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# Ubiquitous Design. Ethnographic glances toward syncretisms, polyphonies, meta-fetishisms

Massimo Canevacci\*

Università Roma la Sapienza & Universidade de Sao Paulo

\*Corresponding author e-mail: maxx.canevacci@gmail.com

**Abstract:** My paper will connect ubiquitous subjectivity and ethnographic perspective: a montage of cultural fragments selected from social networks and visual artists, digital communication and urban panoramas. The ethnographic experiences based on material/immaterial fieldwork may offer a decentred methodological perspective in order to face, decipher and invent the contemporary forest of symbols. Anthropology applied to design produces syncretic, ubiquitous, polyphonic transfusions about different cultures, codes, styles. This is the focus for an “undisciplined” design oriented by a multi-sited methodology. Ubiquity revolves around spaces/times relationship through the ethnographic method of field research, expanding syncretic concepts in digital/auratic cultures. My paper faces the concept of ubiquity through web-culture and performative ubiquitous subjects. Ubiquitous design may prepare researchers for the encounter with the stranger, the uncanny, the unknown. Ubiquitous ethnography is experienced everyday by everyone through “incoherent” self-representation pulses. Ubiquitous researcher is driven toward unknown beauties directed by exact imaginations and astonished glances.

**Keywords:** Ubiquity, Ethnography, Fetishism

## 1. Meta-fetishisms

“Send these images of me through the internet out into the universe, where I will continue my out-of-body existence”

(Cronenberg, 2014, p.99)

My paper will present an anthropological perspective on time and space through the syncretic or dislocated meaning of ubiquity: *ubiquitimes*. Digital cultures and communication are going to transform the classical distinction of space-and-time, favouring the expansion of a decentred and non-linear experiences of spacetimes. A strong metaphorical use of ubiquity has been used recently on web-culture, first of all by Mark Weiser. A shared affirmation is that the web is ubiquitous and so *ubiquities* characterizes internet’s space-time (human and not-human) relations. *Ubiquitimes* also expands a restless montage of syncretic concepts and polyphonic methods in digital culture.

Following Mark Weiser:

“Ubiquitous computing names the third wave in computing. First were mainframes, each shared by lots of people. Now we are in the personal computing era, person and machine staring uneasily at each other across the desktop. Next comes ubiquitous computing, or the age of calm technology, when technology recedes into the background of our lives”.

About his statements, the most uncanny is the second one:

- The more you can do by intuition the smarter you are
- The computer should extend your unconscious
- Technology should create calm.

The extension of unconscious along the mindful body of any user is connected with my research about the mutation of classical fetishism in a more challenging meta-fetishism. Industrial design was based on Eurocentric fetishism. I'll try to expose a different perspective on contemporary visual fetishisms disseminated along communicational metropolis and digital technologies. Fetishism (from Latin facticius) has been gravely misunderstood by hegemonic culture. I call meta-fetishism my critical Project: meta-fetishisms re-enacts meta-morphosis and performs the irreducible desires to change identities, forms, bodies, beings. Meta-fetishisms try to liberate traditional stereotypes based on colonialisms (feitiço), alienations (Marxism), perversions (Freudism), common sense (everything); to mix organic/inorganic, material/immaterial, skin/screen, flesh/technology; to cross histories and myths; to vivify what - or who - is inanimate (objects, things, commodities); to discover sensorial attractors.

Meta-fetishisms and meta-morphosis may expand ethnographic design and subvert the “state of things”: because things do not have a state but individualized movements. A meta-fetishist design elaborates a process to move beyond the dualism between subject/object and toward a not-anthropocentric anthropology. My ethnographic design has the fluid physiognomy of a conceptual constellation, where wandering researchers may practice the multi-sited ethnography, expanding design and mixing subject/object, nature/culture, space/time.

Here I'll select four authors: Bialetti, Pesce, De' Barbari, Waldo.



Figure 1. BIALETTI'S meta-fetishist funeral

In this image taken during Bialetti's funeral (2016), it is possible to see that inside the moka machine there are the Bialetti's ashes: his body-corpse mixes the living and the dead, commodities and bones, organic and inorganic. So everyday it is possible to listen the breath of the thing metamorphing in spiritual coffee. My interpretation is simple: this ritual it is possible only now, when the sensibility has been changed, the sacred and the profane are mixed just like a coffee blend, when the dust is becoming a perfumed spirit. Or a ghost... Bialetti will be famous not only for his mustache designed in front of his moka, but also for having experimented the transition from traditional fetishism to a syncretic meta-fetishism. If the coffee machine has the classical pattern of industrial design, his funeral transform it in a unique experience. Bialetti's funeral is the experience design based on an emerging ubiquitous meta-fetishism.

Applying Cronenberg's literary vision, Bialetti will continue to be present in his out-of-body existence. Cronenberg and Bialetti together may perform a very syncretic connection.

Gaetano Pesce is the individualized design. It attests to the radical transition from industrial design (in which objects were multiplied industrially) to customized design. In his vision, every single object needs to be assigned to each single person. The object is individualized, thus "it" becomes more-than-object, a über-object: a unique product that incorporates the subject's expanded biography.

Anthropomorphism is a decisive style: each object is the portrait of a person and vice versa (a black-mirror). The relation between metamorphoses and metafetishism becomes very clear in this example, in which the codes transit between different beings. He explains: "The time of the copies is gone. Design no longer produces copies, only originals. Plural identities".



Figure 2. Gaetano Pesce, Poltrona antropomorfa (Photo by Canevacci).

Gaetano Pesce attests the radical transition from industrial design (the objects were indefinitely multiplied) to customized design. A single object is predicted to every single person, which in turn is individualized: it becomes more-than-an-object, an uber-object: a single piece incorporating the biography of the subject. His methodological concept is "the irresistible charm of the unexpected". It may seem paradoxical, but in this philosophy the only outcome that can be expected is the defective one. If the series work with repeated leveling, a defect becomes uniqueness and unrepeatable that makes "us" different from each other. Defectiveness is the tool that breaks down the purity of the somatic treaty or the skin, even reducing the diktat of the philosophy of the beautiful. A defect is unrepeatable and undisciplined in the sense that it does not remain locked up in the magic circle of standardization. His Non Standard Project inserts the differentiation virus inside typologies that seemed immovable in industrial design. Digital cultures extend from humans to objects, both constitutive as beings with the right to beauty and their own subjective singularity.



Se Warhol imaginou a sua obra como espelho de uma sociedade baseada em “serial production”, Pesce extrai o objeto da produção massificada e lhe oferece um caráter único. O seu design esclarece a perspectiva que atravessa este ensaio em direção a uma antropogia-não-antropocêntrica.



Figure 3. Jacopo De' Barbari: Pacioli



Figure 4. Black Mirror: Waldo

On the left: in this painting, De' Barbari represents the fundamental connection between science and arts (and beauty!) that should be an imperative for any designer: Pacioli invented the divine perspective, but why on his left side there is a young and beautiful “fiorentino”? The painter metaphor is so clear that it's time to apply it to contemporary inventive design. On the right, the image of a very special design, Waldo, a meta-morphic person whose violent discourse is politically uncorrect, anticipating Trump and many other actual politicians. My statement through such a montage is the Digital Bottega: a creative relation between ethnography and design have to re-enact the Renaissance bottega, where the maestro and some young apprentices were undisciplined artists/artificers, in connection with contemporary digital communication.

## 2. Ubiquitimes

Since its linguistic (and theological) invention, the concept of ubiquity is free from any empirical matrix. Ubiquity is an abstract condition mystically tied to a divine being. Ubiquity is the ontology of the sacred, a tension beyond human's dualistic distinctions (body and soul, heaven and earth) and the mere institution of religion. The monotheistic religion was (and still is) interested in the control of orthodox dogma and behaviour in everyday life. Ubiquity is not a result of a daily life's empirical experience as the simultaneity is: ubiquity belongs to the visionary perception of the invisible in which the human condition is constantly observed by God without any secret places to escape to, as this ubiquitous being reaches you everywhere.

In contemporary times, ubiquity plays a logical-sensorial immanence to a material/immaterial character; expresses tensions beyond dualism, that simplified feeling in which binary oppositions are functional in connecting everyday's complexity into the dichotomous domain of the hegemonic ratio. In this perspective, ubiquitous visions is moving beyond any fix identity of things and beings where, thanks to the ubiquitous quality, unlimited poetic and political visions are wandering.

Ubiquitous is exact imagination's potentiality connected to digital cultures.

The ubiquitous movement has expanded in recent years in relation to ethnography. Since then, research on web-ethnography has considerably developed. Exchanges between different cultures have been seen and analyzed in the past, as the dissolution of weaker cultures. These exchanges between different cultures were perceived as structurally and tropically tristes, destined to an anthropology disorder; on the contrary, this is a challenge where the active blendings are characterized by syncretisms not by passive approvals. The ethnographer is no longer only an anthropologist: also the so called native is anthropologist and artist.

My identity as a researcher does not remain the same, as it simultaneously develops diagonal relations, using expressions from different glocal methodological areas, which happen to be increasingly less geographically but more emotionally characterized. This identity is more flexible in relation to its industrialist past. Hence, the ethnographic glance is ubiquitous as it is trained to decipher conflicting codes, whilst practicing equally differentiated modules.

The 'me' researcher places her/himself in this situation of ubiquity, immersed in his own personal subjective experience and in the instant-relationship with the other, also equally ubiquitous, with his digitized communicational system activated at that moment. This experience does not mean the dematerialization of interpersonal relationships. A complex psycho-physical network is certified, optical and manual connections, certainly cerebral and imaginary ones that shift in such apparent immobility and the experience of the subject, as well. The obvious psychological implications would need a specific research, along with a self-searching on the part of the subject-ethnographer, who experiments on her/himself these accelerated transformations. The ubiquitous ethnography expands a connective multivocality.

### 3. Montage

Incongruous montage may be a perspective for syncretic design. In the first half of the past century, some authors affirmed the importance of the method based on montage independently from each other and through different disciplines. The influence of cinema was not determining in selecting the authors. Indeed: Thomas Mann, Walter Benjamin, Gregory Bateson, Zaha Hadid were inspired respectively by classical music, urban experience, narrative epistemology and digital architecture.

My syncretic montage:

Thomas Mann wrote to Adorno, the secret councillor of Doctor Faustus: "What I would especially like to make sense of is the method of montage, that goes through the whole book" (2003: 13). Walter Benjamin in the *Passagen*: 'This work's method: literary montage' (1962:595). Gregory Bateson in *Naven*: "Explanation is about the fitting together of data" (1988:264). Finally, Zaha Hadid in an interview about diagonal forms: "I always think about how we can put the object together" (2012:20).

The methodological montage applied here is designing an ubiquitous constellation: a sidereal concept composed by different planets or meteors wandering in an area that is difficult to define. In its diversified movements, the vague constellation includes visual configurations, compositional narratives, empirical contexts, irregular logics and incongruous intersections. My ubiquitous constellation is an ethnographic design in which any concept intones a polyphonic composition and draws acoustic dissonance expressing a physiognomic vision.

## 4. Constallation

My ubiquitous ethnography project is based on an astonished methodology applied to performative processes, co-design activities and dislocated researches. Every wandering subject who wants to practice this ubiquitous ethnography has to live the astonished experience of a dissonant polyphony, i.e. transform himself/herself in an ubiquitous designer. This processual composition has the physiognomy of a moving constellation, where wandering/wondering researchers are elaborating visual imaginations, connecting fragmented montages of familiar/ stranger cultures, creating experience design. This is a conceptual design of my ethnographic constellation based on pragmatic experiences:

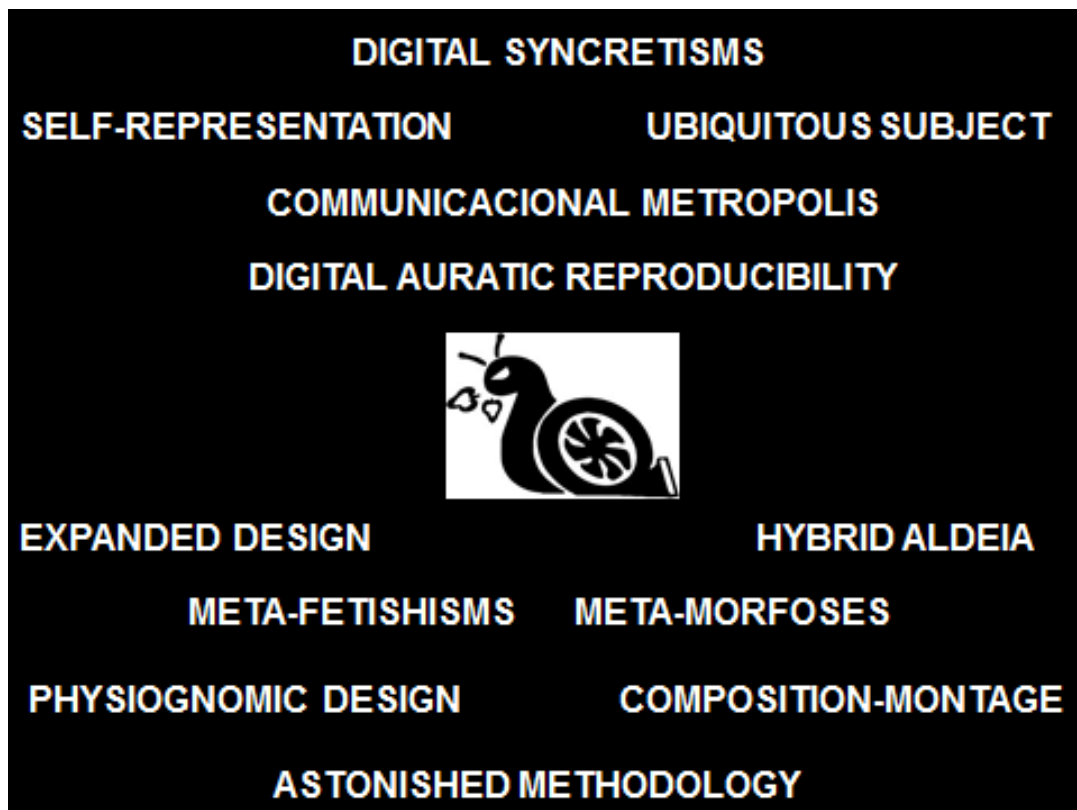


Figure 5. My wandering constellation

The snail running slowly may be the oxymorous for an ubiquitous designer. All around it is possible to look at my wandering constellation of concepts where I will try to fix for a while my undisciplined movement.

- **Self-representation.** The question of ‘Who represents who?’ takes up Marx’s criticism of the division of labor. The current accelerated digital-industrial context has produced a different kind of ‘division’: a division between those who communicate and those who are communicated; between those who historically have had the power of narration and those who are in the lonely state of being narrated. This is precisely why that specific linguistic knot exists, binding ‘those who represent’ to ‘those who are represented’, according to the communicational division of labor. It is a division that should be addressed in experimental methods and the pragmatics of researches. A visual hierarchy of the dominant logic has separated those who have the power to represent the Other from those who should continue to be represented as part of an eternal human panorama. The “native” use of digital technology facilitates a decentralized network disruption not comparable to the one produced



with analogic technology. The Ubiquitous ethnographer does not focus any more on how “we” represent the “other” in a hierarchical and dichotomic pattern. Hence, the traditional approach as the only legitimate framework for representing the Other is obsolescent. There is no unified we or other: there is a different kind of subjectivity creating a wandering design.

- **Physiognomic Design.** Physiognomy is another empirical concept that we have to apply in-between teaching and researching. Physiognomic design is a visual configuration that absorbs the psycho-cultural “character” of any object in relation to a customer or user. A techno-digital product has the physiognomy of a connective person that unifies public and private life. An iPhone has a personality and this personality has a specific physiognomy based on the extension of classical fetishism. iPhone is a living subject. The physiognomic fetishism unifies subject and object through a proteiform de-individualized individuality. In my exact imagination, the physiognomic composition of the wandering design must present a different kind of fetishistic physiognomy that liberates any reification that characterized the regressive pattern of the homologated industrial society. The exact imagination has a meta-fetishist physiognomy. The same so-called “objects” of research manifest a personality full of individualities.

- **Communicational Metropolis.** Communicational metropolis is quite different from the industrial city or the modernist metropolis, principally for its relations with the expansion of de-centred communication, digital culture, performative consumer styles. These mutations produce a deeper connection between economic value and cultural values, such as lifestyles, worldviews, beliefs and mythologies. The communicational metropolis offers an auroral panorama potentially beyond metaphysical dualisms, industrialist paradigms, sociological dialectics. There is no sociologically defined centre, but a differentiated cultural polycentrism. Consumption, communication and culture are disseminated in the material/immaterial urban territory, with an increasing importance regarding post-industrial production of design. This ubiquitous polycentrism develops performative personalities beyond the massified audience of the industrial age. These pluralised and fragmented subjects desire to perform – and design - consumption, communication, and lifestyle. From an ethnographic perspective, the contemporary metropolis is located at the intersection between self-representation, public art, digital culture, trans-urban subject.

- **Digital Auratic Reproducibility.** The concept Digital Auratic Reproducibility is emerging along the process of my research about meta-morphic fetishisms. Performing arts, expanded design and digital communication are morphing the aura into reproducibility and vice versa. DAR is related to the mutant concept of ubiquity. It seems to me that the immanent sensoriality of ubiquity is disseminating the traditional opposition between space and time. The web is ubiquitous and ubiquity is going to portray multivital subjectivities in a simultaneous mixing of space-time relationships through social networks. Instead of dialectic opposition between aura and reproducibility, the digital articulations mix these perspectives that, instead of dichotomic, have become syncretistic, polyphonic, and diasporic. This reproducible aura – an aporia for dialectical thinking – is the concrete perspective of a ubiquitous designer.

- **Astonished Methodology.** The epistemological transformations of ethnography explain the concept of astonished methodology. It is an innovative way to position your mindful body in a porous dimension to look for the unknown. It is a positional practice that aims at opening the self-researcher

corporeality and prepare him/her for the encounter with the stranger: a stranger which, precisely because unknown, is desired. This encounter is essential in ethnography and in design. The most important moment for any researcher is when he/she has the chance to encounter someone or something radically uncanny. If the Unheimlich had the characteristic to invert the stranger in familiar, the contemporary uncanny is a complex mixing and re-mixing of stranger and familiar. The researcher has to be prepared when – in an excess of serendipity - that meeting actually happens. He/she must be trained to face the unknown. Carpe codex: grasp the code when it is facing you as a still unknown, stranger or odd image.

**-Digital Syncretisms.** The concept of syncretisms may be the keyword to focus on one of the most important anthropological challenges: how to mix different cultures, identities, styles and voices without eclecticism or exoticism. Syncretisms are global polyphonic movements beyond (not against) the radical fundamentalisms or neo-racist statements toward the pure or authentic culture or religion. Polyphonic and dissonant syncretisms are offering a cosmos-political perspective through an ethnographic glance. The actual meaning of syncretism is autonomous from any religion: syncretism is a re-enacting concept as well as a disruption statement, beyond the traditional meaning of philosophical superficiality or religious cut-up. A significant cosmopolitan public is attracted by a progressive trend toward syncretisms: an assemblage of cultural fragments selected from movies, artists, musicians, fashion designers, pieces of literature or essays. This vagrant ethnography through different textual montage is experienced everyday by everyone and, at the same time, is connected to the vague research of beauty. Digital syncretisms are liberating the depth of surfaces, the abstraction of thought, and an endless ethnographic aesthetics in order to prepare the researcher for the encounter with the unknown and thus desired stranger.

## 5. Wandering Conclusion

Physiognomic is a meta-fetish concept ethnography may apply to design. A Physiognomic Design is a visual configuration that absorbs the "psycho-cultural character" of any object in relation to any user. A great political problem is emerging: a digital product has a personal physiognomic that unifies public and private sphere. So an iPhone embodies a specific personality and a physiognomic expanding and modifying the classic fetishism. iPhone is a live and sensorial subject. In practice, this subject/object being is creating his/her/its aesthetic and behavioral power through a personalized physiognomy. A design crossing ethnography observes and co-creates objects that always more elaborate forms and sensorialities of subjects. To invent altered physiognomies - still nonexistent but present in the personality of humanized "things" - favors the alliance between meta-fetishisms and meta-morphoses: it reinvents the widespread human desire to change forms, identities, experiences, to travel between human, animal, vegetal, mineral, divine...

Wandering along my Ubiquitous Constellation, it is possible to look at these eight pragmatic concepts as an applied methodology in order to face the challenge towards some undisciplined perspectives of ubiquitous design. Self-representation - Physiognomic Design - Communicational Metropolis - Digital Auratic Reproducibility - Astonished Methodology - Digital Syncretisms can be interpreted in terms of a multiple logic as well as of an emotional chain or - better - as a Moebius Ring, where every concept will be crossing and mixing with the others. Along this line, if we want to elaborate an experimental lab for anthropological fieldwork, it is crucial to re-think the conventional identity of students and professors. Then, we have to perform the mutant relation between contemporary metropolis and digital communication, looking for hybrid styles, phantasmic codes,

unresolved images, dissonant soundscape, uncanny artists, unknown interstices. At this point, we can present some primary iconic draft, whose physiognomy may be temporary and progressively determined through an emotional dialogical discussion. We have to remember the importance of communicating through an articulated communication: body-language, metaphors, the context and so on. This meta-communication approach involves the deep methods we are trying to present. There will be no innovation without a meta-communication and self-consciousness involving not only the subject but also the object present in the lab-scene. The astonishing meta-communication and multi-sited perspective is transforming the "normal" sensorialities and identities: the dualistic dichotomy between subject and object is melting in the air of pixel. We have to cross and to mix the traditional logical as well as expressive dichotomy. The ethnographic design is a living object/subject. He/she has his or her own complex personality, multiple identities, sensorial idiosyncrasies, logical affinities, erotic syntony. And, above all, an astonishing physiognomy.

The expanded design involves a multitude of applications in music (sound-scape), ethnicity (ethno-scape), mass-media (media-scape), fashion (fashion-scape), cinema (sound-designer), internet (web-designer), in urban communication etc. I want to underline the expanded design through a dialogue between two anthropologists: George Marcus and Paul Rabinow:

"The term design expresses the primacy of inquiry and data over theory, which all four of us affirm as an essential feature of anthropological knowledge production. The **design studio** - a phrase developed with the architectural design studio or lab meetings in the sciences in mind - is the institutional space for teaching an anthropology informed by the design concept".

In other words:

"The design studio could be a place in which students could be taught - could experience - how to anthropologize all the information that they have assembled on their particular topic before they actually begin fieldwork".

Anthropologizing information develops a decentralized attention towards each expressive fragment elaborated more or less spontaneously in the research process; one learns to look at the micrological details of the local culture itself; The results of this detailed observation are applied in the more open or glocal scenarios: a mixture of local and global. This suggests that the profile of the designer needs to be based on the ethnographic method and applied in fieldwork, in which this concept is not only the traditional empirical field (urban or indigenous), but simultaneously and ubiquitously the spaces/times of digital technoculture. The design-studio project faces the challenge of crossing and mixing anthropology and the arts in the direction of expanded design.

Therefore, also a concept is design.

The ethnography of design is outlined as vague in the object (the works) and in the method (the wandering gaze). Ethnography is an undisciplined methodological wandering, the ethnographer moves, moves deslocated and walks with abandoned slowness (surrender) attentive to the smallest details. The ethnographic designer observes everything that is vague and, observing him/herself, continues to wander.

Design is vague to the ethnographer because it incorporates both the evasive beauty that characterizes its "object", and the act of the self-producing as a transitive subject. The wandering transite is reflexive, dislocating ubiquitously between object-design and itself, discovering the uncanny inconsistency of this dichotomy.

The vague design and wandering ethnographer intersect and disperse themselves in cultural syncretisms and ubiquitous subjectivities.

The wandering designer becomes an ethnographer, in the sense that it is in the wandering that you can find the stranger, that you can absorb the different, the disturbing other. Irreducible fragments may be joined and exposed in various works - syncretically. Wandering in search of the vague is the methodological practice of the ethnograph designer who elaborates ubiquitous and syncretic encounters.

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About the Authors:

**Massimo Canevacci** is Professor of Cultural Anthropology – University of Rome "La Sapienza", Visiting Professor in the University of São Paulo (IEA-USP, Brazil).