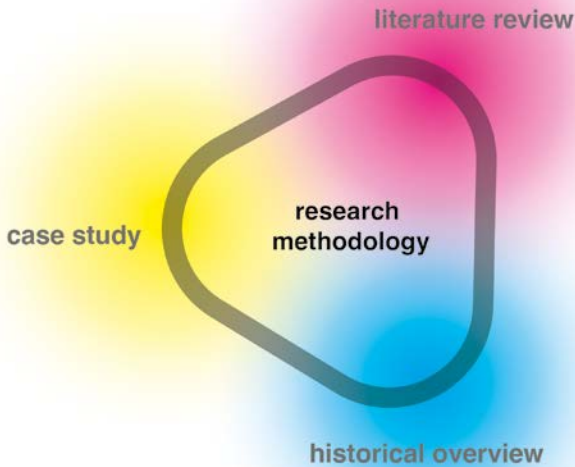
The historical analysis looked at artistic, political and social movements that represent the overcoming of classical thought and constitute movements of change in social thought concerning the problems they faced at the time they refer.

Finally, the analysis of case studies looked for artefacts that conceptually and formally represent the thoughts defended in the aesthetic opportunity to be presented, allowing the construction of a theoretical argument through their interpretation.

Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism values environmental conservation through a system that preserves the integrity and stability of the bioethical community and emphasises the qualities of human integration as a constructor of artificiality (Pepper, 1996), "an ecocentric ethic always has a homocentric justification" Merchant (2005, p. 49). Aligned with the scope of *Circular Design*, aesthetics stands out as a research model and a form of knowledge, considering aesthetic experience as a form of knowledge (Geiger, 1958).

Reflections coming from ecology remind us that knowledge of nature demonstrates the power of human beings but reinforces the notion of its limits (Clément et al., 1994), and Design is the most powerful tool with which humanity has learned to shape environ-

ments [and, by extension, society and itself] (Papanek, 1972). The aesthetics of nature as an aesthetic theory requires us to reformulate the subject of aesthetics. It is a theory of perception, understood as the experience of immersion of people, objects and environments in a reconstructed nature. Ecology is a science, but the ecological is a symbol, a sign and provides an opportunity to reflect and rethink inherited patterns of thought and behaviour critically. From an ecological view, the relationship between the environment's qualities and the mood becomes the leading interest for aesthetics (Böhme, 2017).

It is about *Dasein*, the presence of things, artworks, animals and humans. Ecological aesthetics was motivated by our problems with nature, more precisely, by our problems relating to it. Humankind's manipulation of nature shows signs of not being unlimited or unconditional. Humans are always dependent on nature. However, nature as a given is disappearing with the increasing technological advances (Böhme, 2017).

Sustainability refers to temporal resilience and durability in social, economic and cultural articulation. Consequently, there is, some friction between determining which elements should change and which should be sustained to increase overall sustainability.

This issue is of crucial importance in the sustainability transformations that Design may assist in making solutions more sustainable (Lehtinen, 2021), creating cultural, economic and environmental value, and offering more than they take (ensuring equity) (Penty, 2020).

From an aesthetic point of view, sustainable Design should aim to create durable objects that can be repaired, updated and reused (Harper, 2018), giving back to the disposable, consumerist condition of the market.

Only a design aware of its aesthetic dimension can participate actively, giving its interpretation to new problems (Calvera, 2003), not being hostage to its social functionalism.

Historical Context

Countercultures propose radical ruptures in art, science, philosophy and lifestyle. They advocate diversity and open communication, and the democratic sharing of their means of cultural production (Silva, 2018).

The poetic language of Dadaism annulled meanings and emphasised sonority, with the purpose that words simulated the urgency of a scream for revolt. The classical concept of beauty was replaced by asymmetry, disharmony, and disorder principles.

Now, questioning itself is used as a component of the work of art, especially after Duchamp's paradigmatic ready-made has come to have an interpretative character, opened up a logical divide between art and beauty, bridged by the Dada movement. In this gap between art and beauty, other aesthetic qualities, such as the Ugly, could emerge (Nolasco, 2010, p. 287). Nevertheless, the beauty in its aesthetic dimension surpasses the harmony to find in the dissonant the necessary truth (Adorno, 2020), admitting a new order.

The Dadaist art, or the Punk Movement, established the rupture with the established culture; the Dadaists grew, in the early

twentieth century, against all the standards of art, suggesting chaotic anti-art (Junior, 2015).

In the 1970s, artists viewed recycling as a method of material spiritualisation, constructing narratives focused on the idea of material dissolution in favour of a new existence based on the liberation of the useless in turn of a new utility (Eimert, 2013).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, these movements represented different socio-economic conditions, the urgency of safeguarding the ecosystem and mitigating the problems caused by the Anthropocene.

As an example, *Art Povera*, by dispensing with an end in itself, sacrificed its aesthetic dimension for an ethical functionalisation, demonstrating the complex connections generated in the world of things through the austere form using unconventional and "poor" materials, resorting several times to organic materials. Memory was a recurring theme, stimulating the observer to reflect on growth, death, dissolution, perishability and rebirth (Eimert, 2013).

The same is true of Land Art, using rocks and branches as raw materials. Wrapped in a romantic and ephemeral register of the presence of being, as a protest against the artificiality of life in the big city, opposing the "utilitarianism" of contemporary art, celebrating the smooth perfection of metallic and synthetic constructions. Indeed, the Land Artists' search for the elemental experience, cosmic approach to the earth and desire for a timeless world mark their work as a modern variant of the back-to-nature movement (Abromson et al., 1973; Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009).

Case Studies

Ore Streams, FormaFantasma

Ore Streams Fig. 2, Fig. 3 is an investigation by Formafantasma studio that transforms electronic waste into products, presenting various perspectives and reflections on the role of Design as an agent for the responsible use of resources.

Ore Stream raises awareness, through form, about the quantities of electronic waste produced (and discarded) and its mismanagement and low reuse.

Attributing an activist and reflexive dimension to artefacts, recalling the ugliness of alienated consumption, the rise of e-waste and digital consumption, they seek solutions to face more responsible management of the electronic society.

Conditions for Memory, Mel-Chin (1989)

Conditions for Memory is an installation of sculptures in New York's Central Park that intends to remind and alert the population to the extinction of the region's native species (The Sea Mink, Heath Hen, Passenger Pigeon, Labrador Duck).

Represented by the silhouettes, configured in an open mould as a representation of the impossibility of reviving these species. Furthermore, the various sculptures are accompanied by the extinction year as a reminder of the urgency of a paradigm shift.

Wallmakers

Wallmakers Architecture Studio is dedicated to constructing several buildings, having as a differentiator the use of unconventional materials such as clay, mud and waste and adopting Millenial construction practices for the construction of the structures.

They are concerned with using materials *in loco* (for example, the rocks used in the excavation) (About - WALLMAKERS, n.d.).

The Wallmakers studio re-establishes a connection to nature, positively taking advantage of its resources through an attitude of equity with the natural environment.

Campana Brothers

The Campana brothers develop various artefacts, with inherent environmental and social awareness, using waste materials and handmade products, such as the Pirarucu collection made in leather with fish of the same name, caught locally and in a sustainable way.

Fig. 2
Forma Fantasma, *Ore Streams*, Table make to the exhibition Ore Streams using technological waste, Adriano Pinho, Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris, 2022.

Fig. 3
Forma Fantasma, *Ore Streams*, Detail of Table make to the exhibition Ore Streams using technological waste, Adriano Pinho, Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris, 2022.

Likewise, the Stuffed Toys collection, a collection of chairs made of stuffed animals and toys that appropriates "cuddly" products resulting from the industrial massification of a society (environmentally exhausted), denounces alienating *fetishism* by designing products that are humorous, mysterious and disturbing.

The case studies presented, therefore, constitute an aesthetic thought based on the idea of activist representation and the resignification of the artificial, reclaiming, through the idea of social, cultural and economic sustainability, the social fetishism of the time, through the conceptual innovation of its forms.

Aesthetic Opportunity

The Ugliness, the aesthetics of the Ugly, may offer the resistance capable of escaping the alienation of the pseudo "beauty" (aesthetics of market reception (Adorno, 2020) in the emergence of modes of subsistence.

The ugly is consolidated from Modernity onwards as a mode of protest and opposition to the conventions and traditions in force (Altaf, 2014)

"As a poetic work, the design will find its vocation to unsettle the world, questioning it as truth (Providência, 2012, p. 124), and in this sense, the ugly will not exactly be the opposition to the beauty "because its negativity is not symmetrically opposed to positivity", but the urgency of an aesthetic of "immeasurable, all excess, everything that is not regulated, disciplined and contained" (Fianco, 2020, p. 11) characterising the experience of the new as truth until it is socially integrated consequently, neutralised as beauty.

The Ugly as works of art will allow capturing the meaning of life in the depth of human nature, offering the perception of the foundation of the disorder of the real, the natural and world vision in its beautiful and ugly qualities (Suassuna, 1972), being, therefore, its mission "to introduce chaos into order" (Adorno, 1951, p. 215).

The ugly is "inseparable from the concept of beauty", becoming eminently mimetic and critical of the existing world (Ferrer, 2017, p. 232), restoring to culture the representation of the world, not camouflaging it with the sublimation of beauty but exposing it cathartically, highlighting all the ugliness of society (Adorno, 2020; Fianco, 2020).

Beauty will always refer to a sublimated society submissive to material consumption called "progress" (Nolasco, 2010, p. 59), contributing to unsustainability and environmental disaster.

However, forms communicate, and their aesthetics play a creative and activist role, enabling the conception of a new moral idea (Fianco, 2020).

Aesthetic values are thus released through the socially ugly (Adorno, 2020) since the "question of the aesthetics of form, is thus not limited to a mere problem of taste, but constitute an ideological and above all moral problem (...)." (Providência, 2011, p. 281), "[Design] is the free position of the essence of a world. However, historically, they are creations. Objects, in time, are facts of decision and condition of deciding morally on beauty. A theme: beauty; a

structure: to be free among fellow creatures." (Lapa, 1968, p. 74).

Alienation is identified by Hegel as the divorce between "essence and existence" (Hegel, 1995; Macedo & Piccolotto, 2020) as if existence is trapped in a representation that distances us from our essence. It reached its peak not only due to capitalism (motivated by unconscious consumerism) but also due to the Modernity of technology; as stated by Benjamin (2010, 2012) and Flusser (2012; 2008), "The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives." (Debord, 2005, p. 16).

The solution pointed out by Herbert Read goes through a recomposition of the human psyche through art. For Read (1968), only art can give meaning to existence, "not only in the sense of overcoming alienation [from nature, society, the self] but also in the sense of reconciling the being with its destiny (Macedo & Piccolotto, 2020).

The ecocentric aesthetic is a proposal for innovation, escaping the alienation of beauty in the search for truth, ignoring the beauty that alienates and promotes the oblivion of the being.

The rough, imperfect and "poor" form of the materials used, without finishing, restores the material consciousness of (living) being that cohabits biomes over which it does not dominate.

It is proposed then the definition of an aesthetic language of Design aligned with the thoughts of the Circular Economy and 2030 Agenda, allowing through the poetics of *brutalism*, truth and austerity, as opposed to sublimation, based on the construction of the survival of the planet and consequently of the human being.

Therefore, the sustainability of ecocentric aesthetics considers the processes of materialisation through the comformation of ideas promoting longevity, material economy, form and its meaning, "solving" the system's problems and mediating communication with the remaining agents representing social conscience.

Art and Design are socially produced, a product of their time, but also a means of stepping back to speak against the institutions of society: "This contradiction is preserved and resolved in the aesthetic form which gives the familiar content and the familiar experience the power of estrangement" leading to the emergence of a new consciousness as well as new perceptions (Marcuse, 1972, p.41; Miles, 2016, p.8). The "estrangement" [ugliness] opens new critical possibilities, integrating the individual as an interpreter and key to resolving its enigmas.

Discussion

The proposal of this aesthetic language arises, from the need to find new ways of designing, with a view to a carbon-neutral society, ensuring the preservation of ecosystems and promoting local communities, equality and diversity, reminding the human being of his role as planetary manager.

The use of waste, austere forms and the reformulation of production processes will reveal a communicational form of activist resilience, allowing the cohabitation of all beings, guaranteeing the continuity of species and the survival of the human being.

Design will be [through aesthetics], an agent of change, building a better future, critically designing a safe planet mediating the various disciplines and reconfiguring artefacts, the economy and society (Rawsthorn & Antonelli, 2022)

The ecocentric aesthetic asserts itself as meta-design, "as an aesthetic contribution to the critical reformulation of society, thus increasing its life span, reducing the industrial impact [on nature] by incorporating more appropriate materials and more elaborate techniques, thus counterposing the deceleration of consumption for the conservation of biological and cultural diversity" (Providência, 2011, p. 280).

Therefore, the assumption of an ecocentric aesthetic language will represent new knowledge, fostering awareness through raw and austere forms and materials in the preservation of the ecosystem, which will create a rupture with unsustainable fetish patterns and alienation.

Adriano Pinho
PhD student and researcher member of MADE.PT (Critical Design for Development and Prosperity), ID+ Institute of Design, Media e Culture. His research interests are circular design, sustainable design, bio-design, and critical design.

Francisco Providência
Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro and coordinator of Research Group MADE.PT (Critical Design for Development and Prosperity), ID+ Institute of Design, Media, and Culture. He has had his design studio since 1985.

References

Abromson, M.C., Baumgard, F., Bihajji-Merin, O., Buchner, J., Buse, H., Chaplin, S., Cirici Pellicer, A., Claus, J., Claus, S., Decker, E., Dypreau, J., Fatouros, D. A., Fischer, Y., Fujieda, T., Gutbrod, K., Haftmann, W., Hall, D., Haycraft, R., Helms, D., & Wilson, S. (1973). *Dictionary of Twentieth Century Art* (1st ed.). Phaidon.

Adorno, T. (1951). *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1st ed.). Edições 70.

Adorno, T. (2020). *Teoria Estética* (2nd ed.). Edições 70.

Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (G. S. Noerr, Ed.). Standford University Press.

Altaf, G. (2014). *Marcas do Feio na Contemporaneidade*. Master Dissertation. Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

Benjamin, W. (2010). *A Obra de Arte na Época da sua Reprodução Mecanizada*. (1st ed.) Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema.

Benjamin, W. (2012). *Sobre Arte, Técnica, Linguagem e Política* [About Art, Technic, Language and Politics]. Relógio D'Água.

Böhme, G. (2017). *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres (Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces)*. (J.P. Thibaud, Ed.; 1st ed.). Routledge.

Calvera, A. (2003). *Arte¿?Diseño* (1st ed.). GG.

Chilvers, I., & Glaves-Smith, J. (2009). *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Clément, É., Demonque, C., Hansen-Love, L., & Kahn, P. (1994). *Dicionário Prático de Filosofia*. (1st ed.). Terramar.

Debord, G. (2005). *Society of the Spectacle*. Rebel Press.

Eimert, D. (2013). *Art of 20th Century*. Parkstone Press International.

Ferrer, D. (2017). Sobre a Estética do Feio em Karl Rosenkranz e Christian Hermann Weisse *Aoristo — International Journal of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Meta-physics*, 218–232. " "Fianco, F. (2020). Arte e Sociedade em "Teoria Estética" de Theodor Adorno. ARJ – Art Research Journal / Revista de Pesquisa Em Artes, 7(1). https://doi.org/10.36025/arj.v7i1.17844"

Flusser, V. (2010). *Uma Filosofia do Design - A forma das coisas.* Relógio d'Água.

Flusser, V. (2012). *O universo das imagens técnicas: elogio da superficialidade.* Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.

Flusser, V., Abi-Sâmara, R., & Cardoso, P. (2008). *O Mundo Codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação.* (1. reimpr). Cosac Naify.

Francalanci, E. L. (2006). *Estetica de los objetos*. Epublibre.

Geiger, M. (1958). Problemática da Estética e a Estética Fenomenológica (N. Araujo, Ed.). Progresso Editora.

Harper, K. H. (2018). *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage*. Routledge.

Hegel, G.(1995). *Filosofia da História* (D. P. Lomba, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Universidade de Brasília.

Junior, D. (2015). *Futurismo, Dadaísmo e Modernismo como influência do movimento punk.* In P. Perazzo, C. Peruzzo, R. Rossetti, & M. Caprino (Eds.), *Comunicação e Cultura: Aproximações com memória e história oral*.

Lapa, A. (1968). *Entrevista a Álvaro Lapa*. In E. Dionísio, A. Faria, & L. S. Matos (Eds.), Situação da Arte - Inquérito Junto de Artistas e Intelectuais ortugueses. Publicações Europa América.

Lehtinen, S. (2021). *Aesthetic Sustainability. In C. P. Krieg & R. Toivanen (Eds.),* Situating Sustainability: A Handbook of Contexts and Concepts (pp. 255–268). Helsinki University. Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-14

Macedo, L., & Piccolotto, D. (2020). *Um estudo da obra "Arte e Alienação: O papel do Artista na Sociedade, de Herbert Read*. Revista Eletrónica de Arte, Educação, Comunicação& Design, 1(2).

Marcuse, H. (1972). *The Aesthetic Dimension : Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Beacon Press.

Merchant, C. (2005). *Radical Ecology: the search for a livable world* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Miles, M. (2016). *Eco-aesthetic dimensions: Herbert Marcuse, ecology and art.* Cogent Arts & Humanities, 3(1), 1160640. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1160640

Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.

Nolasco, A. (2010). *Transgressões do belo: Invenções do feio na arte contemporânea portuguesa*. PhD Thesis. Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa.

Papanek, V. (1972). *Design for the real world: human ecology and social change* (1st ed.). Pantheon Books.

Penty, J. (2020). *Product design and sustainability: strategies, tools and practice*. Routledge.

Pepper, D. (1996). *Modern Environment an Introduction*. Routledge.

Pombo, F., & Calvera, A. (2019). *Beauty for Design History: On track to Design Aesthetics*. In MADE. PT - Design Crítico para o Desenvolvimento e Prosperidade (pp. 92–103). ID+ - Instituto de Design, Media e Cultura.

Providência, F. (2011). *Design para os museus: Os museus enquanto objectos desenhados.* Boletim Cultura de Vila Nova de Famalicão, III (6/7).

Providência, F. (2012). *Poeta, ou aquele que faz: a poética como inovação em design*. PhD Thesis. University of Aveiro.

Providência, F. (2015). *Inovação: contributos do design para o desenvolvimento económico e social*. Universidade de Aveiro.

Rawsthorn, A., & Antonelli, P. (2022). *Design Emergency: Building a Better Future* (1st ed.). Phaidon.

Read, H. (1968). *Arte e alienação: o papel do artista na sociedade*. Zahar Editores.

Saito, Y. (2007). *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.

Silva, D. (2018). *Marginalidade e design: origens e desdobramentos do Punk*. Blucher Design Proceedings, 512–523. https://doi.org/10.5151/cid2017-45

Stiegler, B. (2018). *Da Miséria Simbólica / A Era Hiperindustrial*. (L. Lima & N. Quintas, Eds.; Vol. 1). Orfeu Negro.

Suassuna, A. (1972). *Iniciação à Estética* (1st ed.). Editora José Olympio.

Wallmakers. (n.d.). *About*. https://www.wallmakers.org/about