

Webgenres and -styles as socio-cultural indicators - an experimental, interdisciplinary dialogue

The paper presents a crossdisciplinary experiment of analysing web-design through a combination of the academic fields of design history and anthropology. The two authors merge aesthetic and socio-cultural aspects of new technology in a case-based discussion of the invention and use of contemporary web design. Indicating the potentials of an inter-disciplinary perspective in exploring design in general they draw on such parameters as user-differentiation and aesthetic positioning in a discussion of the role of genre and style in commercial formations on the web. Comparing examples from banking web-pages, they discuss certain aspects of cultural and esthetical conceptual representational systems that are expressed through genres and styles on the net. They argue that web design has become a central cultural field for the negotiation and expression of identity and taste, communicating different design norms and forms of social distinction.

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INTRODUCTION

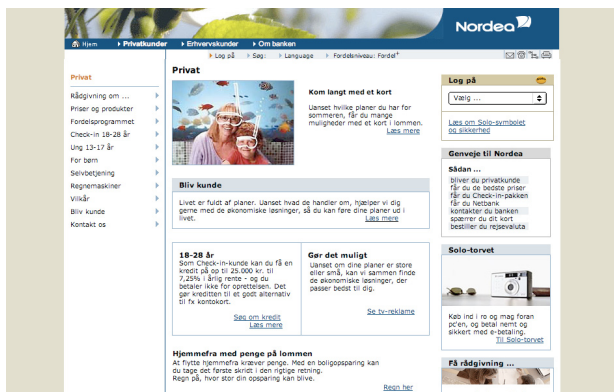
During the past decennium the world wide web has grown to become a most significant vehicle of information, entertainment, trade and administration in global production. In competition with the other electronic media, it is probably the most dominant medium of communication for the (almost) global distribution of culture. From being a primitive, text-based medium, the interface has become an advanced and complex multi-mass-medium, representing ever increasing forms of design. Initially a playground for private experiments, it gradually turned into a culturally sensitive and strategic instrument for commercial and governmental purposes. Along this process, user-differentiation and aesthetic positioning became valuable instruments for webdesigners and companies. Simultaneously, a certain convergence of genre and style developed, gradually coagulating as separate professional and commercial formations on the web (Engholm 2003). These formations were structured according to cultural taxonomies connected with similarity and consensus of content, functionality and product-range. As these developments happened, cross-disciplinary teams of web-developers took over the work formerly done mainly by private enthusiasts, computer-technicians and graphically oriented webdesigners. These new professionals focused on producing and mediating particular forms of identity, brands and tastes, and gradually have come to set certain norms and standardisations of form.

With this development, it has become more important to consider the socio-cultural significance of communication, and the aesthetic and cultural aspects of the differentiating functions, use, and style of webpages. Based on examples from two genres; banking, we focus on the cultural and esthetical conceptual representational systems which are expressed through genres and styles on the net. We argue that web design has become a central cultural field for the negotiation and expression of identity and taste, communicating different design norms and forms of social distinction.

Previous research and our contribution

Until now, the literature on web design has been characterised by normative and pragmatically oriented “how-to” and “what is cool” introductions offering guidelines for the development of web design. The focus has been on either usability aspects (e.g. Johnson 2000, Fleming 1998), Nielsen 2000, 2002), or mainly on graphic-aesthetic dimensions of web design (e.g. Nettleton & Glenwright 2002, Siegel 1996, Veen 1997, 2001, Zeldman 2001, 2003).

Other studies rooted in cultural studies and the sociology of technology have focussed on the social habitus of web-users or the importance of seeing the meaning of web-technology in social context (Johnson 1997, Sterne 2003, Streeter 2003). However, only few attempts have been made at analytically and descriptively engaging with the social, cultural and aesthetic formations of meaning at work in the taxonomical



Website of the Danish bank Nordea

genres and styles of web sites (Engholm 2003, Thorlacius 2002). Contemporary media-studies have introduced a cultural-sociological turn to the research of mass-communication. Many of their perspectives will most probably prove relevant to the study of web design. By introducing social constructionism, critical hermeneutics, semiotics, discourse analysis, narrative studies, perception theory and cognition studies into formerly rather formalistic reception-studies, this radically interpretive turn has nuanced our understanding of the role of the media, but also marginalises the significance of actual materiality (Grossberg et al.1998; Thwaites et al.1994).

Concepts at play in our discussion

Otherwise, Western modernity has been characterised by a tendency to conceptualise aesthetics as “formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes or gestures” (Geertz 1983:96). This formalism also characterises many design studies. We regard this perspective as relevant, but also want to take into consideration the interpretive, culturally ambiguous character of aesthetics, on which the New Art History (e.g. Bryson, 1983, Mortensen 1997, Sousloff 1997) has emphasized. In agreement with these perspectives we regard aesthetics as concept which involves not only the immanent structures of an object, but also the hermeneutic competences of the receiver, regulated as they can be by discourses, value systems, cultural conventions, etc. In this context we use the term cultural to refer to a socially meaningful constellation of classificatory figures, representational relationships, taxonomic conceptual systems and concepts of social order and causality, placed in diachronic social connection with earlier cultural forms and in synchronic relations with other cultural formations (Salamon 2002: 301f). This concept of culture builds on the axiom that meaning is always relative to a context and produced by the constellation of individual signs and appearances within this context (Salamon 1991). By thus generating specific conceptual constructions, culture produces or reproduces both the context and the subject positions within it. Cultural roles are generally recognisable within a cultural context as associated with broader formations of culture, demarcated by political affiliation, aesthetic tastes, lifestyle and consumption patterns (Bourdieu 1979). Individual signs will thus trigger specific cultural connotation to those culturally initiated to a particular genre. Along with a number of post-structuralist and critical, culture-analytical scholars, we assume that the production of meaning is radically context-sensitive and essentially socially constructed. Out of a range of possibilities of meaning, certain formations of significance are perceived and judged as relevant in each instance of communication (Sperber & Wilson 1986). In the meeting between concrete form and the interpreting subject, perception works as an organising instance, directing the flow of meaning into stylistic compartmentalizations. According to Merleau-



Ponty perception “already stylizes”, as it cannot avoid taking a point of view. Style is thus always already present, working in a dialectic relationship with human abilities for perception. The cultural habitus and intentionality of the users and recipients of communicational forms, determine perception. In other words, each particular instance of subjectivation produces a similarly particular formation of style(s) (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 237). The ability to identify a particular web site with conventions and norms, thus rests on the cultural situatedness of the user. In our analysis we use the concepts of genre and style as points of departure for discussing certain of the different cultural norms and ideological values that web design reflects. Our definition of genre is based on a claim that genres on the web act to generate expectations (Engholm 2003: 31). They establish a conceptual and cognitive framework building on norms and conventions shared by senders and receivers (Sperber & Wilson 1986; Tannen 1993). They thus produce and re-enforce shared expectations and recognition facilitating social and commercial interaction. Genres are generated by the repetition of phenomenological constellations - such as textual content, navigational elements, layout, graphics, the use of dynamic or static images and colour range. Genres are recognised by culturally situated, semantic patterns referring to conceptual universes, formations of taste and normative hierarchies (Fowler 1989: 216). Thus genre is cultural, interwoven with socially specific expectations, requirements and wishes, to which the producer can appeal. The receiver similarly is assumed to immediately recognize and associate with these (Chandler: 2002). Fields of recognizable representation are thus constructed linking a particular site with similar web sites and other media within this particular genre. These genre formations make up beacons of cultural identification, to which user groups might either establish or reject links of identification (Douglas 1996). Thus genres on the web are connected with generalisable social formations and culturally situated taste. However, the actualised formations are not predictable, as norms always are generated and interpreted in social and cultural context, and thus leave room for a broad range of interpretations. Our definition of style is based on the concept that style on the web serves to provide differentiation within a genre and in this function even may break with norms of a genre. Generally it has a more ‘individualising’ character depending upon the extent to which it deviates from the accepted genre expectations. Accordingly genre is often moved or expanded by style differentiations. Within a genre, such as that of banking web sites (discussed below) stylistic differentiation can be used to associate individual banks with other cultural formations and genres. In the example of a bank web site, the context would be defined by a particular banking company characterised by a choice of banking genre and nuanced by a choice of style that are recognised by users as culturally significant. The subject positions and identities of bank user or banking branch are (re-

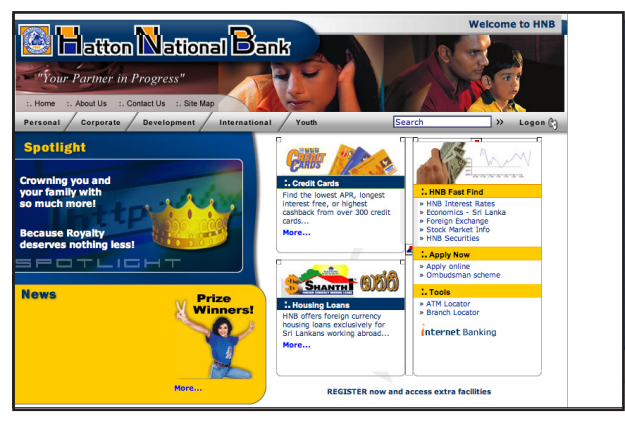
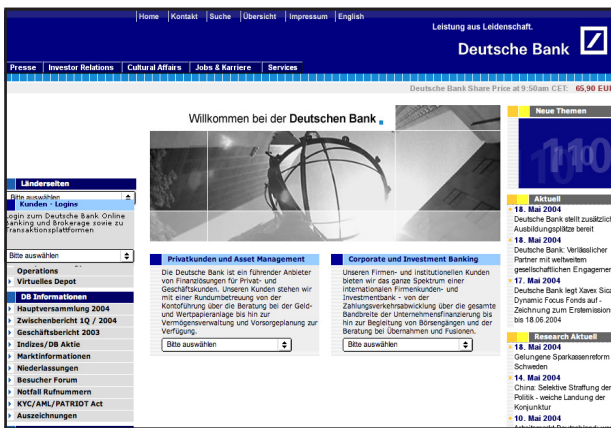
produced within this context, and given particular tone or accent – such as “conservative saver” or “independent entrepreneur”. The introduction of styles traditionally not associated with a particular genre creates norm breaks. It opens the possibility for establishing new genre-conventions. In a particular cultural context the introduction of unorthodox styles to a well established genre produce new formations of meaning and thus establish new platforms for creating taste and identification. Along these lines, the typical user will have expectations about the seriousness and functionality of such a site. This will determine the extent to which the user identifies the site with conventions of the ‘bank site genre’, and the extent to which the user will identify with the culture of a bank - and subsequently might choose to become its customer (Engholm 2003; Gabriel & Lang 1995).

The orthodox banking site

To document this, we will discuss the web sites of two Danish bank sites. We could also have chosen bank sites of other

nationalities, as we have detected a general global convention covering bank sites on all continents, however most markedly in the so-called Western world. We will shortly get back to this. The first of the two banks we have chosen for our example - the Nordea Bank - clearly represents the norm for the bank genre. The other - the Basisbank - represents a break with the genre convention.

Nordea is the result of a recent fusion of several large, well situated and estimated banks of Scandinavia, and clearly plays on being situated in a Scandinavian cultural context. The overall appearance of the Nordea site follows a traditional grid-layout. As for navigation, the site follows the normal conventions placing the menu on top of the page, content-navigational elements on the left side, and the constantly updated contents in the middle. Looking at graphic appearance, the range of colours (royal blue, blue of sea, sand-grey and a tinge of natural orange) represent colours found in Nordic nature, and as we shall shortly argue, also broadly found in the global banking genre. Less easily classifiable is the choice of images. Nordea Bank’s site generally



From the top left: websites of The Bank of England, Credit Lyonnais, Deutsche Bank, Hatton National Bank (Sri Lanka), Banco Central do Brasil and Bank of Japan.

features two to three images on each web page, depicting family-scenes or snapshots of nature and hobby-related scenes associated with leisure and dreams of a leisured life. Interiors are kept white-in-white with raw wooden planks and Danish furniture classics of the expensive kind. Several recognisable locations are featured, such as an image of the Queen's hunting manor and villas from the most expensive and mundane residential areas of Copenhagen and its northern suburbs. There are only a few images of actual professional interaction (eg. a meeting in the bank), whereas non-work related "good life" in a conservative, Danish middleclass context is referred to in most images. The banking site is thus rather direct in its use of known and easily associable cultural icons such as life-style associated brands, situations and locations. Nordea's site safely belongs to the cultural norm, and also corresponds to the genre shared by other 'orthodox' banking web pages (Engholm 2003).

The Nordea bank site shares its focus on idyllic versions of middle class, private family life with other traditional Danish banking web sites. However, it is worth noting that other European banks of presumably corresponding cultural orthodoxy, such as Deutsche Bank, Credit Lyonnais and Bank of England, tend to feature only the public side of the bank identity (such as buildings, streetlife, situations from professional worklife). It could be considered, if this relates to actual cultural differences. The focus on private familylife and dreams of privileged leisured life is also found on Bank of America's site. We will not conclude on this particular issue of private/public image as an element of style, as we have not actually studied the customer portfolio of these banks, and thus can not conclude if these differences mainly stem from a difference in customer segments (private versus professional). We would hypothesise that there also are more general cultural signals involved in the choice of using familylife as not only an indirect 'banking product' ("buying the good life"), but also as a metaphor for more general cultural traits, such as membership of a particular kind of sheltered, moral community (Lakoff 1996). The orthodox banking site of Nordea shares the choice of blue – mainly dark blue - as a predominant colour with other 'orthodox', normative banking web sites. Blue can almost globally be recognised as the normative colour of the banking site genre. According to studies of culturally situated colour symbolism, it seems that blue has been associated with reliability, conservatism, maleness (thus the "neutral" gender), and trust in European and Christian cultures. Certain tones of blue – such as royal blue - have historically been very difficult to produce or expensive to acquire and have been guarded by privilege, so that only certain classes of society were allowed to use them, for example in their heraldry. Blue was used in uniforms associated with the enforcement of law, and at the same time the privilege of wearing it was also protected by law. Blue has thus been associated with royalty, limitless force (sea and sky), the virgin Mary, privilege, and more recently the logos of major institutions (Mollard-Desfour 1998). Not only

the European and American sites generally use blue (often with added colours simulating gold – such as yellow and orange). Also such banks as Hatton Bank of Sri Lanka, Bank of Japan, Banco Central do Brasil and Banque Islamique du Senegal have chosen variations of blue as their main colour.

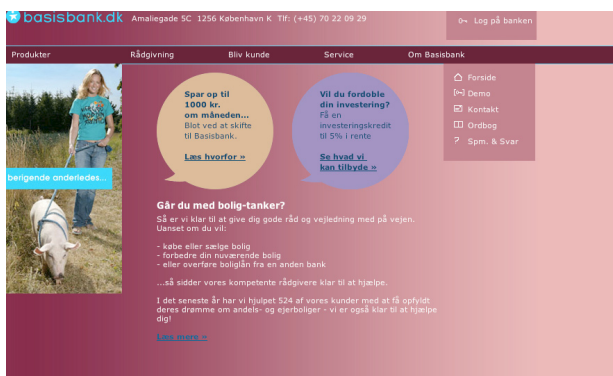
The unorthodox banking site

With royal and dark blue as well established colours of the banking genre, the choice of 'Barbie' airbrush pink as background colour for a banking site signals a highly conscious genre break and the introduction of a different style. This is what the new, netbased Danish bank Basisbank features on its site – and in a range of adds placed in different other media. This site also does not feature pin-striped professional or idyllic middleclass family scenes.

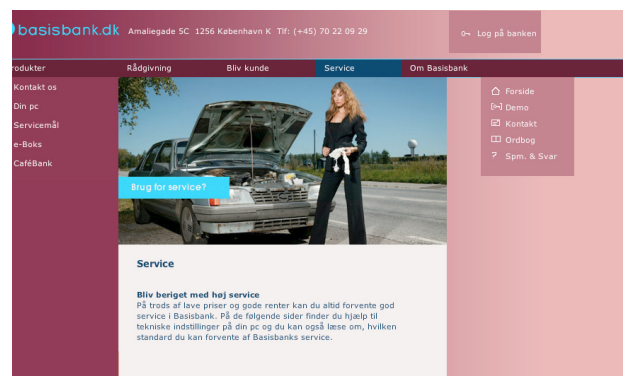
It features rather extreme situations of entrepreneurial behaviour flashed by female photo models. On this site there are none of the family pets or hunting-dogs featured by Nordea, but a cute pink piglet walked on leash by an equally cute blonde. However, the unorthodox style does not extend to the actual structure of the site. Similar to Nordea's site, the Basisbank site is also based on a CMS determined grid, organising the content of the web pages. Also the navigational elements correspond to the Nordea format, following the conventions of content based websites with divided menu- and content-navigation tools. Except for these technical features, the Basisbank site seems to aim for differing from the orthodox banking genre, and introduces its own style. With a turquoise-and-white logo, beige and lilac of inserted cartoon dialogue bubbles and the piglet & model images, Basisbank is easily associated with kitsch and 'bad-taste' pop-art, generally addressing a youngish (-35) audience in the Danish context.

Implicit distinctions

The netsite avoids any scenes of social interaction, including job- or familyscenes, only featuring one image on each page, showing the teeny-bop model dressed in sexually appealing leisure clothes. Hair is long and undone, contrary to the contained hairstyles of any women featured on the Nordea site and other traditional banking sites. The construction and composition of the images are rather explicitly artificial or awkwardly staged, again in contrast to the elaborate "casual style" of the more traditional banking sites. The Basisbank site thus marks itself as heavily staged, in an ironic, 'postmodern', camp style – often with rather explicit and exaggerated sexual overtones. Under the headline "Service", the photo model is shown dressed in black fashionable "designer" clothes and stands beside a shabby, Opel Cadett normally associated with young, male, fast-driving car owners. Behind her is a Danish highway-scape and in the horizon



From the Danish web bank Basisbank.



a fallacious tower. The model has an independent appearance, holding soiled oilcloth in her hand, letting her loose hair fly in the wind. Contrary to the contained, morally normative, professional- and family pictures of the orthodox banking genre, this picture plays on an ambiguity of sexual associations. It hints at the double role of an independent, sexually self-controlled woman as the servicing woman - the object of male phantasy.

Formerly the bank ran a campaign involving only old, fattish men in suits (associated with the term "old male pigs") and young, sexy women. This campaign apparently is assumed to be known to the users of the web pages. The present image thus no longer features the old men, but features the young women in company with pigs. Furthermore piggy banks are featured - held close to the heaving chest of these young damsels. Men or children are nowhere to be found on the web site, which seems to aim for a style signalling social independence, denial of authorities and young (rather classless) single's culture. It is obvious that these concepts are set in play by implicitly playing at a denial of the generally known banking genre and the middle class, bourgeois norms associated with it.

Similarity, distinction and norm break

In later years, a tendency can be observed among the commercial and professional sectors of the internet - of which bank sites are a subdivision: websites are made increasingly similar to each other. We associate this uniformity with cultural, professional normativity and with the phenomenon of genre serving to increase the efficiency of communication by providing a frame of reference shared by senders and receivers. A growing number of companies perform user tests on their websites, and probably link these with cultural standards and user segmentation. User tests and the adaptation to user needs also privilege the choice of lowest common denominators in user skills and equipment, leading to stereotypical and conventional results. All in all the cultural and technical considerations discussed here, lead to rather rigid or orthodox norms for web design for bank sites which we, in this discussion, have ascribed to the inherent conservative values of the banks and the producers of banksites. However, this normativity also leaves room for easy challenges to accepted genre conventions, such as in the case of Basisbank.

Having looked at a number of banking web sites under the crossdisciplinary prism of culture and genre, we can thus conclude that the emergence of new software and a new medium have not generally led to new innovative expressions, at least not in the short run. Even in a new medium such as www it seems that producers and designers draw on established norms and genres in order to make the new medium seem more familiar in its expression. But also because designers and companies in the professional part of the web respond to the cultural norms already established in a particular field, such as that of banking and commerce. We might even hypothesise that the almost global use of the new medium of web design rather contributes to the spread of a norm and genre convention traditionally associated with Western marketing design to cultural regions formerly marginal to these forms of representation. We might therefore argue that in the context of conservative sectors such as banking, the spread of the medium of www design lead to a restriction of expression. But as producers, especially in highly competitive Western markets, are under constant demand to differentiate both product and style, we also see experimental exceptions to the genre norms, such as the Basisbank example has shown. However even these seem to be under rather tight restrictions as to what will be acceptable to companies and designers as well as the target groups.

It would be interesting to look at the cultural formations at play in such phenomena as radically different choices of style and

radical breaks with genre. Such examples can be found, even in the conservative and normative field of banking net sites. However, we have limited our discussion to the genre norm and an example of a rather normative break with this norm - the kitsch style of the Danish Basisbank. Even though mainly Danish subcultural associations are in play in relation to an exclusively Danish target group, corresponding culturally determined mechanisms of consolidation and differentiation can be observed in all parts of the masscommunicative internet.

Wider implications for other fields of design

Focussing on culturally situated genres and styles, we hope to have thrown some more light on the role of norm break as a medium of innovation in web design. Furthermore, we also find that this has implications for design in general. Rephrasing Raymond Loewy, genres and styles in design under commercial conditions change and progress by seeking the "most advanced, yet acceptable" (Loewy 1979). In this context we have taken a descriptive, analytical perspective on existing web sites by using the concepts of genre and style to describe a certain dynamic of design. By working from a rather object-oriented, formalistic, descriptive approach, we have been able to set our different disciplinary perspectives in play and in dialogue with each other. However, it would seem fruitful to continue this interdisciplinary work by further operationalising our concepts in relation to a concrete practice of design. For instance, we could imagine our conceptual framework employed in scenarios tentatively describing future products and users.

In the dialectics at work between on the one hand established orthodoxy in genre and style and on the other hand normative breaks, productive mutations and gemmations happen. This is also known from studies in the development and change of human culture through the dialectics between hegemonic, orthodox cultural formations and counter-cultural sub-cultures. Thus, the dialogue between aesthetic analysis and socio-cultural analysis can be fruitful and further developed in the context of design studies.

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 Deutsche Bank: <http://www.deutsche-bank.de/>
 Credit Lyonnais: <http://www.creditlyonnais.com/>
 Bank of England: <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/>
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