

Designing Concerns. Bruno Latour und das Transformation Design

by Peter Friedrich Stephan (2024) Bielefeld, transcript, 513 pp.

Christian Dayé 

Graz University of Technology

The ambition of this book is to establish a channel of interdisciplinary communication between STS and design studies. Its author, Peter Friedrich Stephan, is a recognized design scholar and professor for transformation design at the Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln in Cologne, Germany. He finds foundations of such a channel between STS and design in the work of Bruno Latour, who himself, as Stephan repeatedly cites, conceived of design playing an important role in the transformation of the project of modernity: “[W]hy not,” Latour asks in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, “transform this whole business of recalling modernity into a grand question of design?” (Latour 2013, 23, *emphasis in original*).

For Stephan (2024, 36), design negotiates the relations of use and changes of use (“Nutzung und Umnutzung”), habit and irritation, normality and particularity. In its most general form, design brings something into existence that modifies existing practices. This conception of design as a practice resonates with the work of Latour. In particular, Stephan elaborates on a set of Latourian terms and endeavours: the notion of Dingpolitik (Latour 2005), an understanding of concerns and the projects that involved visual techniques like drawing and mapping.

Despite his deep engagement with the Latourian œuvre, Stephan stays alert of the shortcomings of Latour’s work: its terminological and logical inconsistencies, and in particular its recurrent misleading examples.

Where Latour is right, he is often not breaking new ground, and where he is breaking new ground, he is often not right. [...] Latour’s approach is original, but it ignores the current state of discourse in design. (p. 27, *own translation*)

Thus, a mutual rapprochement of STS and design promises to benefit both sides. For design, Latour offers, indeed, a “system” of thought (cf. Latour 2010, 607) that is productive in reorienting the self-concept of design towards its new role widely called “transformation design.” Latour’s system can do this just because of its inconsistencies and voids. And for STS, the current state of debates in design can provide anchors for lifting Latourian theorizing to a new level of sophistication.

The book is structured into three parts. Part A discusses the state of the art of design and argues based on a brief review of the field's history why it might profit from a more thorough engagement with Latour's works, and in particular with Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). It finds a convergence in the projects of polity, design, and Latourian theorizing in that under the conditions of a pluriverse, their task is to work towards (or compose) a future coherent world. Part B then turns to the writings of Latour to excavate and re-construct the role that design plays in his thinking. Again, due to inconsistencies, this is not an easy task, but Stephan succeeds in writing an introduction to decisive parts of Latour's works that most likely is accessible to designers. And Part C merges Latour's ideas on concerns with a design-focused approach to concerns developed by the author. Based on examples from his own studies, Stephan explains that his approach to concern design might be understood as a development and update of earlier frameworks of design, in particular of Sozio-Design proposed by Bazon Brock and others (cf. p. 374).

But what are concerns? On various occasions, Latour juxtaposed matters of fact with matters of concern to emphasize, amongst others the role of (public) interests in the definition and (dis-)stabilization of facts. Matters withdrawn from reasonable debates (facts) might become matters of public dispute (concern).

From this, Latour derives a design task: visualizations should be created that illustrate the controversies surrounding matters of concern. Design should thus contribute to a *Parliament of Things* and enable a reset of modernity. (p. 27, *own translation*)

Stephan, however, is critical of Latour's treatment of the phrase matters of concern, arguing and partly showing that Latour could have spent more effort to increase the phrase's terminological clarity. For instance, given Latour's fascination with Gabriel Tarde, Stephan (e.g., pp. 263-264) wonders why he didn't take up the latter's term of "passionate interests" to suggest that matters of concern are the "fabric of vectors and tensors which defines the attachments of people and assets" (Latour and Lépinay 2009, 39). Also, Stephan explains that the "specifications" that Latour made in his second Spinoza Lectures in 2005 (cf. Latour 2008, pp. 47-48) – matters of concern have to matter, have to be liked, have to be populated, and have to be durable – did more to obscure his thoughts than to specify them. In addition, Stephan shows that the varying ways in which "matters of concern" have been translated into German minimized the term's potential impact (cf. pp. 182-183).

According to Stephan, it is best to conceive of concerns in design as "values in action," thereby following Latour and ANT in acknowledging the assemblage of various elements as place of agency and of their (necessarily incomplete) mutual definition. ANT and concern design share the characteristic that their vocabulary allows for describing aspects that have hitherto been only partly recognized. "Yet, while ANT upvalues the contribution of material elements in chains of action, concern design complements their psychological aspects" (p. 335). This helps answering a question that Latour had left open, the question of why and how chains of action are initiated. In line both with Latour's views on the Anthropocene and humanity's responsibilities in *Facing Gaia* (Latour 2017) and with the more general principles of transformation, Stephan claims that the task of design may be to "temporarily stabilize

the driving forces of concerns in *cultural formats*” (p. 336). Doing so with an emphasis on *matters of concern* might help avoid the trap of unjustified collectivities, like “the social” in social design, and allow for a stronger focus on Dingpolitik.

Stephan’s book is timely insofar as the reception of Bruno Latour is ongoing with unabated power even after his untimely death and includes more and more disciplines outside his own core areas of engagement. Its presentation of Latour’s work is informed and informative. While at times repetitive, the writing across the three parts nonetheless ensures that these parts may be read separately, which makes them more usable in teaching. However, as regards the main mission to encourage a mutual rapprochement of STS and design, it remains to be seen if Latour is a good strategic choice. STS appears to find itself in a momentum where the interest in practice-oriented research is declining in favour of a re-assessment of macro-sociological power relations and the political economies governing (and manifesting themselves) in recent developments in science and technology. Certainly, design scholars have well-developed sensibilities in tracing power inequalities in objects – yet, whether these sensibilities will be conveyed over a bridge leading through Latour and ANT can be doubted.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that Stephan’s book encourages others to forge further between STS and design – an encouragement, we should add, not only at design scholars but also at STS scholars.

References

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