

What does Gore-Tex have to do with the impermeability of social structures in the era of social flexibility?

By Diego Castro.

From fake PhD theses by prominent politicians over short-lived cheap electronic products to the ephemerality of human relations in so-called “networking”: superficiality seems increasingly to be the keyword for many developments in our late capitalist society.

Lack of sustainability, planned obsolescence of industrial products, disappearance of artisanal skills and accelerated consumption are conditions, which today not only lead to ecological problems. The work ethics and modes of production of late capitalism have a wide-ranging influence on our social life. Following an idea of Richard Sennett, we want to investigate the gradual alienation, which affects both the relations between people and between people and things.

How does the concept of superficiality relate to innovations within surface design? How does the membrane between the object and the user become visible, especially when it is designed specifically to reject the user, in cases such as touch screens or seats at MacDonald’s? And what happens, then, to public life, when we understand urban space within its traditional role as stage for a compulsive public performance. In public life, marked by the terror of intimacy, we already see the dissolution of old roles, because of the increasingly blurred borders between the private and the public. Once the domain of the role plays of adults, this area has undergone a change: since the discovery of the economic potential of teenagers in the 1950’s and the subsequently required participation of younger generations in public life, the strict distribution of roles between actors and audience is faltering. This development has been expedited by the increasing privatisation of public space and the neoliberal retreat of the state from its regulating and distributing role in all areas. In this way, alterations are taking place on the public sphere’s membrane, which not only lets wide-ranging changes appear, but also causes them.

In premodern times, this surface was a place for stagings, in which for example clothing would signal social status, profession and power across all social classes. Such codes were strictly tied to the public sphere, whereas in the private home, clothes would be subsumed under functionality. In the public sphere, the functionality of clothes would recede behind the compulsory self-staging. This functionality has not disappeared, however. But with the discovery of teenagers, casual wear became increasingly important. Be it the windbreaker, T-shirt and jeans of James Dean, which led to the triumph – not without conflicts – of so-called dressing down in the public space, or the functional sports clothes, such as Gore-Tex. This circumstance explains why The Beatles, in the years of the Mersey beat, were more popular with the older generations than The Rolling Stones, who appeared on TV in street wear.

On the other hand, this situation holds the key to understanding the new emphases and distributions of significances in the public sphere, for the functional clothing not only signifies the success of private homeliness, but also alludes to the functionality of the bearer of the clothes. And: it defines the rules of public interaction, no less than the old order of clothes. Only the emphasis is different. Firstly, in bourgeois milieus, there arose a rejection of the habitus and dress codes befitting of social rank, and instead a valuation of naturalness was favoured. This went hand in hand with the dissolution of class differences within the family, between adults and children. But most of all, it served as an expression of *Sympathetics* – we are now almost by *Sympatex*, but not quite.

Before we get to the accomplishments of hydrophile molecular building blocks and hydrophobic membranes, back to naturalness. The emphasis on naturalness, on modesty, served to establish a symbolism in public space, which made it possible for the well-to-do to be judged according to generally respected criteria of humanity. In its formation phase, this is not only rooted in the experience of the French Revolution, but also in the fear of further revolutions. To better understand this ostentative flattening of social hierarchies, let us make a short digression to the strategies of corporate management in postfordism. Who is not familiar, at least from anecdotes, with the consequences of flexibilised, flattened hierarchies on the emotional relationship of the employee to his work place. The more the “Du” replaces the “Sie”, the more the boss also becomes a “friend,” the pressure to also engage in work outside the working hours grows, the more the differentiation between work and leisure diminishes, between worker and private person, between exploitation and self-realisation. And the more the private is extinguished, paradoxically, through the expansion of the private. Its difference from work, from instrumentality, to the public, is erased. With this extinction, a corrosion of what law or moral or ethic standards could regulate, also sets in. Here it is the legal protection of the private that is corrupted by the disbanding of binding rights in the, henceforth colonised, areas of the public. And: where they become invisible, hierarchies are hard to define. Thus is also one of the key problems of neoliberal capitalism identified: the non-addressability of critique. It bounces off the surfaces.

How are user interfaces designed? Are they not conceptually subsumed a strict economy of time, and if it is so, how does our relationship as users to the surfaces change when the period of contact on the matrix are radically shortened? How is the relationship of the artist to the user interface of the canvas? How does the concept of friendship change with the modern organisation of work and with Facebook? Is it subject to changes in its content and economy? Is friendship with your boss in the end not more important than the quality of this friendship? Is the number of Facebook-friends not more part of a judgement of personal surplus value than a statement about an active social life?

How do surfaces turn into superficiality? This is visible in the surface design of public squares and means of transport, in which 90° angles are lowered by 10° to let your elbow slide off the window sill in the ICE train; benches at bus stops, which are replaced by moulded seats that no longer allow the homeless to take a nap; or fully automated self-service check out systems, which make contact with the sales person obsolete.

What changes a square into a plaza? Does the social function of public squares fall behind their representational function? Or, do these surfaces subject their users to their functionality so thoroughly that, in these spaces, private police must implement the laws of the commercial?

If we follow Andy Warhol and claim that anyone can be a star for 15 minutes, what does this mean for the star? Who can remember the Superstars from the casting shows of yesteryear? Also artistic work is caught up in the standards of the postfordist production apparatus, with its logic and logistics of production adapted to an accelerated economy (e.g. just-in-time production). Adhesion contracts in show business, or the superficiality of the artistic education after the Bologna reforms, are matched by short-lived artist careers and bad painting, intuitive user interfaces in video art, or shopping as art, as in the works of Sylvie Fleury. Or, as in “Deutschland sucht den Superstar“ (similar to “American Idol“), where on the one hand the possibility for genuine authorship is hollowed out, and on the other hand, the life spans of artistic careers are radically shortened to match that of electronic products. The planned obsolescence of MP3 players has its analogy in the forms of performative cultural production and of social relations, which henceforth are subject to the highly performative standards of a consumptive economic system. The response of the contemporary capitalist system to the anomalies that arise here is normalisation and update-terror.