

Constructing a *Formbild*

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An important ambition in the school subject *Arts and Craft*¹ in primary schools is to let students experience artistic/design activity and to develop their competence in understanding and valuing the artistic expressions of others. In other words a focus on visual ideals or *formbilds*: herein lies both the transferring of/introduction to other people's *formbild*, and also the building of the student's own *formbild*.

The concept *formbild* is a philosophical notion used here to describe a visual ideal, or an *idea of a form*. This idea lies between the object and the subject (Engholm and Michelsen 1996) and can be understood as a visual ideal that guides the artist, designer or architect in his creative activity. The concept is related to Bergson's *image* concept (Bergson 1991), Norberg-Schultz' concept *mellomgjenstands-dannelse*, and the concept *intermediary design objects* (a notion formulated by Alain Jeantet (1998) according to Boujout and Tiger 2003).

It is an interesting fact that throughout the history of *Arts and Craft* the *formbilds* have been and still are changing. My question is why? Why do the ideals behind the

¹ *Forming/Kunst og håndverk*.

formbilds change? How is it possible to recognize different *formbilds* at the same time in different areas of the subject? And why is it that during the history of *Arts and Craft/Forming* many different *formbilds* have been preferred? Or, on a more basic level, how do we as individuals actually develop a *formbild*? Is it a conscious process, and do we actually have a choice? Addressing these questions, new questions follow: How do we as teachers in the subject *Arts and craft* communicate a *formbild*, choose a *formbild*, or tutor a student constructing a *formbild*?

These questions initiated the research project presented in this article. To analyse activity in the past or in the present, we need to understand the mechanisms of this activity. The full title of my research project at Oslo School of Architecture is: “Constructing a *Formbild* - An Investigation into the Intertwined Connection between Contemporaneous Design and Cultural Identity in Forming/Arts and Craft.” The first, and main, part of the study consists of a closer study of the micro processes in the activity in *Arts and craft* where the transferring/introduction/building of the *formbilds* transpire. Based on the understanding derived from this study, the next part of the study will be a discussion concerning the different *formbilds* in the school subject *Arts and craft* and their relation to the *formbilds* in the contemporaneous art and design practice.

Status Questionis

The subject matter of the study is the field *education within object design, visual art and craft in primary and secondary schools in Norway*, here referred to as *Arts and craft*. The field *Arts and craft* is a sub-domain within “the *making professions*” (Dunin-Woyseth 2003:130, 263). The concept *making professions* has developed as a collective term for “the fields of art production, object design, industrial design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and spatial planning” (Dunin-Woyseth 2003:130, 263).

Arts and craft education in primary- and secondary schools in Norway today is subjected to the guidelines set out in the National Curriculum, “Læreplan for grunnskolen” (L-97). This curriculum marked an ideological break with the previous curricula, moving away from a (predominantly) formal educational perspective, to a (predominantly) material educational perspective² (Klafki 2002, Kjosavik 1998). In this new curriculum there are listed specific examples as to what constitutes the pinnacle of our culture. This change has two implications that could be theoretically studied. (1) *What* is selected and who makes these decisions? What are the reasons given theoretically and historically and how are these reasons made subject to critical evaluation? (2) Is it probable that showing “good examples” in *Arts and craft* really has an impact? How does this actually work? Or, in other words: How is a *formbild* communicated? How is it understood and constructed in a new and intentional setting with new individuals?

² Bildung formal/bildung material (Klafki 2002).

Several newer studies have taken up these lines of questioning, both from design and art theory and from pedagogy. For instance, Bourdieu: *The Rules of Art* (1996) and Michl's articles a.o.: "On seeing Design as Redesign" (2002). The basic premise in these and similar studies is an understanding that creative processes are always related to what has preceded them. As Michl writes: "although in one way it is correct to say that designers start from nothing, in another sense it is equally correct to maintain that in practice they can never start from scratch." (Michl 2002:2). You have to start with and from something which may be something as abstract as an idea, a *formbild*, etc., or something as concrete as a type of artefact, a function etc., and develop it further. In another article Michl argues against the notion "free art" calling for "an understanding that neither craft nor free art are autonomous art forms; that both exists within restrictions; that both are based on conventions, that both have an audience; that both can be said to have their sponsors." (Michl 2002:7, my translation).³ Even though neither of these articles directly refer to visual ideals, both of them imply an understanding that *formbild* is a part of what precedes the creative processes and is continued in them.

These studies describe some aspects of the fact that in a period of time, at a particular place or in a particular group a common ideal of form exists: a common *formbild*. Examples of this might be art historic periods such as "Baroque", "Renaissance", "Classicism" etc. However, the artists/designers in these periods do not necessarily regard their work as within a set of rules within a style, but as principles or individual intellectual programs. Lawson writes: "Many architects today regard the styles of architecture more as inventions of the critics than a set of rules which they themselves follow." (Lawson 1990:165), and he quotes Venture saying: "Bernini didn't know he was Baroque... Freud was not a Freudian and Marx was not a Marxist" (Ibid). This perspective opens an intriguing question: How do these individual intellectual programs/*formbilds* evolve and why are they so similar to each other to such an extent that critics may recognize it as a style?

There is, in my opinion, still a lacuna in the knowledge of *how* these *formbilds* are constructed: how the actual constructing process functions. In the schools there often is a recognizable visual agreement in groups of students or pupils working under the same teacher, hence a parallel to the recognized similarities described above. Is this something that naturally follows the educative situation? If so, how? And if not, what then? The scope is on *how* this communication actually works.

Theoretical perspective

The project takes up a socio-constructivist⁴ point of view, connected to French post structuralistic theory (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Burr 1995) and critical discourse

³ The Norwegian original: "en forståelse av at verken kunsthåndverk eller frikunst egentlig er autonome kunstarter; at begge arbeider innenfor restriksjoner; at begge bygger på konvensjoner; at begge arbeider for et publikum; og at begge kan sies å ha sine oppdragsgivere."

⁴ Socio-constructivism must here not be confused with Piaget's constructivistic theory, but as a larger science-theoretical superstructure with roots in Foucault, Althusser, etc., Jørgensen og Philips 1999.

analysis (Foucault 1999, Fairclough 1995).⁵ The basic assumption is that humans construct their understanding of the world and that this construction is taking place when communicating with others. ‘Reality’ is only accessible through our categories, or constructions, and our knowledge of the world is hence a product of our ways of categorizing it.⁶ This applies both to our relationship with entities as ontologically different as abstract concepts (e.g. *formbild*) and to physical objects and things.⁷ Knowledge is therefore not seen as an objective truth, but as a time-/place-contingent construction, which is a part of a discourse.⁸ The basic assumption of discourse analysis is that our ways of speaking are not a neutral mirroring of our surroundings, but an active participant in creating and changing these (Andersen 1999, Jørgensen and Phillips 1999, Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). Foucault writes: “Discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak [...] Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention.” (Foucault 1974:49). Understood this way, discourses both constitute and are constituted by the world.

Understanding *formbild* as a social construction circumscribes and systemizes the complex relationship between design and cultural identity. It is a philosophical shift, moving the focus from the objects or the Kantian relationship object – subject, to the relationship between individuals, and between individuals and their social setting. *Formbild* as a socially constructed phenomenon enables a view on the aesthetic evaluation as something dependant on the actors, their positions in the field and the communication in the field⁹.

The focus on the specific aesthetic activity in a specific social setting offers a pragmatic basis for the exploration, making it possible to analyse the structures that confine this relationship between the individual and the social. These structures can be understood as a *framework* of mechanisms organizing and focusing the activity in a situation, and thus the individual’s interpretative understanding and repertoire of action in the situation. This framework is referred to as *hermeneutical filters*. The hermeneutical filters are, as discourses, both constant, i.e., that they *constitute* the world, and changing, i.e., that they are *constituted by* the world. They have two aspects: (1) dynamic aspects – the mechanisms of changes to and fixation of the

⁵ Jørgensen og Philips 1999, Andersen 1999.

⁶ For example Burr 1995, discussed by Jørgensen og Philips 1999:13f.

⁷ The relationship human – thing in a socio-constructivist perspective is described by H. Blumer through his concept *symbolic Interactionism*. Blumer shares with Mead, Dewey, Thomas, Park, James, etc. the basic premise that “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. H. Blumer 1969.

⁸ Discourse is here used in a definition by Jørgensen og Philips 1999:9” – en diskurs er en bestemt måde at tale om og forstå verden (eller et udsnit af verden) på.” This is an expanded variant of Foucault’s definition: ”Vi vil kalde en gruppe af ytringer for diskurs i det omfang, de udgår fra den samme diskursive formation (... Diskursen) består af et begrænset antal ytringer, som man kan definere mulighedsbetingelserne for.” (Foucault 1969:153,172:117 referred and translated by Jørgensen og Philips 1999:22).

⁹ "Another, but parallel, perspective is found in Reitan's article in this publication. She relates to Wenger's concept community of practice to describe and understand the social aspects of the designing process (Reitan 2004)."

structures, and (2) hierarchical aspects – the power and control behind these mechanisms. The study of the construction of a *formbild* in such a social process may therefore be organized around two main items: (a) to understand the dynamic aspects of the *formbild* construction, and (b) to understand and describe the hierarchical aspects of this construction.

Two aims

The research project has two aims, where the first is the most extensive:

- To uncover discourses and structures active in a design process in an education situation, and the dynamic and hierarchical aspects behind the mechanisms: the hermeneutic filters. *Research question: How is a consensus of a formbild constructed within a social-/cultural group in Arts and craft education?*
- To use this knowledge to discuss certain conditions/circumstances in the history of *Arts and Craft*; hence the different *formbilds* in the school subject and their parallels in contemporaneous society.

Research in a context of application

In “The New Production of Knowledge” Gibbons & al discuss two “modes” of knowledge production (Gibbons & al.1994).¹⁰ In the paper: “From a profession to a discipline - Some notes on knowledge production in the subfield design education in primary and secondary schools in Norway. ”,¹¹ I discussed these two modes of knowledge production against the attributes of the subfield *Arts and Craft* (Gulliksen 2004). A case was made in this paper for knowledge production in this subfield having much in common with the descriptions by Gibbons & al. of knowledge production in Mode 2. In particular the attributes *transdisciplinarity* and *heterogeneity* could seem of interest as guides when considering the construction of the subfield as a discipline.¹² The transdisciplinary model for diffusion of knowledge was also said to be interesting when considering an establishment of various alternative research fora in the subfield. An example of just such an alternative is the network for *DesignDialogue* (Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen 2003¹³). I will return to this later.

Another attribute of research in Mode 2, is the *context of application*. This was also said to be of interest (Gulliksen 2004) because it could provide a possible starting point for the subfield as one of several subfields under *the making professions*,

¹⁰ Their claim is that a “distinct set of cognitive and social practices is beginning to emerge and that these are different from Mode 1.” (Gibbons et al 1994:3). This change is not only influencing what knowledge *is*, but also the social characteristic of how knowledge is being produced: The context it is produced in, the way it is organized, which systems of reward it is based on, and what mechanisms of quality control have been applied.

¹¹ Gulliksen 2004.

¹² Thompson Klein 2000; Dunin-Woyseth and Michl 2001.

¹³ See article in this book: Dunin-Woyseth, Halina, and Liv Merete Nielsen.”From apprentice to Master”.

where design activities constitute the core. Instead of focusing on problems of combining different theoretical traditions,¹⁴ research could begin with the activity, not with the different theories describing this activity from different perspectives. This might be our *context of application*. In such an exploration of the activity, we can exploit our advantage as a transdisciplinary and heterogeneous field, *where making knowledge is being derived from, then scholarly processed, and, finally, directed back to* (Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen 2003:25). Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen describe the feature that separates *making* disciplines from academic disciplines like this:

the concept of making disciplines [...] can be regarded as a specific approach from the point of view of the professionals. It is an approach "from within", a "craft approach". Being a know-how approach, it is complementary to the know - that perspectives of academic disciplines, which often address similar subject matters, but from different points of view through common generic academic rigors (Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen 2003:33).

The empirical basis

The empirical basis of my project is in two micro-case studies of education situations in *Arts and craft*. These case studies are modelled after Latour and Woolgar (1986), Latour (1987), Yin (1994), Angrosino and Mays de Pèrez (2000), Knorr-Cetina (1995) and Stake (2000). The purpose of such a case study is according to Yin to describe and understand a phenomenon, develop a reflexive understanding of an activity, try to approach the situation without preconception, and avoiding the traditional dichotomy individual/social. Several steps of precautions were made to achieve this before, during and after the observations, but the selection of the cases, the material collected, and the analysis conducted on this basis is treated with care and attention to misinterpretations and other possible sources of error.

Critical discourse analysis is one of several inspirations for the analysis of the material. Flexibility towards the material is stressed permitting reconsideration and change of strategy if needed. Fairclough's three-dimensional model "Text – discursive praxis – social praxis" structures the analysis.¹⁵ According to Fairclough the discourses mediate between the text and the social praxis. "Text" is here understood in a broad sense and includes all the communicative events registered in the notes from the observation.¹⁶ "Social praxis" also includes role-expectations.¹⁷ Social praxis as a totality has both discursive and non-discursive elements and is not available through discourse analysis alone. But, as previously mentioned, the project is not trying to explain the totality of social or cultural practice in the groups

¹⁴ Some of these problems were discussed in Gulliksen 2002, Gulliksen2003, Gulliksen 2004.

¹⁵ Fairclough 1995, Jørgensen og Philips 1999, chapter 3.

¹⁶ This means *words*: text, speech; *other symbolic actions*: vocal and non-vocal; and *objects*: type, style, typology. Jørgensen og Philips 1999: 80 and 92.

¹⁷ See e.g. Parsons definition of sociology: *Det system av rolleforventninger som regulerer atferden hos de individer som opptar statusposisjoner i et sosialt system*. Jørgensen og Philips 1999.

studied but only some facets of it: the communicative events, and explore what these facets can indicate concerning the construction of *formbild* in the group.

Gaps

The cases are documented by observation, and the notes from the observations are to some extent controlled/coordinated by video recordings. After the observation the communicative events (both verbal and non-verbal) and the discourses they refer to, are analysed. The analysis begins with grouping the registered communicative events into units of meaning (ME), and next the MEs into themes. These themes are analysed further, resulting in a suggestion of which discourses the communicative events are related to. The communication is then re-analysed to find whether there are instances where students (S) or teachers (L) hold different positions within the discourses. These disagreements in positioning are referred to as *gaps*.¹⁸ When a gap is identified, the material is re-analysed again in order to recognize *how* the gaps are filled: does someone change position, and in that case *who*? Or do the participants leave the gap to linger? From this analysis a description of the dynamic aspects of the hermeneutical filters behind the *formbild* construction can be made: how the individuals change or stabilize their positions when agreeing or not agreeing upon what is “the best” ideal to follow, i.e., the dynamic aspects of the hermeneutical filters.

Power and positioning

The next step in the analysis is to go behind these changes or not-changes in positioning: If someone, S or L, changes position: is it possible to explain *why*? Does someone have an answer to what a “good form” is? Do they explain, tell, influence or manipulate? This step in the analysis results in a description of the hierarchical aspects of the hermeneutical filters, i.e., the power/control behind the *formbild* construction. Power is not regarded as something that is negative, or that someone possesses, but as a relational function. It is in the relation between the individuals’ positions in the field that the power is, and the agents activate it when communicating. Foucault formulates this: “Power is a machine in which everybody is caught, those who exercise power, just as much as those over whom power is exercised.” (Foucault 1980:156). The relationship between the dynamic and the hierarchical aspects of the hermeneutical filters may be illustrated like this:

¹⁸ Wickman and Östman 2002.

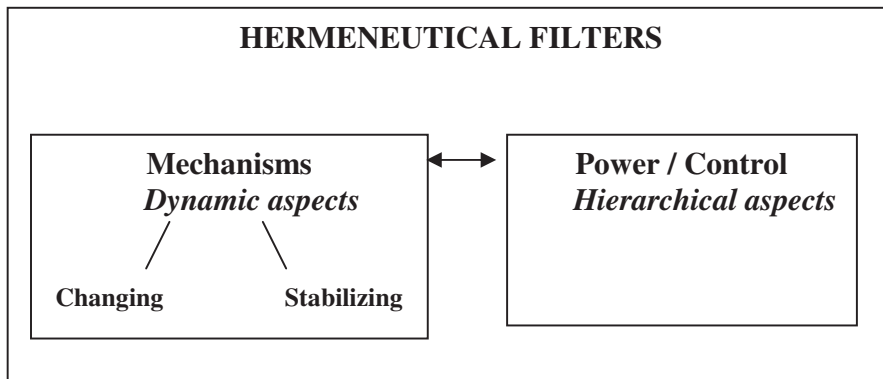


Figure 1. Two aspects of the hermeneutical filters

Opening up the perspective

The second part of my project is a theoretical discussion on *formbilds* in the history of *Forming/Arts and craft*. Based on the knowledge and the concepts developed in the analysis in the first part of the project, the second part is a reflective and explorative discussion. The discussion will be illustrated by selected historical episodes from text sources and text-image sources. In a later project, preferably a Post Doctorate project, these examples and this thread of discussion will be reconsidered to a more full extent in a discursive and social context.

This project in relation to the DesignDialogue project

In the article “From Apprentice to Master”, Dunin-Woyseth and Nielsen (2003) present the project *DesignDialogue*. One of the initiating aims is, as the name indicates, to establish a forum for scholarly discussion within the design subjects. In light of the perspective given, by Gibbons & al. in: “The new production of knowledge” (1994), such an establishment of a new research forum is very interesting (Gulliksen 2004). The project has three parts: (1) Developing Academic Design Knowledge, DADK, (2) Developing Design and Visual Literacy, DDVL, and (3) Developing a Practice of Democratic Design, DPDD. The respective areas that are studied in order to develop this are: (1) Professional design practices, (2) design education practices and (3) design aware practices.

My Ph.D: “Constructing a *‘formbild’*” starts in the same specific activity that *DesignDialogue* does: the *making* activity, with the ambition to study the mechanisms and power structures in the construction of *formbild*, and to develop critical analytical concepts describing this. This knowledge is in the second part of the project used to discuss the historical practice of education in *Arts and craft*, therewith to direct knowledge back to the field of practice. This way the project hopes to provide a contribution to the development of *DesignDialogue’s* area of research, both in the areas of design knowledge (DADK) and visual literacy (DDVL), and knowledge that first of all might be useful in design education practices.

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Summary

This paper presents some aspects the Ph.D study “Constructing a *Formbild* – An Investigation into the Intertwined Connection between Contemporaneous Design and Cultural Identity in Forming/Arts and Craft”. The project is introduced, and status questions, theoretical background, aims/research question and strategy/method are shortly presented. Then the project is retraced in a *DesignDialogue* context, making the case that it may contribute to the areas of design knowledge (DADK) and visual literacy (DDVL), but first of all that it might contribute to knowledge concerning design education practices.