

# FEAR AND DESIGN; HOW CAN DESIGN IMPACT ON FEAR? HOW CAN DESIGN RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT FEAR?

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*This ongoing practice based research project investigates how design can work with or against fear, raise questions about fear and how rules about fear can be used in the design process.*

*The approach in this work is to raise questions rather than finding solutions or making products adjusted to commercial needs. The focus is put on fear of global warming, a topic of current interest.*

*The tool used in this case are textiles printed with thermo chromic paint that change in colour due to temperature. With this technique patterns and images can be modified, messages by text or images can appear and disappear.*

*The aim is to through images and patterns communicate and create awareness and to highlight topics in a subtle and poetic way rather than using the apocalyptic tone found in media for example. The aim is also to give a holistic picture and embrace the complexity of the issue rather than presenting straight answers.*

## Introduction

The term 'culture of fear' is relatively new. It describes how our society is affected by fear and addresses the permeation of fear across all forms of contemporary public discourse.

Wikipedia defines the culture of fear as:

*...a term that refers to a perceived prevalence of fear and anxiety in public discourse and relationships, and how this may affect the way people interact with one another as individuals and as democratic agents. Among those who share this perception there are a variety of different claims as to the sources and consequences of the trend they seek to describe; however, most share the basic claim that this is a relatively new phenomenon with important and potentially harmful implications... (1)*



Image 1.  
[www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/media/f\\_fear.jpg](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/media/f_fear.jpg)

I think fear is a feeling that is and always has been playing a central and important part in societies. It helps us make decisions in our daily life. It tells us when to cross the street and how to drive our car for example. It also plays an essential role in confirming standards and values in societies and different cultures have different rules about fear. Fear can therefore be seen as a social construction. Fear is also individual, and different people from various backgrounds and experiences are afraid of different things. Class, gender and generation are also aspects to be considered.

According to the definition from Wikipedia culture of fear is a relatively new phenomenon. I'm not sure I agree on this point. Maybe the Culture of fear always has been present but that the sources of fear have changed over time. I found this quote reading an interview with Joanna Bourke, the author of *Fear: A Cultural History*.

*"[Terrorists] are more daring, they are served by the more terrible weapons offered by modern science, and the world is nowadays threatened by new forces which, if recklessly unchained, may some day wreak universal destruction."* (2)

A quote from a British police officer in 1889 commenting organizations involved in attempted political murders. To us this expression of deep concern might sound a little bit exaggerated. But when is fear actually justified? Of course this is a question with no simple answer. But I think that being afraid does not only have positive constructive effects, especially fears without a concrete source can easily turn into destructive anxiety. In the essay *Politics of fear* by Frank Furedi the author argues that the modern fears are more diffuse and that the line that defines the border between reality and science fiction has become blurry.

*Today, however, public fears are rarely expressed in response to any specific event. Rather, the politics of fear captures a sensibility towards life in general. The statement 'I am frightened' is rarely focused on something specific, but tends to express a diffuse sense of powerlessness.* (3)

### Background

One method to determine the approach I want to take in this project has been to study other design work on the topic fear. One example is Design Against Crime.

Design Against Crime is a research program undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Salford. It is supported by the Home Office, the Department for Trade and Industry and the Design Council. On their web site you can find information about the aims with the program, example of studies and examples of products. Some of the examples of products developed are, color tags for clothes making the clothes unusable by releasing a dye when the thief tries to remove the tag from the garments, beer glasses made of glass that if broken turns into tiny pieces instead of large parts that could be used as a weapon and garments with embedded mobile phones and GPS-technology. The last example is in collaboration with Philips. The purpose is to make parents feel less worried about where and with whom their children are. According to the web site this invention could actually reduce the risk of child abuse. Maybe this kind of product also can make parents that have never worried that their children would be the victim of abuse concerned? And how can the GPS-system prevent abuse?

### *PHILIPS SMART CONNECTIONS CLOTHING*

*Philips has developed a range of garments where mobile phones and GPS technology are embedded into the clothes. This case illustrates how integrating communication technology into fabric can help protect children from abduction, abuse by adults or other children.* (4)



Image 2. Childrens outdoorwear, Philips.  
<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/dac/philips.pdf>

Reading the description of the research I learn that the aims of this research is to integrate technology and clothing, to combine garments functionality with modern communication and to make it possible for parents to track their children and provide play opportunities. What they say is that this technology will give children larger freedom and save parents from anxiety and worry. To me it sounds like the designers put a lot of trust into technology. Is there any proof that children whose parents know where they are, are at smaller risk of being victims of abuse? Another positive result of this project, according to Design against Crime, is that the garments have fun elements like fabric antennas, radio tagging and miniature remote cameras that will allow children to play exciting games outdoors. I see three dangers with this project. First, parents may start to worry about their children being abused because there are products on the market preventing this and not because their children actually are at risk of abuse. Second, parents will put their trust in a technology that promise to keep their children safe without any proof that this is the case. Third, the company is profiting of the fears that people have, designing and selling products that there is no real need for. The tensions Philips and the designers mention about the task are that the technology is heavy, that the price of the garments will be high and that the clothes because of that might be a target of crime. The concerns I have are not mentioned.

The vision of Design Against Crime is:

*To use the creative, innovative and holistic nature of the design process to address crime reduction and related social issues as a means of:*

- o delivering a safer environment*
- o Improving business performance*
- o promoting social inclusion.* (5)

In the information I have taken part of I miss reflection of why people have fear of crime. There are no intensions that there might be a gap between the level of fear and the actual threat. The assumption made by Design Against Crime seem to be that there is crime, people therefore fear crime and that it's possible to design away some of the crimes and indirect decrease the level of fear. I find that this is a quite simplified and non-holistic way of looking at the world leaving out important elements. Taking for granted that crime can be designed away indicates that crime also can be increased by design. That the occasion makes the criminal. Is there a fight with broken bottles at the bar because the costumers have access to breakable bottles? Would the physical abuse decrease if this changed or would the abusers find other things to use as a weapon?

Can this kind of design work actually increase fear instead? Can it make people aware and cautious about things they have never found threatening before? And is this a way of profiting on the fact that people have fears in order to sell products?

#### Fear of Global warming

Global warming is a topic of current interest and the fear of this is something that almost everyone can refer to. But as I mentioned before fear can take many different shapes and depending on the circumstances fear can be abstract or graspable, constructive or destructive, it can make us take action but it can also paralyse us. What would be my approach as a designer in order to high light the topic Global warming and the fear of Global warming with out paralysing people and with out making people afraid in a destructive way? Unfortunately there are some difficulties in finding "objective" and sober information about global warming. Books with titles like The last generation, Natures revenge and The final century might have an opposed effect on many readers.



Image 3. [http://dreamers1.com/russia/North\\_Cape/European\\_Russia.43.JPG](http://dreamers1.com/russia/North_Cape/European_Russia.43.JPG)

Björn-Ola Linnér (senior lecturer and head of the department for climate research at the Linköping University, Sweden) claims in the internet edition of Svenska Dagbladet (2006-11-15), that exaggerated over tones in the important debate on global warming might hurt the reliability of the climate threat.

*'Climate chock' was the alarming headline of a Swedish tabloid paper ,with warnings of a decrease of heat in the Gulf Stream which would result in a severe cold in Sweden.*

*The Swedish radio program 'Efter tolv' predicted; "The earth and its inhabitants are facing environmental disasters which will eliminate us." The former vice president of the US, Al Gore, claims that we need to take action, in ten years it will be too late .*

*There is a risk that these apocalyptic messages have an opposed affect. We can not afford a setback caused by the overuse of dark predictions. (6)*

He writes that the environmental movement during forty years has given constantly recurring warnings of disasters and ecological collapses. Predictions that, when not fulfilled, gives strengthened arguments to critical voices. Björn-Ola refers to Kerstin Anér who already during the seventies pointed out the risk of apocalyptical forecasts. She claimed that these dreadful predictions runs a risk of being worn out and making people passive because they feel powerless. He continues:

*We don't need to use an apocalyptic tone. The issue is important in any case. The uncertainty about the consequences of human manipulation of the complex climate system is serious enough to motivate us. (6)*

Is it possible to communicate the importance of awareness about global warming without using horror visions, without underestimate peoples ability to think and without telling people what they should feel or fear?

#### Patterns and images that are sensitive to temperature in order to encourage people to lower their energy consumption

(This idea has been formed in collaboration with Interactive Institute, Aware)

Is there a way to communicate through textile patterns? Can a printed pattern give the holistic and poetic picture of a topic? And can the same turn an abstract and destructive fear into something more graspable and in that sense less destructive? For example small changes that indicates increased or decreased temperature. A change that encourages the user to lower their energy consumption.

Could a aesthetically appealing pattern change to something less desirable or even disturbing? Frightening?

*As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. (7)*

Can this theory about dirt be applied on the designing of patterns. Maybe there are some generally excepted rules about colour perception and image composition that can be used in the attempt to create patterns that change from harmonic to disharmonic, from calming to stressing or from aesthetically appealing to repulsive.

From order to disorder, from positive to negative.

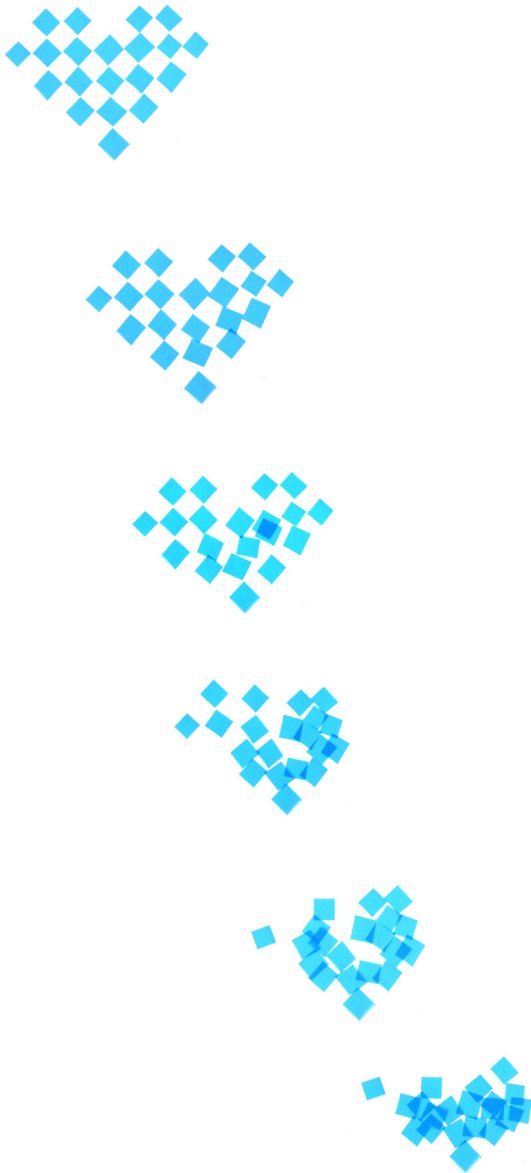


Image 4. Breaking heart.  
Design by Jenny Bergström.

Or a visualization of the fear one should have for global warming. Instant feedback. Who would be the programmer of this pattern or image? Can I as a designer know what people will find appealing or disturbing? It is possible to be very informative and pedagogical and it's possible to use a more abstract language.

Example 1. Traditionally appreciated, harmonic patterns that change, are disturbed by something disordered, randomly composed elements.



Image 5. Disturbed tartan.  
Design by Jenny Bergström.

Example 2. Aesthetically appealing patterns created by elements that with a close look would be interpreted as frightening. A change could reveal a hidden message.



Image 6. Gåsöga.  
Design by Jenny Bergström.

Example 3. Shapes combined with appearing texts that reveals a message.

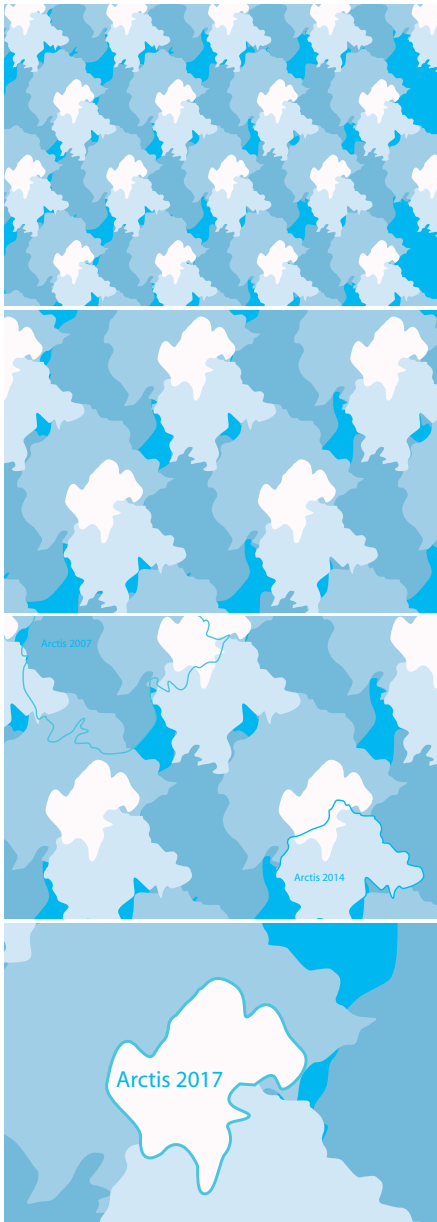


Image 7. Melting Arctis.  
Design by Jenny Bergström.

## References

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2. Bourke, Joanna. *Fear: A Cultural History*. London: Virago, 2005, pp. 364
3. <http://www.frankfuredi.com/articles/politicsFear-20041028.shtml> (5 February 2007)
4. <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/cri/adrc/dac/stscene.html> (1 February 2007)
5. <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/cri/adrc/dac/project.html> (1 February 2007)
6. [http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/brännpunkt/did\\_14065478.asp](http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/brännpunkt/did_14065478.asp) (25 January 2007/originally in Swedish)
7. Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger. An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. London, 1966, p 2

## Conclusions

Working as a designer includes a certain amount of power. The products can be looked at as a sort of media and the designer will have an impact on peoples behaviour, thoughts and living, to a very small extent or to a rather big. It is possible to raise questions through design and this fact can be used or ignored by the designer. I prefer to acknowledge this fact and work with that in mind.

As I mentioned this practice based research work is on-going and I can therefore only draw general conclusions at this moment. I'm planning to present the result of this work at the end of April 2007.