

CONVERSATION TEMPLATE: FINAL SUBMISSION**Abstract**

The philosophical tradition Pragmatism reduces technical objects towards utility. In contrast to this reduction the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon introduces a philosophical position that technical objects a) have their own mode of being called technicity b) should not be reduced and c) are becoming more open. In this conversation we will explore these contrasting positions and the problematic relation of Simondon towards design by way of an imaginary design case revolving around a wildlife camera. A hands-on approach with two ‘clearings’ of delegates and a moderator steers the conversation. Participants capture the session by way of two wildlife cameras. The footage will be used for dissemination.

Adventure: expedition to Pragmatism and Inventivism in the design situation

Keywords: Pragmatism; Gilbert Simondon; ontological force;

1. Convenors Information

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2. The sophisticated technical object and reduction towards utility

We invite DRS delegates onboard of an imaginary design team within a larger company. The team wants to improve an existing product: a smart digital camera for vlogging to a YouTube community. Two sophisticated wildlife cameras are brought to the situation and the team will tinker with them in order to explore what state-of-

the art technology could do for the project. Pragmatic team members team up in a ‘clearing’¹ and for them the design situation boils down to the great Pragmatists’ question: ‘does it [the camera], with our additions, *rise or fall in value?* Are the additions *worthy or unworthy?*’ (James, 1907, original emphasis) or more poetically put by Debaise and Stengers ‘Sensing that a possibility is urgent: does it add something to a situation at hand, or does it lead to an impoverishment?’² (Debaise & Stengers, 2017).

The ‘Pragmatists Clearing’ works with the sophisticated camera from a utility perspective. Other delegates in our imaginary design team set foot in a different clearing. Their position is that a light detecting resistor (LDR) chip, sensitive to light differences, provokes scientific questions about design and indetermination. For instance how noise could be further reduced when the camera is used domestically under dim lighting condition, a situation for which the wildlife camera was optimized in the first place. They reason that the fact that the camera is light-sensitive at all is only possible due to a certain extent of indeterminacy at the level of the LDR chip. This clearing draws from a position that is incommensurable with Pragmatism, namely ‘Inventivism’³ and these people feel much more at home with the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989).⁴ Simondon argued that technical objects have their own mode of being. This mode of being evolves as the Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi puts it ‘through the network into a postindustrial ‘open object’’ (De Boever et al., 2009, p. 23). A more sophisticated machine ‘harbors a certain margin of indeterminacy [and] this margin [...] allows the machine to be sensitive to outside information’ (Simondon, 2017, p. 17). This margin of indeterminacy is also called “openness” and it is ‘an irreducible third ingredient in the ontological entanglement: *technicity*’ which ‘we will refer to as the “ontological force” of technological apparatuses’ (Hoel & Van der Tuin, 2012, original emphasis).⁵

The ‘Inventivism Clearing’ is speculative. While tinkering, the camera provokes new questions towards their colleagues of the R&D department and towards science. If

¹ Clearing is used here as ‘open space’

² ‘le possible dont je sens l’insistance ajoute-t-il à la situation ou l’appauvrit-il’ (Debaise & Stengers, 2017). The authors like to thank Dirk Snelders for the translation.

³ Massumi coined the account of Simondon as an ‘inventivism that is not afraid of nature, and *its* creativity.’ (De Boever, Murray, & Roffe, 2009).

⁴ Gilbert Simondon is not widely known in the Anglo-Saxon world as his work was available in French only for a long time. In 2017 an English translation of his secondary thesis from 1958 was published: Simondon, G. (2017). *On The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (C. Malaspina & J. Rogrove, Trans.). Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing. We deliberately want to relate to the unalloyed philosophical project of Simondon here.

⁵ This third ingredient was the account of both Ernst Cassirer (1974-1945) and Gilbert Simondon (Hoel & Van der Tuin, 2012).

their colleagues at R&D join the design project, there is a chance that a next generation LDR chips is invented which furthers the relation we can have with technical objects as they become more open.

3. Conversation research question

During this Conversation we want to draw the attention to sophisticated machines that enter design situations in practice:

How designers can engage with two perspectives: 1) Pragmatists aiming for utility and 2) Inventivists working with indeterminacy?

4. Set-up of your session

4.1 Introduction of the Clearings

We hope to attract 5-15 delegates interested to explore the effect of two (seemingly) incommensurable philosophical positions and how one can engage with them in a design situation. We will pro-actively approach a mixture of delegates.

Co-convenor Stella Boess working from Pragmatism introduces the imaginary design challenge after which 'Clearing Pragmatists' starts off. 'Clearing Inventivists' then proceed by way of a 'Simondonian' co-convenor Jonas Fritsch. Jonas Fritsch has worked for more than ten years relating to Simondon's philosophical project. A third clearing is led by co-convenor Sander Mulder. He reflects on both clearings towards design more generally. Sander Mulder is an experienced facilitator from practice and works on an external PhD related to Simondon and responsibility. We will literally bring two working wildlife cameras to the situation as a sophisticated machine. After informed consent of the participants, the wildlife cameras record (parts of) the Conversation.

4.2 Change position and present key insights

As the Pragmatic clearing may be more familiar and to provoke discussion, half of each clearing will be invited in changing through facilitating materials. To wrap-up we will ask delegates to articulate how they engaged in each position. Did the changing of position provoke new and more distinct notions how to relate to design?

5. Type of space and equipment required

A space is needed to draw out 3 clearings for 5-15 participants. We will bring two wildlife cameras ourselves and we need some basic materials to tinker with. Usage of a wall or flip-overs is foreseen where delegates can draw as well.

6. Dissemination strategy

6.1 Exchange in online forum

The convenors will be represented online by lead and contact Sander Mulder.

6.2 Concluding document

The convenors will share a concluding after the conference and will provide written material in the form of a lightweight template for presenting their documentation (2-4 pages) in an exhibition space during the conference.

6.3 Expedition movieclip

A short movie can be edited from the footage of the two wildlife cameras.

6.4 An essay or paper on the conversation

In the reflection on the session it is our ambition to draw on contemporary attempts to extend Simondon's (problematic) notion of design.

7. References

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About the Convenors:

Sander Mulder works in design education (Delft University of Technology), works in practice (co-design and co-creation projects for mostly non-profit clients) and is an external PhD candidate researching responsibility in design.

Stella Boess is assistant professor at Delft University of Technology and researches design thinking and doing tools for (non-)designers. She has worked in consultancy practice both employed and independently.

Jonas Fritsch, PhD, is associate professor in interaction design at the IT-University of Copenhagen. His work centers on a creative thinking of interaction design, experience philosophy and affect theory through practical design experiments with interactive sound and physical interfaces.