Book Review

Michael Haverkamp


Synesthetic Design

The author of this new volume, Dr. Michael Haverkamp (see http://www.michaelhaverkamp.de), is a specialist in cross-sensory harmonization who has been working for a number of years now for the Ford motor company over in Germany. While the book was originally published in German a couple of years ago, this new translation (by Michael Dudley), comes as a beautifully produced volume published by Birkhäuser. Indeed, the book itself is multisensorially very appealing, bound as it is in a striking pink cover, with textured pages to run your fingers over (no, really!), and a CD with a selection of distinctive sounds and evocative musical clips to boot. The text is amply illustrated and laid out, as one might expect for a design-inspired volume, in a most eye-catching manner.

The book itself, more than 460 pages in total, provides an excellent overview of the field of synesthetic, or better said multisensory (about which, see more below), design. Many practical applications and examples of good design are littered throughout the text. As a whole, Synesthetic design is certainly both inspiring and thought-provoking in equal measure, though perhaps more something to dip into than necessarily to read from cover to cover. The bibliography is really most impressive. What is especially noticeable are all of the obscure German references that I had not come across before, but which I will be sure to make the acquaintance of before too long. Many of them, it has to be said, sound absolutely fascinating. Writing this book has clearly been a labour of love for the author.

According to the synesthetic approach to design outlined by Haverkamp, the aim is to systematically develop products that stimulate all five senses. Given the author’s background in the car industry, it should perhaps come as no surprise that many of the examples he chooses to describe relate specifically to enhancing the design of the multisensory driving experience, a topic on which he has published and presented extensively. Overall, though, despite
the most worthy goal of trying to cover all of the human senses, the chemical senses, in particular, get relatively short shrift, no more than a few pages scattered here and there. (And, disappointingly, we never get to find out what a Ford car should taste like!) Touch is not really covered in any great detail either. That said, Haverkamp does foresee an exciting future in which the latest insights from psychology and neuroscience, paired with the development of innovative new materials will open up a range of opportunities for designers in the years to come (see Gallace & Spence, 2014, for a similarly enthusiastic view). However, it is the interactions between vision and audition that really stand out here.

While this book is primarily aimed at designers, Haverkamp brings together such a wide body of research that this volume will undoubtedly be of great interest to the basic researcher wishing to think about the application of their findings out there in the wider world. Especially interesting for me was the extensive discussion of synaesthesia and art. Indeed, a number of ‘synaesthetic’ paintings are also scattered throughout the text.

**Synaesthetic, or Multisensory, Design?**

Now, a pedant might want to question whether the title of this book is necessarily the most appropriate one. Yes, one could certainly say, this volume has been written by a synaesthete (as apparently Haverkamp is); And yes, this book is very much about design. But does that necessarily mean that this book is best titled *Synesthetic Design*? I would argue not: For beyond the catchy title, it is important to remember that according to many researchers, synaesthesia is, by definition, an idiosyncratic condition (e.g., see Grossenbacher & Lovelace, 2001). What this means, in practice, is that the intra- or cross-sensory associations (or concurrents) experienced by the synesthete are largely idiosyncratic (though see Cohen Kadosh et al., 2007; Simner et al., 2005) — and hence, I would argue, of little relevance to the designer striving for design solutions that are going to be universally appreciated. Now, one might want to argue that being synaesthetic confers some enhanced ability, or sensitivity, when it comes to thinking about (or experiencing) the connection between the senses. Alternatively, however, it has been suggested that synaesthetes might just be more creative than the rest of us (Dailey, et al., 1997; Domino, 1989). Certainly, over the years, many a creative/artistic individual has been (or better said) claimed to be synaesthetic (e.g., see Harrison, 2001; see also Duffy, 2001). However, the evidence for a causal link here is weak, and hence one might wonder what benefit, if any, being synaesthetic actually conveys to the creative process.

To his credit, though, in the opening section of the book Haverkamp suggests that his approach is based on *synesthetics*, rather than *genuine synaesthesia*. By this, he means “the conscious design of objects with respect to con-