

# Designing for the everyday through thusness and irregularity

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The concept of “everyday” is a central topic in design, and this paper argues for more attention and discussion on the everyday than what is currently done in design research. By elaborating what the everyday is, designers can better formulate a perspective on people’s lives and experiences, and therefore can better contribute to the enchantment of the everyday through designing. To contribute to this effort of clarification and enchantment, we first attempt to clarify the concept of everyday and thereafter suggest notions originating from Japanese philosophy to address the everyday in design. The everyday is described mostly through the process of quotidianisation of the unfamiliar towards the familiar. To support designing for the everyday, we propose to focus on Japanese notions: *thusness* and *irregularity*. *Thusness* invites to consider the experience of the *here-and-now* as being the active relation with the entirety of the world through interaction. *Irregularity* invites to keep something unexplained in the design, eliciting possibilities of exploration, openness, change, and the shift of perspective. Finally, three relatively practical design concepts, namely micro-considerations, micro-frictions, and (es)sential details, are proposed to support application of *thusness* and *irregularity* through design.

**Keywords:** *everyday; thusness; irregularity; quotidianisation; Japanese philosophy*

## 1 Introduction

The term “everyday” is a central topic in contemporary design, and is often used in design research literature (e.g., (Hallnäs & Redström, 2002; Norman, 2013; Saito, 2007; Wakkary & Maestri, 2007)). It usually refers to a banal context of practice or to what is ordinarily encountered. Therefore, it encompasses a large breadth of topics, from chairs to Internet-of-Things connected devices. However, it is hardly questioned as a concept in design research: what is the everyday? How does a design become an everyday design? How does

Discussing this apparent lack of tentative to describe and to characterise the everyday [Lévy, personal communication, April 4, 2017], a clear position was given by a professor in design: although understanding how design inquiries the everyday, the definition of the everyday appears to be too complex to be realistic. As he explained, the notion of everyday is part of a set of terms that are at the essence of design, and its interpretation varies according to the perspectives taken in and on design. In other words, defining the everyday would require defining design once for all.

Our viewpoint differs from what has just been suggested. It is certain that the definition of design is a complex and probably unsatisfiable enterprise. Yet the attempts themselves can be a strength for the discipline of design: the expression of a plurality of perspectives, and their crossing make possible a continuous fruitful reassessment of the discipline, as well as, consequently, its progress and the rich complexity of its very nature. Redström (2017, p. 6) argues even that “the presence of many different definitions is instrumental as we try to understand and articulate what things like “design” or “designing” are; this absence of unified definitions is not a conceptual shortcoming of our thinking but in fact an effective strategy for coping with certain kinds of complexity – although this is not something we have made explicit”.

Questioning the everyday invites to explore and to point out its qualities and opportunities of transformation from a design perspective. Following the proposition of Debord (1961), questioning the everyday necessarily leads to transform it: “Studying the everyday life would be a perfectly ridiculous undertaking, and first condemned to comprehend nothing of its topic, if one was not explicitly proposing to study the everyday life in order to transform it.” It is therefore a relevant topic for design research.

As for design, studying the everyday and attempting to describe what it is are not the aim to settle this notion, but to the contrary, it is to explore the territory of the everyday. The destination is incidental. Exploring the everyday is first of all to formulate a perspective on our lives and experiences, on the banal, and on design. Such exploration asks for an approach, often inspired from auto-ethnography (Lévy, 2018b) or ethnography (Wakkary & Maestri, 2007), through which design can transform the everyday, capturing and designing for its profound beauty. Studying the everyday through designing leads to enchanting the everyday. This is the objective of the research this paper belongs to.

Previous works (Lévy, 2018a) have shown that Japanese philosophy has inquired the everyday and can inform design research and design practice in a way that is lacking in the (mostly western-based) current design research literature. In this paper, we propose to clarify how two notions coming from Japanese philosophy, namely thusness and irregularity, may contribute to the consideration of the everyday in designing. To do so, we first describe the everyday based on the phenomenological description elaborated by Bégout (2010). Thereafter, we address the way design can consider and contribute to enchant the everyday through these Japanese notions.

## **2 Quotidianisation and Thusness**

Let’s consider a smartphone, an archetype of artefacts composing the everyday. During the first days of ownership, the product can be praised, both from the perspective of its design and of the related services. It is still to be explored in order to find new and potentially unexpected possibilities, functions that are yet unfamiliar. However, once the smartphone is used for a significant period of time, and as it becomes familiar, it starts to fade out in the everyday use. In a way, it becomes *flat*. First, it is physically flat, as a design attempt towards perfection in materiality (we will discuss a critical position on the value of perfection in the section 3). Second, it becomes “experientially flat”, as the intelligence on board takes over our attention. This flattening is made possible by the immediate transparency of the interface, which is a “manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 24). In other words, we aim to access information and services *as directly as possible*. Both types of the smartphone’s flatness

support a process of habituation of the smartphone in the everyday. It is this process of habituation that we will clarify in the following.

## 2.1 Quotidianisation

Bégout describes such phenomenon as "a process of material organization of the uncertain world in a frequented environment, the work of overcoming the original misery of our condition by creating familiar forms of life" (Bégout, 2010, p. 313), using different techniques such as domesticity or habituation. This phenomenon is called *quotidianisation*. Moreover, quotidianisation is done in a context that is already largely *quotidianised* (Bégout, 2010, p. 385). Therefore, the aforementioned techniques are used to integrate what is unfamiliar into what is already familiar. Through this process, while interacting with already quotidianised artefacts as well as contributing to the quotidianisation of other artefacts, the everyday takes shape. Qualities of the everyday life relates to habituation, expectation, familiarity, proximity, tranquillity, harmony, ineluctability (of reality), proximity, detail or intimacy.

Everyday life is made up of what has been quotidianised, that is, the part of reality that is made habitual and liveable in peace and tranquillity, of what is therefore domesticated. Everyday life appears as the outcome of a process that is always active and never finished. It makes things usual, liveable with peace of mind, and therefore gradually escapes our amazement: this process therefore seems to "undermine the unknown and increase the *déjà vu*" (Bégout, 2010, p. 353).

The difficulty in approaching the everyday in design lies first and foremost in the fact of its familiarity, in its apparent obviousness, and therefore in its difficult questioning and analysis. Design needs to find in the everyday something to explore, to question, and to shape.

*What is really happening, what we are experiencing, the rest, all the else, where is it? What happens every day and comes back every day, the banal, the everyday, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual, how to account for it, how to question it, how to describe it?*

*Interview the usual. But we are used to it. We do not question it, it does not question us, it does not seem to be a problem, we live it without thinking about it, as if he did not convey any questions or answers, as if he was not carrying any information. It's not even conditioning anymore, it's anaesthesia. We sleep our lives from a dreamless sleep. But where is our life, where is it? Where is our body? Where is our space?*

*How to talk about these "common things", how to track them down instead, how to find them, how to tear them out of the gangue in which they are stuck, how to give them a meaning, a language: how to finally speak about what is, about what we are.*

*Perhaps it is a question of finally founding our own anthropology: the one that will speak of us, that will seek in us what we have looted from others for so long. No longer the exotic, but the endodontic.*

*Perec (1989)*

## 2.2 Thusness

The invitation of Perec greatly resonates with the attention given to the *here-and-now* by Japanese culture and philosophy. In Japanese philosophy, the *here-and-now* can be roughly

be described as reality that one is aware of through *acting intuition*. The notion of *acting intuition*, proposed by Nishida (1987), relates to an understanding of reality made possible both through a reflexive and active grasp of the things of the world, and through a passive intuition by which one is grasped by things. The being is both object and subject in its relationship to things, in its relationship to the world. Therefore, the notion of *here-and-now* does not relate to the state of the present time, but to the active relation between the entirety world and the being in the world (which is, on another note, close to the theories related to embodiment (Dourish, 2001)). This nuance is significant: the *here-and-now* concerns the entirety of the world as experienced through what is perceived, rather than solely what is perceived. Therefore, one think about the thing as *that is*, rather than as *this thing is*. “*that*” is the thusness (or suchness – *shin’nyo* in Japanese) of the thing, which constitutes and is constituted by the entirety of the world. Thusness is “an existence prior to all distinctions, impossible to define except as being thus” (Lévi-Strauss, 2013, p. 96).

Considering *thusness* enables designers to consider reality as it is experienced. This makes it possible to take into account the everyday, i.e., the banal and the infra-ordinary, as well as the values that constitute it. Indeed, designers take advantage of this to understand the potential transformations caused by the introduction of a new design into reality, and also to understand how the design will potentially be quotidianised. The attachment to this reality requires the designer to focus not only on the material and social aspects of this everyday, but also on the way in which we can interact with them. The artefact must be designed with regard to the holistic consequences of decisions made during the design process. Each detail and its structural, performance, aesthetic, economic, contextual and ethical consequences matter, so that an iterative dialogue between prototyping (reflection-in-action) and formalization (reflection-on-action) appear effective (Schön, 1983).

From this perspective, thusness is a horizon that invites the designer to find a coherence between the qualities of the artefact and those of the reality it invests. In other words, the evidence of reality must be found in the evidence of the qualities of the artefacts, and then the thing is as *that is*. But this coherence of qualities does not in any way tend towards making reality static. The experience of these qualities through an interaction with the artefact is ethically pervasive both in activities and in time. Therefore, the ethically transformed reality transforms the perception and value of the artefact. Thusness as a horizon taken by design gives reality as it is lived, dynamic, aesthetic and ethical coherence through the experience of everyday life.

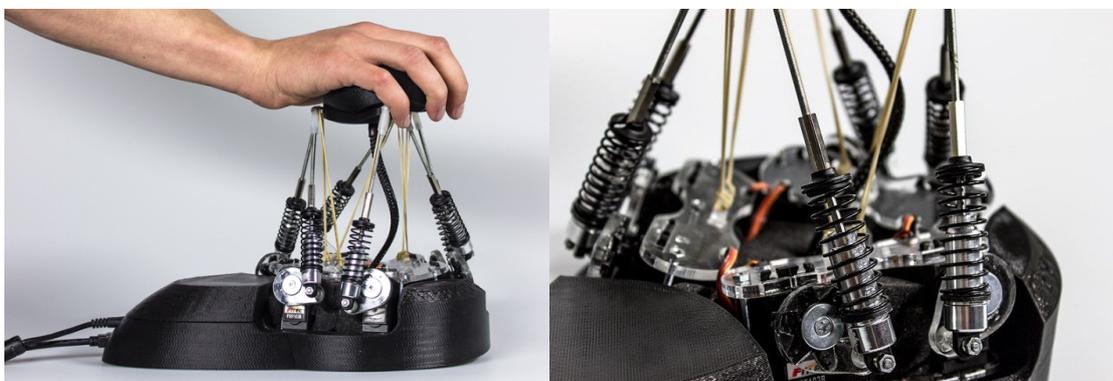


Figure 1. Stewart, designed by Felix Ros

An exemplifying project is Stewart, designed by Ros (Terken et al., 2017), which takes into account the complex relationship between the artefact and its environment and raises the ethical question of our relationship to that environment (cf., Fig. 1). Stewart is a tangible interface for fully autonomous vehicles (level 5). The core of the project addresses the relationship between the rich road environment, the autonomous and therefore potentially independent vehicle, and the passenger who is not anymore entitled to have control. Instead of focusing on interaction, the project raised the question of the relationship between the passenger and the vehicle that had become "intelligent", moving together in an uncertain environment. This relationship is proposed to be built on a dialogue. Stewart continually informs the passenger of the vehicle's behaviour and intentions. And it also makes it possible for the passenger to inform the vehicle if (s)he wishes the vehicle to change its behaviour or plans. A dialogue then takes place, allowing a constructive exchange leading to a relationship of trust, as the lack of trust in an autonomous technology launched at 100km/h is often cited precisely as a weak point of autonomous vehicles (Choi & Ji, 2015).

The main value of this design is the creation of a dialogue between the passenger and the so-called autonomous car as a result of considering this couple moving in uncertain environment. Instead of designing the interaction focusing on control, this design considers the car as an intelligent agent evolving in a (possibly urban and complex) landscape, and consequently considers the value of a dialogue between the two intelligent agents, the car and the passenger, moving together in this landscape.

### **3 Unfamiliar and irregularity**

#### **3.1 Unfamiliar**

The dynamic nature of the everyday is also considered by Bégout (2010). The ambivalence of the everyday resides in the permanent oscillation between the experience of the familiar (in the quotidian) and the discovery of some unfamiliar or unexpected (in the *extraquotidian*), i.e., between the endotic and the exotic (Bégout, 2010, p. 44). The quotidianisation is possible because of both: the familiar supports the quotidianisation of the unfamiliar (cf. chapter 2.1). Therefore, the dynamic nature of the everyday is in the quotidianisation of the unfamiliar, which requires an attention to the unfamiliar as well as the familiar. Only through this attention, the quotidian can develop and enrich itself: the unfamiliar is contributing to the evolution of the everyday.

#### **3.2 Irregularity**

This notion of "contributing unfamiliarity" greatly resonates with the notion of irregularity proposed by Yanagi Sōetsu (1989). Yanagi is the founder of the *mingei* movement in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Japan. This movement is interested in craftsmanship by ordinary people and values that are "*modest but not cheap, cheap but not fragile. Dishonesty, perversity, luxury, these are what mingei objects must avoid at the highest level: what is natural, sincere, sure, simple, these are the characteristics of the mingei*" (Viatte, 2008).

In Yanagi's view, because perfection is final, it is regulated, static, cold. It is therefore away of any possibility of openness and freedom, which he associates to beauty. Overcoming the apparent duality of perfection-imperfection, Yanagi insists as well that freedom is also not to be obliged to beauty, otherwise freedom would only be illusory. Not finding a better word,

Yanagi proposes the notion of *irregularity*, when “something remains unexplained”. Such beauty cannot be premeditated.

In contemporary industrial production, this irregularity can exemplarily be found in the work of the textile designer Minagawa while pushing the embroidery machine to its mechanical limits (Minä Perhonen, 2005). At these limits, the machine creates unpredictable imperfections, source of unique and poetic beauty. We did a similar exploration (Lévy & Yamada, 2017) on the 3D-printing of whisks handles for the Japanese tea ceremony. Based on a parametric design (therefore transmitting “perfect” instructions to the 3D-printer), five whisk’s handles were printed at different speeds: the speed as recommended by the printer manufacturer, as well as two, three, four and six time faster. The whisks were evaluated by tea masters during a seminar. The second whisk handle, printed at twice the normal speed, was significantly most appreciated, precisely because of its subtle structural irregularities providing space for a permanent possibility to explore the artefact, for a potential surprise always renewed, while not being a clearly designed imperfection. The ambivalence of the imperfection makes it a beautiful irregularity.



*Figure 2. Chasen handles, 3D printed at different speeds  
(from left to right - 1,2,3,4,6 times the standard speed of the 3D printer)*

Irregularity is therefore the essence of a force that leads to exploration, openness, change, and the shift of perspectives. It is not a design error, but on the contrary an opportunity for the artifact to be more than what is expected a priori. In other words, it is an overcoming of design: the aesthetic proposition contributes to an ethical transformation through the aforementioned shift of perspectives. Such irregularity is made possible if the designer accepts a partial loss of control of the design, necessary for the emergence of an irregularity.

#### **4 Consequences for design**

The enchantment of everyday life by design therefore invites the designer, and later the user, not to take her or his eyes off the ordinary (keeping thusness is the horizon) and to accept, and even to enhance in the case of the designer, small irregularities that make create openings for possible ethical transformations.

Attention to details appears to be a practical means by which designers cannot only keep an eye on the everyday, and therefore keeping thusness in the horizon and creating effective irregularities to enhance this everyday. We describe in the following three approaches that have addressed the design of details in accordance with the notions of the thusness and irregularity. The micro-considerations focus mainly on the structural aspects of the artefact,

the micro-frictions on interaction, and the *(es)sential details* on the experience. Even if these first two approaches can be considered independently of each other in the context of a design practice, they are nevertheless complementary, and their relationship seems not only enriching but also contributing to a design that takes into account *(es)sential details*.

Through the concept of *micro-consideration*, Fukasawa (2015) suggests to keep an eye on the ordinary, through focusing on details. He invites to design for details taking into considerations the way people act in the everyday. An example of such micro-consideration is embedded in the design of the muji rice cooker (Rice cooker / MUJI / 2014) (Fukasawa, 2014). On top of the rice cooker, a small straight mound is added to place the back of the rice spoon. Putting the spoon on top of the cooker is a fairly common action in Japanese households, yet it seems that muji is the first one who took this action into consideration in the design. The aim of such micro-consideration is, according to Fukasawa, to ensure that the product offered by muji is sufficient ("muji is enough"), i.e., that it corresponds exactly to what the customer had in mind when entering the store, without overdoing it. In the terms used by this paper, the customer perceives the thusness of the product. To do this, Fukasawa observes what people do without thinking about it: the banal in their actions. Thereafter, he integrates what he has observed into his thinking and design. Thus, the design created is quietly integrated into the daily lives of its users.

Considering the interaction aspects in designing and inspired from the micro-boundaries proposed by Cox et al. (2016), *micro-frictions* are small moments of friction taking place in interaction during an activity, which divert from the expected without significantly disturbing the objectives of the activity and disrupting the course of this activity. They are a form of friction that only briefly surprises the user's ordinary by a form of irregularity. They briefly surprise the experience and invite the realization of the quality (good or bad) of the *here-and now* by means of an irregularity through the course of interaction.

Finally, the process of determining a set of qualities essential to the creation of value in interaction is at the heart of an education project led by the authors for several years, named "*(es)sential details*". What makes a detail essential is that it reveals an interacting beauty whose quality is most important to achieve a form of irresistibility (Andersen, 2013). The details considered in this project can be of a physical or interactive materiality (Stienstra, Alonso, Wensveen, & Kuenen, 2012) and engage in a reflection through design on the place of detail in the emergence of interactive beauty.

## 5 Conclusion

We pointed out the paucity of addressing the notion of everyday in design, and motivated the challenge and the ambition of such address. Rather than attempting to define the everyday, we suggest engaging in an open reflection on the everyday in order to propose means for its enchantment through design. The main challenge seems to find conceptual means to question the everyday, that is the obvious and the familiar.

Thusness and irregularity enable to start addressing the everyday through designing. It invites us to consider first the context of the design to comprehend the situatedness of the interaction (including the banal and other elements that constitute the everyday), rather than considering first the interaction itself. Irregularity provides a balance in the consideration of the familiar, by keeping opportunities for the surprises, for the opening of spaces of possibilities. Irregularity, that can be addressed through various operationable approaches

(micro-considerations, micro-frictions, *(es)sential details*), is paramount in regard to the creation of beautiful uncertainty in everyday experiences.

These irregularities break the seamless flow of interaction with the expected, and therefore invite the user to *really* see and appreciate the artefact (s)he is interacting with. It brings the attention of the user to the *here-and-now*. Such impact requires the designer to also pay attention to the *here-and-now*, and by extension to the everyday. Even if this framework can undoubtedly be applied to a situation other than everyday, it finds all its strength in the everyday and the banal. Everyday practices and the arts of doing should be for the designer a point of attention and of concern at least as important as the artifact to be designed. What we do, our interactions, our reflections, etc. constitute our daily experience. Artifacts, possibilities of action and of unexpected events are means for such experience.

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