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The Corporeal Order of Things: The *Spiel* of Usability

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Abstract. Things make sense to us. The identity of a thing is a meaningful style that expresses the usability of the thing. The usability is a dynamic order of the praxis in which the thing is embedded and in which we are ourselves de-centered. According to Merleau-Ponty, this sociocultural and psychosocial order is a formation of practical understanding and interpretation that rests upon and resumes the elementary, perceptual-expressive structuring of being. The *Spiel* is one of the three dimensions of corporeal intentionality, in which this entire organization of meaning and experience unfolds. So, the *Spiel* of usability is a corporeal and practical intentionality that reaches from an aesthetic-ontological structuring of meaning to the order of the things in modern everyday praxes.

Key words: aesthetic reason, corporeal intentionality, meaning, Merleau-Ponty, performative presence, praxis, pre-personal experience, style, thing, usability

1. Introduction

The word “thing” is used in a variety of ways, all of which seem to imply some kind of human creation: no “thing-in-itself” is completely freed from a certain “sense” or “idea” that we may have of it.¹ In other words, certain varieties of *meaning* and *experience* are integral to the “reality” and the “essence” of any appearing thing. Things that may matter to us in any way are not things for any living being, but first and foremost (if not exclusively) for human beings. To us, things are mainly useful, in particular, when “things” is understood in the primary sense that relates to identifiable physical entities. The meaning of the things is the meaning that we associate with their use. This meaning is decisive with regard to their identification also when they appear apart from any concrete use, e.g. as broken, irrelevant, or currently being designed. Disturbingly encroaching things have a sense that is largely indirect: marginal to – and somehow differentiated from – the vast scope of adequate and reliable things in our daily life, including unimportant and negligible things. Of course, it is not in contrast to – but in a tight, implicit association with and creative prolongation of – their materiality and physical features that we make use of things. Our interplay with things is usually based upon an extensive (“objective”) reliability and a deep (“subjective”) faith as to

what we can do with them. In short, what we recognize as an ashtray, a house, or a computer system is structured through the topic of compound (potential, actual, expected, emergent, etc.) *usability*.

The usability of things does not come down to questions of deliberate design, the users' conscious choices, or other issues of functionality in the strict sense of definite utilities that can be objectified and formalised in the specification of things or socio-technical systems (cf. Pye 1978). The difference between utility and usability is between aspects of one and the same practice that may be more or less contrasting,² and that require completely different conceptual perspectives for their explication.² While utility is a principle essentially defined by functional formality and socio-economic quantity,³ usability is an actual experience concerning the psychosocial and sociocultural³ qualities and strains of concrete practice.

The topic to be pursued here is the experience and practices of usability (and only more implicitly its relationship with utility). In addition, the notion of a very general kind of experienced order, called a "*Spiel*," is taken up. In particular, the article discusses how this notion applies to our understanding of praxis⁴ and being.⁵ In fact, the whole account that follows is an attempt to explicate the relations of embedment in being that can be indicated as follows:⁶

Thing < Usability < Praxis < Being

However, we have to face the complication that this compound relationship implies a particular "folding out" and "folding in" of meaning: being is the continuous, centrifugal and centripetal differentiation and formation of a new *Gestalt*.⁷ So, the whole relationship may be nothing more than an undifferentiated *Gestalt*, or its structuring and explication may point to the significance of additional intermediate momenta (and of course a *Gestalt* may unfold in other directions than towards the distinction of something as a thing). For example a discussion about the quality of a particular screwdriver tacitly implies the experience of it as an unnoticed tool in use, which again implies the much more general background experience of an undifferentiated "something." This differentiation and unfolding is the crucial matter of phenomenology: the oriented structuring of meaning and experience that is called "intentionality."

Section two below indicates how the notion of a *Spiel* has similarities with Ludwig Wittgenstein's, Pierre Bourdieu's, and Michel Foucault's concepts of sociocultural practices as games or play, and how it differs by emphasizing the elementary structuring of meaning as a field of presence. The third section, *The Meaning of Things: Usability and Style*, outlines Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of the usability of things as a comprehensive meaningfulness and practical convenience. There is a meaningful corporeity of the things, a style that interplays and is intertwined with our bodily being. The fourth section, *Elementary Meaning*:

The Corporeal Spiel of Intentionality, then briefly outlines the phenomenological notion of the *Spiel* as a dimension of corporeal intentionality that structures meaning and thus usability. The fifth section, *The Spiel of Usability in Modern Praxes*, illuminates the usability of things in modern⁸ everyday life. It is pointed out that the intentionality of a *Spiel* takes up the praxes with a differentiated expression of usability: a characteristic style of things that belong to a particular type of praxis.

2. The Order of Praxis: A Field of Performative Presence

The understanding of our interplay with things and their usability in everyday life requires an alternative to systemic notions of meaning, discourse, practice and experience.⁹ Whether a general systems theory draws upon spiritual or biological and technical concepts, like the Hegelian dialectic and cybernetic approaches respectively, systems theory always seems to severely violate its theme when applied as the basic or solitary approach to human and social science. Whereas we want – as far as the scientific understanding of psychosocial and sociocultural phenomena is concerned – to take human experience and practice seriously, the concept of *Spiel* appears to be a plausible substitute for the system concept: it is an equally general designation, but it indicates a more profound and dynamic understanding of the order which we find in all kinds of phenomena. The German word “*Spiel*” (or the French “*jeu*”) is preferred in order not to choose between “play” and “game,”¹⁰ and to indicate a much more elementary connotation in both: the dynamic structuring of no more than a certain recognizable order. Indeed, we find the simple order of a *Spiel* in all the various forms of practice that might be called “play” as well as in other types of praxis (or practice), and in all sorts of non-human – but recognizably structured (i.e. socioculturally identifiable) – phenomena, such as the “play” of the wind in the leaves.

2.1. *The Spiel of Performative Order*

Wittgenstein’s and Bourdieu’s concepts of game (cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Wittgenstein, 1971) are both significant steps on the way to the phenomenological notion of *Spiel* that we are aiming at. There seems to be an important overall picture that is common to them, and indeed Bourdieu often referred to Wittgenstein. In this line of thought, the notion of a game applies to a basic and almost ubiquitous kind of sociocultural order that may be characterized as follows:

It encompasses “realities” as well as “constructions.” Human beings may be rather passively engaged as well as more actively involved in the unfolding of a game.

It is familiar to us, rather than being given in any formal way. A game can only be understood in its immediacy. So, any explication of it must be associated with the experience of sensing and perceiving it directly.

It is composed of generative dynamics, rather than definite functions. The sociocultural reality that we experience and practice through a game is marked by discontinuity and ambiguity.

In effect, these points seem to imply that the scientific understanding and explication of the sociocultural games must be of a phenomenological – hermeneutic kind. The markedly performative character of the order and reason we find in our praxes and practices indicates that theoretical conception of our psychosocial and sociocultural being has to appreciate the primacy of lived experience. Indeed, it is quite evident that any *performative* meaning – the understood sense and significance of a practical performance – must be anchored in *the presence and concreteness* of that performative event. A paradigm even for the experience of performative art, this actuality or revival of a concrete presence is much more than a communication of information between two or more distinct positions. The enormous richness of meaning that is spontaneously oriented with a precise theme (cf. Schutz, 1962, 1966) implies a background of more indistinct contexts. It is not a structure of (tacit) knowledge that could in principle be exhaustively laid bare and specified in a number of propositions or networked representations. The issue concerns the very structure of experience itself, a practical grip on events that indicates our profound connection with the world (cf. Garfinkel, 1984). The immediate perception of a performative expression is due to a general anchorage – a sedimentary “feeling at home” – by the recognition of customary comportment. This immediacy does not allow any distance between expression and perception, between an active and a passive side of the per-formative interaction: to grip the performative sense is to be situated by it, ready to “go on from there.” While Wittgenstein and Bourdieu both expressed a certain awareness of this, they were also ambivalent about it and reluctant to simply accept a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach. Consequently, Wittgenstein most markedly and Bourdieu in a somewhat intricate way halted in front of the radical consequence of their own insight, namely that sociocultural order is profoundly something we are embedded in and “of which we are,” rather than something we encounter and possess. For instance, they could have chosen “play” instead of “game” in the English editions of their books. For the purposes that Wittgenstein and Bourdieu had in mind, the word “play” might have been more appropriate than “game,” which among other things indicates a much too rigorous sense of rules. After all, playing is undoubtedly more basic to our existence than gaming (cf. Huizinga 1963), and games in any strict sense of the word are just a small part of the

various kinds of sociocultural interplay: we play a game, we do not “game a play.”

The phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition has, in fact, been occupied with ideas of play, more than with ideas of game. As Eugen Fink (1974) has pointed out, it is an ancient ontological notion that play might be “the essence of being.” However, as his own contribution indicates, that notion can only metaphorically be directly associated with the idea of play as the particular kind of human activity that we predominantly (though not exclusively) ascribe to children. Frederik J.J. Buytendijk (1933) searched for an intermediate position by emphasizing that the human being is exposed to the play: play is based on a drive, and has its own dynamic in which things also “play with the player.” In a sense, Buytendijk’s and Fink’s phenomenological and hermeneutic thinking, according to which play is based upon representations or pictures of the world, culminates in Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990). He renders play as a linguistic dynamism in which the human subject is de-centered, an approach that has a certain similarity with the position of Wittgenstein, but focuses on play rather than discursive language and emphasizes that we are subject to play rather than playing subjects.

Although Bourdieu did not belong to the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition, his sociological concept of game was closely associated with Merleau-Ponty’s uncovering of the simultaneously corporeal and sociocultural structuring of our existence. But despite all its qualities, Bourdieu’s theory can be criticised for applying only the most superficial and easily digested aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of our corporeity and sociality, rather than unfolding a sociological approach from the ontological comprehension of human existence that Merleau-Ponty offers. Bourdieu goes as far as to describe a crucial stratum of sociocultural order in which there is a kind of circularity between general social structures and anonymous social actors. The “here” side of our comportment and *habitus* together with the “there” side of the “surrounding” structures of rules and institutions both play more or less active as well as more or less passive roles at various levels. Only as general sociocultural identity do we recognize precisely what is at stake in trivial bodily communication, and respond competently as required by the situation. Likewise, the competent use of discursive language consists, according to Wittgenstein, of no more and no less than sharing the significant points that are communicated in particular situations. But Wittgenstein’s and Bourdieu’s approaches are both marked by their struggle with – and not least against – the identification of order with rules or regular structures, which is predominant in the understanding of sociocultural life as play or game. While the concepts of body-techniques (Mauss) and self-techniques (Foucault) also outline the idea of a social regularity that is implanted in objective bodily behaviour, Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* goes further by emphasizing the actual experience – the practical sense – with which these regularities are maintained in our daily

practices. He underlines a pre-given mutual transcendence between the *habitus* and the field: the anonymous bodily sense and orientation *is* a sedimentary community of meaningful sociocultural structures, and the social fields *are* structured with bodily orientations and practices. Still, his position limits itself by a focus on the empirical objectification of bodily experience, which is based upon the mere assumption of general correspondence between the subjective experience and the objectivity of sociocultural order and regularity.

But if not as formalized rules and techniques, then how is this notion of praxis as equivalence and exchange between a social field and a social identity actually conceivable? And how can the critical issue about the lived experience of performative meaning be clarified? A careful conceptualization of concrete presence and of the anonymity of sociocultural experience and practice is decisive with regard to these points.¹¹

2.2. *The Profound Coherence of Order and Presence*

Because it is experienced, any kind of order is – as Merleau-Ponty has shown – a formation that rests on elementary, perceptual-expressive meaning. This means that apparently “substantial” and “definite” regularities and rules actually are and remain at stake in the more thorough structuring and unfolding of a *Spiel*. The *Spiel* is not limited to an empirical locality in objective time and physical space. It is a bodily and fleshly intentionality that structures significance and sense associated with an open experience of temporality and spatiality. Merleau-Ponty points to this intentionality as unfolding across what he calls “the field of presence,” a structuring that may be indicated in this way:

Presence < Lifeworld < Corporeal being

The phenomenological notion of the field of presence that structures the coherence of an ephemeral “here-and-now” and a ubiquitous lifeworld has its parallel in Wittgenstein’s conception of praxis as a game that is defined within a hierarchy of forms of life. However, the phenomenological notion of being is not a static form of life, but life as the dynamic becoming – intentionality’s structuring of meaning – that can be understood as a *Spiel*. The perceptual-expressive becoming that starts from an intentionality of “raw being” influences all experience and practice.

It is in the field of presence that events of differentiation, identification and transcendence continuously make a figure stand out from a background: the momentary appearance of anything whatsoever is structured into the perspectives of more permanent experience and sedimentary institutions that ultimately imply the ubiquitous alliance of our body and the lifeworld. The field of presence is not the same as an empirical domain, but a universal

form of sociocultural and historical coherence. Everything, including time and space, is “born” out of the field of presence:

Perception provides me with ‘a field of presence’ in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 307/1962: 265.)

Everything, therefore, causes me to revert to the field of presence as the primary experience in which time and its dimensions make their appearance *in themselves [en personne]*, with no intermediate distance and with a final self-evidence. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 475–6/1962: 416; modified translation; original emphasis.)

Merleau-Ponty has criticized Edmund Husserl’s notion of the field of presence as a structure of consciousness, lacking its real *épaisseur*—a striking term that signifies density, breadth and inertia. Of course, it is precisely these qualities that characterize any praxis and any ontological profundity in association with the field of presence.¹² In a word, this *épaisseur* of the field of presence comes close to the Hegelian notion of the concrete: the experiential coherence of specificity and generality. In his own works, Merleau-Ponty has extensively discussed this density, breadth and inertia of the field of presence. He understands it as a structure of corporeity and experience that includes the “raw” perceptual-expressive being as well as our culture-historically formed practices. In other words, the concept of the field of presence comprises, for him, a wealth of both pregnant and opaque meaning that is continuously oriented into a new coherence of presence and lifeworld. It is not a particular kind of field, but any field expressed and perceived as its actual structuring of our experience. It is principally pre-personal experience and a domain in which things appear to us as styles of usability. While Merleau-Ponty accentuates the performative character of the field of presence as lived and bodily practised experience, he ultimately understands it as a kind of ontological aesthetics: the de-centered structuring of expressive-perceptual meaning.

Today, it seems both natural and necessary to indicate how the outlined phenomenological conception of *Spiel* differs from Foucault’s idea of order as *agame* and his discussion of “the order of things.” With his archaeology (cf. Foucault, 1989, 1994), Foucault suggests a notion of discursive order, which he contrasts with the phenomenological–hermeneutic appreciation of lived experience, and thus, the focus on concrete presence and profound meaning. In spite of this, he obviously maintains important aspects of the selfsame approach: an insistence to approach “the matter itself” and let the material “speak for itself” (as significant structures stand out from a wealth of sources and details), an occupation with the bodily, historical, and de-centered character of our sociocultural being, just to mention some of the most obvious points. Still, he distances himself from Merleau-Ponty in particular, but also

from Heidegger, by asserting that in our time order can no longer be understood as a profound structuring of our being. Order is only conceivable – he contends – as the manifest, rule-governed formation of discourse, expertise, and bodily behaviour, as well as of knowledge and truth. The game whereby such aspects of order are established is an objectification, systematisation or enactment in strategic relations to other possible formations. Emphasizing an understanding of discourse as materiality and events, not just semantic expression, Foucault wants to conceive the discursive formation as an order behind the explicit discourse, which interplays with non-discursive domains. But even his additional analyses of plays (or “games”) of power and of forms of subjectivity do not change the problem of a crucial limitation that Foucault himself occasionally insists on: in spite of its integration in his genealogy, the order that the archaeology uncovers is only about surfaces. Because Foucault rejects the lived experience, the concrete presence, the expressive-perceptual sense and significance that catch us, he prevents himself from any sophisticated understanding of bodily experience, current historical relevance, or elementary coherence of materiality and meaning.

The post-structuralist reaction against humanism and phenomenology – manifested in a sharp division between the human being and the sign as well as between experience and meaning – leads to the problematic if not hopeless notion of play without a “centre” in the sense of a presence (cf. also Derrida, 1990). This “objectification without a subjectivity” seems to inevitably lead either nowhere (i.e. to inconsistency) or back towards the blindness of a structuralist – if not systemic – position. In contrast, with Merleau-Ponty (and to some extent Heidegger) the phenomenological answer to post-structuralism is that de-centeredness is always situated, oriented and generative. Correspondingly, it is particularly clear in Merleau-Ponty that the de-centeredness of the human being into bodily-social anonymity is the precondition for the psychosocial and sociocultural presence that *centres* the experiential figures, themes, and events of both ordinary and exceptional practices. The notion of *Spiel* that we can find in Merleau-Ponty has been further developed by Bernhard Waldenfels (1987, 1994) in more significant ways than by the post-structuralists. He offers a phenomenological discussion of the borders and balances between various forms of order and disorder. Attentive to the intertwinement of subjective and bodily experience with the topics of order, he uncovers profound issues of the structuring of meaning that were inaccessible to Foucault.

Post-structuralism is quite right in rejecting the immature, Husserlian idea of an abstract presence that is simply a structure of consciousness. But when the *épaisseur* of the field of presence is understood as the concreteness of fleshly and bodily intentionality, it becomes clear that our bodily being is an open field of expression and perception interplaying within the sociality and physicality of a lifeworld, and that any presence can be captured and varied

by expressive and reactive things just as much as by us. Thus, if the concrete presence of a thing is all about its usability, then the sense and significance of a thing – the compound of reliability and faith with which we use it – must be related to the elementary forms of meaning with which any experience is structured: corporeal intentionality.

3. The Meaning of Things: Usability and Style

Phenomenology is occupied with analysing our actual experience – the “what” and the “how” of lived experience. Over time, the stringent application of this approach has uncovered the inadequacy of the common notion of an elementary and immediately given “bare world” that consists of self-contained material “things,” i.e. the notion that experience starts from an entirely physical reality consisting of definite entities with pre-given essential features to which sociocultural meaning is only added in secondary movements. Still, according to Husserl the “mere things” (*blosse Sachen*) are constituted in transcendental¹³ consciousness as the formal reality of a unique identity that occupies its own extension in space. This traditional (Cartesian) notion of “mere things” is regarded as more essential than the practical meaning and experiential significance with which we usually distinguish and use the things of everyday life (cf. Husserl, 1973, 1986; Sallis, 1995). Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, even when he had realized the inertia of praxis and “the power of circumstances” (cf. Sartre, 1969: 44), suggested a speculative dialectic in which things and worked matter are simply alienated, reified or dead objectifications and mediations of human existence and praxis (cf. Sartre, 1982; Weismüller, 1999).

3.1. The Concretion of Sense and Significance as a Thing’s Usability

In contrast to Husserl and Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty emphasize that our use of things is basic with regard to how – and how far – they appear to us at all. They agree in claiming that *in so far* as a thing appears in its distinct being, its most elementary and immediate appearance is not due to any act of a pre-given subject. The appearance is neither a constitution nor an objectification of the thing in its permanent facticity,¹⁴ but rather a kind of oriented expression of its sociocultural significance in which the thing offers us its concrete meaning: the situated and contextual applicability of its practical usefulness. For both of them, this has much to do with an understanding of the human subject as basically de-centered in our own experience of and practice with things.

According to Heidegger, things are first and foremost tools and equipment (*Zeug*), i.e. apparent due to our use of them and appearing as appropriated to that usage. This is explicated in his well-known discussion in *Being and*

Time (Heidegger 1972/1978). As tools, things are embedded with all their meaning in our practices and – thereby indirectly – in the total structure of “our world.” Correspondingly, when using a tool competently, we are not particularly attentive to this distinct tool, but work on the background of a kind of coalition with the tool that allows us to be all the more occupied with the fulfilment of our task. In this regard, any competent usage of a tool resembles a way of working that is prototypically found among artists and craftsmen. The unnoticed thing in use is not precisely a singular facility, but rather a *general* prolongation of our bodily capabilities (cf. Heidegger, 1972/1978: 68). So, essentially, the tool is “ready-at-hand” (*zuhanden*), i.e. in our intentional use, and not remarkable, obtrusive or refractory (e.g. broken, lying in the way or missing). Usability (usefulness and reliability) is not a feature of the tool, but rather the essence of the tool; the tool ready-at-hand is first and foremost an “immediate reference” to the coherence and connection (*Bewandtnis*) of its situated and instituted applicability (cf. Heidegger, 1972/1978: 83–88). Without the distance of representations or thematic cognition, the appropriate, skilled use of a tool involves a practical understanding of the meaning of the tool. This direct understanding is a felt (bodily) sense of the tool’s usage, an intentionality that structures what we may call “the situated usability” of the tool. In other words, even the most minute and passing details of applied functions of the tool are embedded in competent perspectives and horizons of how the tool relates to and coheres with a near context of materials and other tools, as well as particular and more general work processes and settings. Ultimately, any aspect of our existence – certainly not just work experience in a strict sense – may instantly be (closely or remotely) involved in the structuring of the situation. It is particularly noteworthy that the ordinary usage of a thing, where its usability unfolds in an exemplary way, is exactly what implies that the thing is as it were dissolved for us in the practical perspective of subtle details and overall practices that situate our usage of the thing, just like the efficient use of one of our hands implies that it does not appear to us as a separate entity (we do not have to look for the hand or think about how to use it).

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger (1993) analyses the relation between a thing and a work of art, and points out that the former can be understood from the latter, but not the other way around. A work of art is essentially an “event of truth” (in the Heideggerian and early Greek sense of truth as uncovering – not as a quality of a proposition), the exposure of the ontological being of something. In a philosophical way of thinking that he insists must come close to poetry, Heidegger explicates how, for instance, vanGogh’s painting of a pair of worn boots reveals the whole usage of this equipment and ultimately indicates how its user is bound to the earth and to a human world. If the work of art expresses something on its own, gives us back a meaning that not even the artist deliberately planted in it, the same must be true of tools and (our abstraction of) “mere things.” All these three kinds of

things are historical sorts of beings that inevitably carry (hidden or revealed) some particular tendencies – or invitations – as to how we relate to the world and what we expect from various situations. While the (great) work of art is associated with the event of truth, the tool is characterized by its usefulness, the anticipation of which is attempted through its purposeful construction: the forming of matter whereby the combined shape and substance of a thing is intended to reflect its usage. But the very usability of a tool must be understood through the way it “rests in itself” and expresses its meaning (usefulness and reliability) that goes far beyond the facticity of a formed matter, almost like a work of art. In Heidegger’s view, notions of a thing as a core that carries its features or as a synthetic unit of constituents (sensory impressions) – i.e. variations on the idea of “mere things” – are “assaults” upon the things. Things express their usefulness and reliability to us, also when they appear otherwise than in their regular usage or apart from any current utilization at all. They address us with their general and specific relevance,¹⁵ which we routinely recognize and respond to without really paying attention to it.

In *The Thing*, Heidegger (1997) moves further in the direction of constructing his own poetic rendering of the ontology of things. He focuses, again, on the immediate address to us of familiar things that we do not attempt to objectify or grasp conceptually but just recognize and respond to in accord with how they matter to us. In this discussion, Heidegger points to the interesting etymology of the Roman word “res” as well as the English word “thing” that imply the denotation of “a case” or “a state of affairs” of concern to human beings, found in expressions like “he knows how to handle things” and “that’s a great thing.” But his main concern in this article is to expound an understanding of being according to which a fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities dwells in the essence of a thing (such as a mug) and structures the world in their mutual “mirroring.”

In these three writings (appearing in 1927, 1935/36 and 1950, respectively) Heidegger has clearly pointed out that he regards tools as a prototypical kind of thing, and that things are essentially characterized by the meaning and significance that they have for us in use. In this exemplary status of the tool lies an emphasis on *the concreteness* (in a Hegelian sense) of the experience of everyday things. Essentially, i.e. in the immediacy of its usability, the mug that you take and use to drink your coffee in the cafeteria is neither completely particular nor completely general, but implies open potentials of differentiation and identification in both of these directions. Furthermore, Heidegger reveals that our practical usage of things rests on an aesthetic structuring of meaning, which is similar to the expression and perception of sublime artworks and which characterizes our very existence. However, he does not explicate the crucial sense in which even an outstanding painting remains “a thing”: in what way its expressiveness is shared with other kinds of sublime artwork and fabulous artefacts, and how our experience of these “great things” implies

culture-historical “institutions” of sensitivity as well as technique. Does not a sublime work of art have much in common with, for instance, a fetish or a book of fairy-tales?

Merleau-Ponty’s rendering of what things are is to a large extent in agreement with Heidegger’s. However, the exemplary status of a tool is not all-encompassing in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of things. More basically, there are crucial differences in their conceptualization of the elementary meaning and sociocultural experience out of which the expressiveness and the usability of things are structured. These differences are in particular related to their diverging notions of our de-centeredness in the praxes from which the meaningful interplay with things unfolds.

According to Heidegger, the human being is de-centered while experiencing the expressions of being and language or of a thing in the perspective of its use. But this does not – in his view – presuppose any kind of genesis or regeneration of the human subject out of its everyday situation. It just implies that this whole scenario of our ordinary life is inaccessible to the rational, conscious subject as it is commonly depicted, and only to be directly experienced or reflectively approached with a thoroughly interrogative (rather than judging) and receptive (rather than constructing) attitude to the expressions of being, language, or things. In Merleau-Ponty, the picture is quite different: We literally exist within and out of the experience of ordinary sociocultural life, and our unique singularity is not absolute, but a particular position that is differentiated and reproduced within our bodily-anonymous existence. While sociality is a dimension of our individual existence and an attitude in which we may be absorbed according to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty basically understands it as the pre-personal community, intercorporeity and intersubjectivity of our bodily existence out of which the more specific individual and collective identities are structured.

3.2. The Corporeal Expression–Perception of Things as Style

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be denoted as sociocultural and corporeal, in contrast to Heidegger’s somewhat speculative and eventually religious position. Merleau-Ponty tries to describe our existence and our lifeworld in the light of the fact that we are experiencing bodies. Only as living, acting and communicating human bodies are we engaged in any psychosocial or sociocultural events, processes and relations. Below and behind our stances as responsible persons, subjects, or agents, we permanently remain a pre-personal “body subject” in close correspondence and interplay with the world. This correspondence and interplay between the body subject and the world is carried by corporeal intentionality. This is an elementary structuring of meaning in which things emerge to us from pregnant and opaque figures, and “mutely” unfolded usability crystallizes into the expression of a style. Now, let

us consider a few major steps in the development of Merleau-Ponty's general rendering of how things appear to human beings with this intentionality.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) depicts things in association with the lifeworld, which he also talks about as a general field of lived experience or as "the natural world." It is founded on perceptual and expressive meaning, oriented with bodily intentionality through the situated structuring of an open reality around a presence. Here, the thing is not simply a perceptual constancy in a geometric space, but rather a nexus of existential (i.e. aesthetic-practical) meaning that preserves its significance across changing situations and perspectives. Things are opaque structures with an ultimately confused significance, because their meaning "belongs" to the world, which is not simply objective and determined, but embedded with an anonymous subjectivity that is ignorant of itself: a depersonalized grip of situations and a tentative evaluation of them. Previous to our conscious reflection we are the bodily experience of psychosocial and sociocultural situations, interplaying with things in their always perspectival (partly explicit and partly implicit) meaning. We are quite confident with the contingency of immediate perception and expression: things and circumstances are significant realities and "living" momenta, before they can be objectified as definite entities.¹⁶ Most immediately, expression and perception are structured with the appearance of a *Gestalt*, such as the distinction of an ambiguous "something" or "somebody." A *Gestalt* is a form of experienced meaning that is fundamental to things as well as ideas. All that happens in the most original situations that we experience is events of perspectival structuring whereby figures stand out from backgrounds. Things, other people and we ourselves are dissolved, as it were: not appearing to the present experience, but literally forgotten for some time. Upon further reflective structuring of the field of presence, the former figure may appear as this or that aspect of a thing, another person or me. Only because the thing is originally expressed through the reorganisation of a perceptual field with its *Gestalten*, can the thing stand out – at different levels of more thematic reflection – as a cross-contextual entity with its own particular characteristics. Still, the very thing is basically experienced pre-conceptually,¹⁷ as a pertinent aesthetic-practical expression of a relatively constant meaning. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls "a style." The style is a profound, communicative significance that indicates the sedimentary as well as generative meaning of a phenomenon, telling us about what is to be expected in situations where the phenomenon appears. We recognize and handle a thing spontaneously and precisely when caught by (i.e. sensing and responding to) its style, without any intermediate representation or cognition.

In *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty (1964b) sharpens the conceptualization of the perceptual and expressive importance of momenta that are actually absent, but nevertheless have a direct impact on the immediately experienced meaning, such as the hidden reverse side of a well-known thing and Gestalt psychology's

“phi-phenomenon” (concretized in the “natural” continuity of the appearing movements in a movie). The things and the spaces that we experience are bound to the context of the human body that always implies various sorts and degrees of “remote” sense, implicit meaning and “semi-accessibility.” There is a negativity of meaning, which is crucial to all perception and expression: we actually perceive many aspects of things that are only indicated or discernible in them as divergences or absences. So, the expressiveness of well-known things and the expressiveness of our body share this elementary “flesh” of the perception, which is more a sensitive submission and abandonment to the immediate significance and seductive reality of the things than an active or intellectual possession of them.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1964a/1968) explicates being as aesthetic meaning in the sense of indivisible perception and expression. Ontological presence is “wild” and incoherent, but nevertheless structured with meaning in the form of an elementary intentionality and spontaneous reason that Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh.” With this denotation, he suggests something that has not previously had a name: the coherence of a materiality and a meaning as the universal element of a being, i.e. a human body as well as anything in the world. So, any experienced matter has its flesh – in common with, in distinction from, in relation to and in communication with other modalities of being:

The visible can thus fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; I the seeing am also visible. What makes the weight, the density [épaisseur], the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture, of the present, and of the world is the fact that he who grasps them feels himself emerge from them by a sort of coiling up or redoubling, fundamentally homogeneous with them; he feels that he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is for his eyes like his double or an extension of his flesh. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 113–4/1964a: 152–3; modified translation).

The flesh is the sensible in the double sense and reciprocity of what is sensed and what senses. The flesh of a thing is not inherent to the spatiotemporal entity of the thing, but the transcendence that inscribes it in a field of corporeal experience: basically intertwined with and undifferentiated from the bodily felt meaning with which the thing can be expressive within this field. Things exist for us and communicate with us through the perspectival structuring of experience: in momentary generative movements the ephemeral appearances of singular things are firmly and cogently put in perspective with a whole universe of sociocultural meaning. In this way a thing becomes significant when it takes a certain possession of the situation within a sociocultural field, i.e. when it appears with the general weight or *épaisseur* of a style.

3.3. *The Order of Style and Usability: Between Figures and Objects*

Let us recapitulate. The actual experience of things takes place on certain levels of differentiation that are between the appearance of more obscure figures (*Gestalten*) and the appearance of more distinct objects (entities), and there is a parallelism and correspondence with three levels of our attachment or approach to things: perceptual-expressive involvement, practical use, and objectifying investigation. Usually, our interplay with things is very dynamic. Practical use involves backgrounds and moments of perceptual-expressive involvement, so that figures are in focus instead of things, which means that the coherence of specificity and generality is particularly strong for a moment, while the field of presence implodes as it were and crystallizes into an emerging event or a focal theme.

Regarded as an unfolding of corporeal intentionality, a thing's usability tends to "involve everything" in its structuring of the field of presence with an implicit background and a more explicit foreground. To illuminate how we can be involved with things through such an all-inclusive meaningfulness, let us briefly look at some of the most significant and illustrative cases. These concern highly refined and composite things that were developed in order to contain or mediate an intentionality – the precision, depth, and flexibility of which are quite obviously comparable to any structuring of meaning that we might be tempted to call utterly subjective, and a mark of our difference from things. Not least in works of art and in the modern media do we find physically manifested meaning that intertwines and coheres with our own identity and with the expressive-perceptual structuring of "anything at all." Though the sophistication of these things is not primarily an attempt to construct precise copies of reality, since they always rely heavily on our readiness to interplay, their success in seducing and deceiving us is so great that we hesitate to call them "things." Obviously, these kinds of things carry intentionality in the old antique and medieval sense of the world that Merleau-Ponty's analyses (1964a/1968, 1993a) led back to as a correction and supplement to the phenomenological convention of a purely subjective point of departure: intentionality is not just the directedness of experience, but of being, including the meaningful references and expressions that are found in things.

In his essay, "The Film and the New Psychology," Merleau-Ponty (1964c) compares the meaning that is perceived in a movie to that of a bodily gesture as well as that of a simple thing: in all three cases the meaning is expressed for and understood by perception, not by thought. Like any work of art, the movie is built up with a style that makes sense through the anticipation of and relying on our interpretation. Obviously, a movie is similar to a literary text in cutting out its narratives and points more directly and in more condensed form than the processes of real life do. But at the same time a movie makes sense through realistic visual and auditory illusion, and moreover applies music to

underline if not to create the “right” moods and emotions. Certainly, a movie is a thing that for a while can address us and fascinate us so emphatically that it is comparable to aspects of our interaction with other people.

Of course, this is also the case with more traditional works of art, such as literature and music. Again, we are talking about very special “things” that were elaborated with the greatest effort to express something significant. But that only emphasizes the artistic cultural refinement of the integral connection between materiality and meaning. While the entire artistic work is contained in a material manifestation, the effort to express something significant in the materiality of “cultural media” (or should we rather call them “artistic toys”?) can only flourish within the praxis of its “usability.” The expressive potential is limited to a certain deviation from the established tradition of how texts and other things are understood to communicate with us. Thus, just as the usability of trivial things is a felt practical significance that transcends their strictly physical entity and de-centers the things in their surplus of meaningful intertwinement with us, the most artistic utilization of cultural media and toys also resumes the elementary presence of any perceptible style and the pregnant sense of the simple figure of “something.”

Perhaps Heidegger’s suggestion that a painting is the paradigm through which to understand what the things really are – what they mean – to us is less demanding than the suggestion of a melody. Still, a melody is probably more closely related than a painting to the topic of usability, in so far as it is more customary and familiar to most of us. Without simply regarding a melody as a thing, a number of similarities can be indicated between *the event* of a melody and *the use* of a thing, i.e. the aesthetic-practical presence of either of them. Obviously, there are decisive things and technical skills involved in the unfolding of a melody, regardless of whether you are participating in or just listening to the performance. But more precisely, the similarities are about being de-centered in a socioculturally structured situation that generally appears as relatively opportune and pleasing or stressing and annoying. Although, of course, different matters and things have different potentials for structuring

– rather than being structured by – the entire situation in which they appear, you may feel “at home” or alienated in the emotional ambiance of a melody, just like at any time only certain physical things are adequate (if not even pleasant or favorite) to us. So, many situations – which might be defined by a remarkable melody as well as by a remarkable thing – literally catch us and seduce us. Even the most trivial and ephemeral appearances of things unfold a certain emotional-conative scenario as they imply and resume their profound association with our existence and experience: “*The thing is structured entirely through our relationship of incarnate being in the world.*”¹⁸ In particular in well-known things, we spontaneously recognize the current variation of a general meaning that indicates the vast, sedimentary experience of their usability: their existence through us as well as our existence through them. The

usability of a thing is its participation in the unfolding of our practices: the performative structuring of a praxis as a field of presence.

4. Elementary Meaning: The Corporeal *Spiel* of Intentionality

Now, it is obvious that there is a remarkable contrast between, on the one hand, the wild being (the flesh) that we share – in our own experience – with animals, plants and things and, on the other hand, the immediacy of our human existence: the coherence of bodily being and sociocultural lifeworld. In altering formulations, this contrast and its “mediation” is a recurrent theme in Merleau-Ponty’s works. In some regards the ontological “wildness” is an oneiric or poetic structuring of meaning, not far from the Freudian primary processes, which is nevertheless compatible – and may be tightly associated

– with efficient expression and realistic perception. Merleau-Ponty regarded the mediation of the immense divergence between “wild” and “confident” being as a principal feature of anthropological ontology. The spontaneous structuring of meaning across this divergence is the situated unfolding of the human lifeworld with fleshly and bodily intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty developed the concept of intentionality as a corporeal and pre-personal structuring of meaning. In my interpretation,¹⁹ his renewal and refinement of phenomenology matured in the understanding of three complementary dimensions of intentionality: a structural, a generative and a dialectic dimension. Corporeal intentionality is the coherent structuring of presence and lifeworld in those three dimensions: as a figure on a background, as a theme in a context, and as an event in a situation.

Structurally, intentionality is the meaningful directedness of the figure-background perspective in any kind of experience. In this structural, horizontal dimension of intentionality, a thing appears with the characteristics that connect it with – i.e. separate it from and associate it with – other (types of) things and with various applications. In order to be noticed, a particular thing only has to be discerned as a specific figure that stands out on the compound background of bodily experience and sociocultural meaning. For example, a particular saw that happens to catch your attention is immediately perceived as one of a kind, relating to a vast field of possible applications.

Generatively, intentionality is the dynamic and vertical structuring which takes up a theme in its context and unfolds more explicit meaning and order from implicit meaning and equivocal order, including things as well as our own anonymous, personal and collective existences. In the generative, vertical dimension a thing appears as the further differentiation of an ambiguous figure, but as something less specified than an object. It is a theme that is differentiated to a certain extent and pointing to a potential of further distinction. For instance, the only useful saw that you can find now is an old one that is actually too worn-out for the task in hand, so the context calls for

further clarification: should you use the old saw with the extra care and energy required, go and sharpen it, look for the better one, which is missing, or drive out and buy a new one?

The microscopic *Spiel* in any experience indicates a particular dimension of intentionality: it is a *dialectic* kind of transcendence. While a singular coherence and uniform direction is characteristic of each of the two other dimensions of intentionality – the horizontal direction in structural intentionality and the vertical direction in generative intentionality – the dialectic dimension unfolds a distributed dynamics of intentionality. However, like the two other dimensions, the *Spiel* has its own variety of the presence-lifeworld duality, that of an event and its situation. In the dialectic dimension of *Spiel*, things interplay with us, relate to us and address us. In our example, the saw in use “talks back” to the hand and arm that operate it, relating how well it is being directed and commenting on the cutting of the wood.

Intentionality unfolds coherently in its three dimensions, as the background, the context, and the situation of a field of presence are formed from a lifeworld. The ontological order of expressive-perceptual meaning is continuously initiated with the immediate appearance of an ambiguous and pregnant “something”: the structural distinction of a figure, which is also the generative identification of a theme, and the dialectic tension of an event.

Let us look a little more closely at the dimension of corporeal intentionality, which is the particular focus of our discussion: the *Spiel*. As mentioned above, the *Spiel* is a dialectic formation of relations and dynamics. Four aspects are the elements by which the meaningful order of a *Spiel* is formed:

Chiasm is the intertwined, mutual implication of two positions that might seem to be quite distinct and disparate “entities,” e.g. a human body and a physical–social environment.

Reversibility is the inter-changeability between two positions of the same kind, e.g. the sensed incident of my left hand touching the right and my right hand being touched.

Responsiveness is the sensitivity and expressivity by which a perceived meaning addresses us like a question, or catches us like a request.

Hyperdialectic is about the always only partial and ambiguous surpassings in history and life. It is a perpetual genesis including a plurality of projects and arrangements, but without any overall goal or general form.

So, the elementary relations in the order of the *Spiel* consist of the reciprocity of intertwined and reversible positions, and its elementary dynamics comprises the asymmetrical responsiveness and irreversible hyperdialectic of such positions. The order of combined reciprocity, asymmetry and irreversibility with which these aspects constitute a *Spiel* is a kind of aesthetic reason: an intentionality of implication and explication structuring the ways in which the meaning experienced in a certain situation folds into and folds out

of various events. The elementary way in which this aesthetic reason “makes” sense is in the pre-cognitive, engaged kind of reflection that is common to the four aspects of a *Spiel*: the expressive-perceptual “folding back” of an ephemerally appearing “something” that prevents its immediate disappearance, or – in other words – the holding on to this “something” in so far as it is distinguished as any *Gestalt* at all. Even this simple identification can be regarded as the differentiation and distribution of phenomena that characterize the dialectic dimension of intentionality: a distinction from what does not adhere to this *Gestalt* and a relationship between the appearances of the *Gestalt*. Since everything in a *Spiel* – the differentiation and identification of anything and anybody – is composed of chiasm, reversibility, responsiveness and hyperdialectic, it must be emphasized that these kinds of expressed and sensed reciprocity and transcendence apply to all of the “implications” and “explications” of an unfolding *Spiel*, its entire autopoiesis.

Thus, the immediacy of the *Spiel* – its elementary aesthetic order and pre-discursive reason – is a dialectic of indefinite relations and events: reciprocal identities and incomplete transitions. The chiasmic and reversible relations indicate the “what” of the *Spiel*: the temporality and spatiality of “near” and “far” together with the identity of things and selves, positions, dispositions, etc. The responsiveness and hyperdialectic generate the “how” of the *Spiel*: activity and passivity, conflict and cooperation, trends and processes, engagement and technique, challenge and reward, etc. There is also a “why” associated with each of the four aspects of the *Spiel* of corporeal intentionality: a conative momentum of relevance to the very opening, formation and resuming of dimensions and perspectives of experience and practices. Of course, these pre-conceptual varieties of the “what,” the “how,” and the “why” of a *Spiel* do not constitute anything like a cognitive “problem space” or a systemic “world” of distinct objects and rules. To indicate how the immediacy of a *Spiel* differs from such notions, let us just take a very brief look at the topic of activity and passivity as well as the topic of relevance. The former is essential to the differentiation and formation of selves and things, the latter to spatiotemporal and institutional structuring.

Distinctions between *passivity and activity* are structured out of the elementary aesthetic (perceptual-expressive) reason that the chiasm, reversibility, responsiveness and hyperdialectic of a *Spiel* may combine into. We are both passively drawn into the *Spiel* and actively taking it up, when we sensibly grasp it and carry it on. The passivity mainly consists, firstly, of being implicated in situations and processes, and secondly, of being assigned to or identified with positions. The activity mainly consists, firstly, of undertaking positions, and secondly, of taking up situations by making deliberate and explicit moves in the *Spiel*. Basically, it is the *Spiel* that structures human subjectivity: it attributes the simplest positions of active subjects and passive objects. Still, there is a correspondence between the differentiation of active subjects and

the differentiation of passive objects. When things that we deal with are not yet structured as distinct objects, then neither are we likely to recognize ourselves as distinct subjects, i.e. active selves characterized by our unique individuality, conscious reflection or cognitive problem solving.

The understanding of the density (*épaisseur*) of the field of presence as the formation of a situated, microscopic-macroscopic perspective of relevance leans on Merleau-Ponty's particular notion of *institution*. In his conception, an institution has the double sense of *atradition* that is neglected or forgotten precisely in so far as it is taken for granted and assimilated, as well as *the initiation* of a new dimension of experience and practice. So, the sociocultural institutions are a projected future as well as a presence of history: a "praxis of foundations" that resumes history with aesthetic-ontological intentionality. Since we efficiently follow one another in understanding the elementary intentionality that is manifested in the historically instituted praxes, we also tend to share a momentum of the tensions and dynamics of more rudimentary culture-historical developments through which the current institutions and praxes evolved. These intermediate positions are kept alive by the equivocal, ideological and mythical sense as well as the discursive rationality of the current institutions. Eventually, meaning is always structured with both universal and socioculturally differentiated aspects; in this sense, our modern expressions and perceptions imply humankind's primitive experience together with a particular cultural history.

At this point, it is clearly intelligible that the *immediate* and *spontaneous* experience of a thing's usability implies a sociocultural and psychosocial foundation of historical coherence and relevant anticipation. In its vertical ontology, usability is a practical matter based upon aesthetic being, but horizontally, the expressive-perceptual structuring of usability is direct and instantaneous. As a *Spiel* of corporeal intentionality, the usability of a thing is the momentary and continuous structuring of an entire culture-historical praxis into a field of presence that upholds a particular practice: a usage, and thereby a thing as well as its user. With this conception of corporeal intentionality, a thing's usability must be clarified in the light of the praxis to which the thing in question belongs.

5. The *Spiel* of Usability in Modern Praxes²⁰

It has been emphasized that things make sense: they are primarily meaningfully applied cultural phenomena, and only secondarily can they be objectified, for example as purely physical phenomena. Now, it must be emphasized that when things are in *Spiel* they tend to appear at their proper level of meaningful organization, namely that of the culture-historically instituted practical affairs of our lifeworld. Like a praxis or a human identity, a thing is an unfolded concreteness: it is of a kind as well as particular.

Essentially, this concreteness is crystallized as an expressive style that characterizes the thing and structures its identification in use. This practical unfolding transcends (and implies) the aesthetic figure of “something,” without turning into the conceptual construction or abstraction of an object. The *Spiel* of a thing in use may for a moment require objectification for the purpose of discourse about the ongoing praxis. Even then, the density of implicit, contextual meaning makes it unnecessary and indeed difficult to move far into object construction. As a style, a thing in *Spiel* signifies its own usability, expresses it, or is assimilated into it. In particular, the usability is signified by the style when momentarily the thing does not fulfil our expectations; it is expressed by the style when the thing appears as a confident point of orientation in the practice; and it assimilates the style when the thing is integrated in the compact, loaded, implicit sense of an ambiguous figure.

In contrast to the prevailing notions of ephemeral, local, small or loosely coupled social games as something characteristic of (post-)modern life, the theory of *Spiel* claims the universality of a more radical, anthropological and aesthetic wild being *as well as* the absolute modernity of a fairly solid distinction of praxis types within a quadratic typology. In the western societies of today²¹ there are four general types or *ideal types* (cf. Weber 1949) of praxis in which to find a characteristic kind of *Spiel* that defines how we expect things to appear to us and be dealt with by us: work, consumption, play and education. Regardless of how much they overlap and intermingle, the work/play and consumption/education contrasts are – if anything – what we must become firmly acquainted with through the socialization that enables us to take part in the various forms of psychosocial and sociocultural praxis – or in other words: to have a “sense of the *Spiel*” that goes on.

In principle, *work* is a praxis “dictated” to us out of natural necessity, though in its apparent facticity it is formed much more by social compulsion. It is the praxis through which the qualified producers create things: realities, qualities and value that change one thing into another, more precious and usable thing. “Work” is the common denotation for artful workmanship as well as hard and monotonous labor. Thus, the performance of work may or may not include the competent finding or design of refined devices. The actual construction or procuring of valuable things through work may be very directly or only quite indirectly associated with the anticipation of their application.

Notions of *play* (including notions of game) are widespread in psychology, sociology, cultural theory and philosophy. A common characteristic of these notions is the focus on playing and gaming as institutions or at least as specific types of regular sociocultural practices that are clearly delimited in time and space, and that stand in contrast to working. Play is about affairs other than production and making a living; typically: having fun, pretending or winning. In an early phenomenological approach, Buytendijk (1933) has discussed this general notion of play as a particular kind of praxis.

Consumption indicates the recurrent intake or utilization of some kind of thing, rather than the using up of goods in their numerical identity. In other words, it is just as marked by mimesis and reproduction as the other types of praxis. Owing to ever occurring new instances of conservation through resumption or revival, consumption reproduces the sociocultural relationship that we have to many things, such as aids, automated services or any particular kind of commodity. These sociocultural relationships are all about things that are produced and arranged for the (mainly quite direct) satisfaction of more or less trivial wishes or needs. However culturally complex and symbolically encoded the consumption may be – and even though it may display a social distinction of status or taste rather than basic needs – it is usually accomplished as a plain and straightforward routine.

Education indicates informal as well as formal varieties of learning that are, however, never completely spontaneous and random, but institutionalized at least to the extent of a common, recognized practice. Education is the praxis through which we make demands on ourselves for the sake of edification, i.e. in order to reach certain potentials of recognized comportment and ability. Immediate social pleasures are renounced so as to attain more remote social pleasures that are also commonly regarded as more gratifying. Although it is primarily a process of training and preparing, education also includes aspects of curious exploration as well as creativeness.

In modern, western societies the distinction between these four praxis types is deeply rooted in cultural history. Gradually distinguished and refined through time, it forms a precondition for the Enlightenment and industrialisation as well as for post-industrial society. As mentioned above, this is a presence of cultural history, which is based upon the elementary structuring of meaning as temporality, historicity, and institutions. Even the current relevance of institutions established in Greek Antiquity is clear. In our practical differentiation of the four praxis types we are familiar with implicit dimensions of the typology that revive old Greek orientations. In one implicit dimension the typology differentiates between practices predominantly oriented towards things (work and consumption) and practices predominantly oriented towards ourselves (play and education). This is a reconstruction of the difference between *technê* and *ethos*. In another implicit dimension we discriminate between productive, demanding practices (education and work) and immediately satisfying practices (play and consumption), which parallels the opposition between *phronêsis* and *hêdonê*.

How is the style of things related to a praxis type, then? The thing that is usable when we work is *a tool*. Thus, the tendency found in Heidegger and many others to regard any usable thing as a tool should be corrected.²² Actually, it is first and foremost characteristic of the praxis of qualified work that things which we use efficiently vanish as it were and melt together with our own abilities, while the work performance absorbs us in the ongoing goal-rational

orientation and structuring of the field of production. (Something superficially similar but really quite different also applies to the praxis of education.) Evidently, this conceptualization of work implies a clear distinction between two sorts of things: the product around which the praxis is oriented, and the tool with which it is carried out. The discourse that the early Heidegger took up obviously holds the artisan's use of a tool as the ideal type of any human interplay or relationship with things and artefacts. It is well-known that this discourse, which is Marxist as well as Heideggerian, has shown its critical relevance to the industrial settings of hard and uninspiring labour. But it is also applicable—though not without problems and limitations—to work settings involving computer-based technology (cf. Ehn 1988; Keller 1994; Winograd and Flores 1986).

The thing that is usable for playing is, of course, *atoy*. The ideal type of toy differs from things belonging to the other types of praxis by not only being fully present in our attention, but directly presenting itself as much more than what it “actually” is. A gift, a status symbol, a religious requisite, or any other kind of toy is loaded with symbolic if not more or less magical meaning. So, its usability is closely associated with its treasured meaning, more or less like a fetish. Accordingly, Donald W. Winnicott (1991) contends that a toy or “favourite thing” appears to the small child as a particular kind of ontological entity, a transitional object that belongs to a “space of potentiality” between objective reality and subjective imagination, which is based upon primary creativity, syncretic being in relation to the mother, and the illusions of the pleasure principle. His point – that not only are things personalized, they are in addition significant for the building of a personal identity – is also emphasized by Tilmann Habermas (1996) and Daniel Miller (2002).

Consumption is a type of praxis in which a usable thing is fairly precisely what it instantaneously and directly appears to be. The thing spontaneously emerges as no more and no less than a presentation: the offering of *a means*, the invitation to a potential for utilization, a model of its own consumption. The means that immediately shows its own applicability is not “a duplicate of itself,” not a *representation* such as in a formal means-ends relation, but an original transparency that plainly conveys what the thing is good for and announces how to handle it. This kind of presentation exemplifies nicely what Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) had in mind when he talked about signs that display their own meaning, and also what Gibson (1986) called the “affordance” of a thing, i.e. what the thing “invites” us or “tells” us to do with it. But it is more closely related to what Norman (1990) called “the psychology of everyday things” when he pointed to the difficulty as well as the demand of capturing it in *technê*, i.e. in the competent design of things. Norman formulated what the understanding of the users' interplay with computer systems has almost exclusively focused on for a long time, since it was believed that the whole topic of usability comes down to questions of “easiness.” But questions

concerning the correctness of users' (mental) model of an artefact – and thereby their possible control of its satisfactory function – can only be *sufficient* for the consideration of usability within the praxis of consumption, i.e. in the case of simple artefacts to be handled by “anybody,” such as bank tellers, informative machines at exhibitions, search systems at libraries and other kinds of “walk-up-and-use” equipment, because the consumption of these computer-based services *should* exactly be trivial and straightforward.

The thing that is usable in the praxis of education – not to be confused with a thing that might be thematized in it – is a *medium*. A blackboard, a book, a verbal or written text is similar to a tool in so far as its usability implies that it is “dissolved” in praxis. However, there is a fundamental difference: what we are oriented towards through a medium is not construction of products, but understanding of sociocultural and psychosocial projects, positions and narratives. So, the usability of a medium is closely associated with socialization and dialogue: a primarily de-centered and pre-personal interaction – perhaps to some extent degenerated into indoctrination or seduction – where experienced subjectivity communicates with inexperienced subjectivity. This peculiarity of subjectivities de-centered with a dissolved thing has led to confusion as well as some clarification about “the meaning of a text”: it is not identical with the specific intentions of the writer or the reader, and neither is it isolated within the coded materiality of the text. It is an expressive-perceptual dialectic of sociocultural and psychosocial experience, the mediated communication between more or less anonymous positions.

A type should be distinguished from a category, just as something typical differs from something categorical. And of course, this entire typology of praxes and corresponding things only concerns principal and characteristic phenomena. Nothing is easier than finding examples of mixtures between play, education, work and consumption, for instance in privileged occupations (such as research) or within ancient economies (cf. Bourdieu, 1977), e.g. in the case of traditional apprenticeship learning (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991; Jordan 1989). However, the actual issue is about a basic typicality of the praxes in modern society, which defines the necessity for any competent person to have a highly refined sense of the structuring of entire contexts and situations—as well as their varying themes and events—on the background of a particular type of praxis. Although a hammer, for instance, is primarily a tool to be handled with a certain competence, there may be a special kind of hammer to be used as emergency equipment in a bus or a train, i.e. clearly a utensil to be handled by anybody. Actually, any close analysis of a work setting, for instance, soon makes it clear that although tools are the typical kind of usable things and toys would be rather extraordinary, media and means can also be quite important, simply because education-related aspects of human recognition and consumption-related aspects of having situations under control are both recurrent momenta in most sorts of work performance. Nevertheless, it is quite

decisive that the available work equipment allows for precisely the kind of praxis that is topical at any time.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has allowed us to clarify some often neglected distinctions, such as the distinctions between a tool, a means and a designed entity (with an anticipated purpose), whereas the usability of things is associated with the particular type of praxis to which they belong. Some of the suggested conceptual distinctions obviously imply a deliberate choice of terminology that may seem slightly arbitrary in relation to everyday usage. Foreexample, in spite of the common etymology, a means (for consumption) is distinguished from a medium (for education). *Spiel* is understood to be different from (but possibly unfolding as) play. Perhaps most at odds with common usage, a sharp differentiation is drawn between an applied means (a presentation for consumption) and the objectification of something in a means-ends relation. All things can be considered in various abstract ways, as definite objects in relation to a scrutinizing subject or in an equally objectified system of means and ends. But only in so far as any thing is *regarded as an object* – e.g. an economic product, a technical design or an item of natural-scientific analysis – can it appear abstractly as precisely the means for a definite end. Still, it is solely within the praxis of consumption that *a usable thing* with its whole surplus of aesthetic meaning would appear in a certain kind of correspondence to the objectified scenarios, namely an applicable means essentially ready made for the utilization that it explicitly offers. Like the other types of usable things, an applied means expresses its usability by a style that concretely indicates its vast potential of practical sense and significance, not by the (necessarily abstract) definition of an end.

A praxis or a practice may be more or less coherent with and in accordance with the participants' existential experience, i.e. rather *authentic* ("familiar," stimulating and satisfying) or *alienating* ("strange," straining and frustrating) to them. The *Spiel* that takes up the praxis concretely and unfolds the usability of its things also delineates more or less directly what may count as "proper," "inventive" or "marginal" functions of the thing, and what kinds of socioculturally sanctioned or instituted dangers of the things' transgression and encroachment on us that might be straining and alienating. Examples of such straining and alienating things can be found among the many computer systems that are designed without due regard for the difference between consumption and work or the difference between play and education. With this bold criticism of the widespread acceptance and intensive application of such systems, I wish to indicate much more than the space here allows me to unfold in any detail: that the theoretical underpinning for these trends in computer systems development is untenable, and that better systems could be developed on a phenomenological foundation.

With the development and distribution of computer-based technology, the disparity between a device's design for anticipated utility and its application

with a concrete usability has grown tremendously. Utterly unable to remedy this disparity, mainstream psychology has mostly produced systemic approaches and utility formulations that were more or less ripe for technical implementation. Thus, with the cognitivism that dominates current development psychology, it has been advocated that learning criteria and curricula should be imposed on child play, and that education should be amusing. Within work psychology and organizational psychology there has, likewise, been a long behaviouristic tradition of concern for rationalization, standardization and simplification of work processes. While these approaches are much in line with the way that engineers, computer scientists and managers tend to conceive of socio-technical matters, they do not add any substantial insight as to the topic of usability or other questions of actual human experience and practices. Consequently, the enormous development of successful computer-based information and communication systems over the latest few decades has been a unique heuristic process of trial and error marked by an incredible waste of resources and a very slow and reluctant movement towards the appreciation of concrete user concerns.

In spite of how disparate and conflicting these two aspects of a practice may be, since the development and spread of new computer-based systems are motivated exclusively by utility concerns, the realization of usability remains a precondition for the realization of utility. Though usability has been disregarded and repressed under utility measures, the latter remain abstract plans until they are somehow applied under concrete conditions of usability. This is precisely what constitutes the possibility of our alienated relationship to computers and other things: systems the application of which are experienced as straining and encroaching are institutionalized into “necessary” practices at the cost of the latitude of the users’ competence, discretion and satisfaction.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology offers a foundation for thorough theoretical analysis and accurate empirical study. The conception of elementary meaning as corporeal intentionality allows us to highlight the topic of usability as our profound interplay with things within all sorts of practices and fields. The *Spiel* of usability is accessible for interpretation and deconstruction as well as phenomenological reduction, and the suggested notions of things, praxis, and human identity that are inapplicable to systemic thinking make perfect sense to the cultural scientist embarking on field studies in the broad sense of ethnographic observation, action research, qualitative interviews or text analysis.

6. Conclusion

The distinct observation of a singular thing as a unique physical identity – and *a fortiori* any idea that we may construct concerning such an object or its features – are both secondary to the various types of usable things that we

recognize as characteristic styles. Actual use, which unfolds the implications of the style of a thing, as well as style, which expresses the usability of a thing, cohere closely with the most elementary phenomena of human experience: the immediate appearance of figures, themes and events. These both pregnant and ambiguous phenomena already include intertwinements of meaning and materiality.

A thing is concrete meaning: an oriented coherence of general sense and specific significance. We recognize it as a pre-conceptual, aesthetic style that expresses the practical relevance and dependability of the thing, including directly observable characteristics. A thing's style not only relates to us in accordance with a mass of instituted sociocultural practices, but also communicates with the expressiveness and sensibility of our de-centered emotional-conative involvement and existence, beyond and previous to any kind of discourse or cognition. The expressions of the styles of things are oriented openings of fields and dimensions for our corporeal practices and actions in interplay with them.

Usability is an experience of the performative significance and sense of a thing. The usability lies in the "natural" convenience and authenticity with which things are associated with our own existence: the "effective reality" (*Wirklichkeit*) or "corporeal pragmatics" of their relevant, suitable, supporting, and confirming interplay with us. The oriented structuring of the usability of a thing resumes its particular sociocultural field of application as the sense and order of a field of presence. Usability is nothing but practical differentiation of corporeal intentionality: the spontaneous and efficient concretion of a rich general praxis into a precisely situated focus.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of "the field of presence" concerns the embedding of culture-historical praxis in the aesthetic-ontological order of "wild being" and corporeal intentionality. Corporeal intentionality is the formation of elementary meaning in three dimensions: horizontal perspective, vertical generation, and dialectic *Spiel*. While horizontal and vertical intentionality are formations of a singular "something," the dimension of the *Spiel* structures relations and dynamics between two or more positions. Thus, the notion of a *Spiel* concerns a ubiquitous kind of order whereby anything that makes the slightest sense – anything that persists as something differentiated and perceptible at all – is structured. Originally, the *Spiel* of intentionality is a wild dialectic and a fleshly "life of meaning" that involve us in various events, movements and dramas, within which we recurrently "wake up" and in some measure become aware of others and ourselves in a particular situation, and sometimes install ourselves as active subjects and as responsible persons.

Thus, a *Spiel* of usability takes place as the dynamic structuring of a field of presence. Our interplay with things follows the differentiation of figures from backgrounds, the unfolding of themes in contexts, and of events in situations. The established order of a simple *Spiel* of practice allows recurrent – but hardly

continuous – appearances of things and human selves as explicit styles, and to some extent of reversibility it is the things that use us: catch us in their expression of suggestions, questions, warnings, requirements, etc. Just in so far as things are neither absorbed into the figures, themes and events of the field of presence nor objectified as abstract entities apart from their actual usability, do they appear with the vertical concretion that distinguishes no more or less than things. The style that characterizes a thing accords with the praxis – or the specific compound of praxes – to which it belongs: a tool for work, a means of consumption, a toy for play, or a medium for education.

There are two principal ways in which we are forced to thematize the in-itself pre-conceptual phenomenon of usability: design and alienation. While the topic of design can only focus a foreground of usability in the attempt to anticipate how a new thing will appear to its users, the topic of alienation mainly concerns the way in which the background of usability – the praxis in which our use of the thing in question is instituted and prescribed – can be problematic. In principle, the problems that occur from either side call for the same remedy: better recognition of and more latitude for the spontaneous unfolding of usability.

With modern information and communication technology, technical design has become a question of ethical, political and economic choices between more open possibilities and alternatives of socio-technical architecture. The comprehensive impact of computational artifacts on the organization of sociocultural life only emphasizes the topical necessity of thematizing usability and the praxis in relation to which it is structured. However, the differences between the four types of praxis are often neglected in socio-technical theory and development such as the design and application of computer-based information and communication systems.

Notes

- 1 This article was originally intended to be a chapter in the book *Doing Things With Things* (London: Ashgate, forthcoming) edited by Alan Costall and Ole Dreier. While my manuscript gradually grew away from the frame of the book, I remain grateful for valuable comments that I received from Ole Dreier, Hysse Forchhammer, Beth Preston, Estrid Sørensen, and in particular Alan Costall. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers of *Human Studies* for their suggestions for amendments, and to Nick Wrigley for his assistance in making the English more fluent.
- 2 The difference between utility and usability is quite similar to Karl Marx's distinction (cf. Marx, 1974) between an abstract reality and a concrete reality of human labour, of economic value, etc. – a distinction that has been interpreted and reconstructed in various ways, such as Bourdieu's differentiation (cf. Bourdieu, 1977) between technical efficiency (together with economic productivity) and the conduct of duty and honour (i.e. ritual activity to preserve what he calls "symbolic capital") and Jürgen Habermas' dichotomy (cf. Habermas, 1981) of a systems rationality (concerning political and economic power) and the lifeworld's rationality (concerning communicative action).

- 3 The words “psychosocial” and “sociocultural” are used loosely to indicate respectively
a foreground (specificity) and a background (generality) of the same experiential and
practical sociality, which is partly explicit (discursive) and partly implicit (corporeal).
- 4 “Praxis” and “practice” are both used for standardized and predominantly pre-personal
ways of carrying something out. While the former is a “heavy standard,” i.e. a
significant institution and constituent part of society, the latter is a much broader
denotation including any “light standard” that may be performed rather temporarily
and only by a small group.
- 5 For Merleau-Ponty the notion of ontological being is actually about becoming, i.e.
intentionality as a structuring of meaning: the incidence or event of an appearance; the
sense, distinction or identification of any “something”; the momentum of orientation
towards a figure or a theme.
- 6 “A < B” means that A is a differentiation or expression within the richer and more
opaque meaning, which constitutes B. A is made up of – and in this sense remains
embedded in –
B. Whereas A exists (or appears) out of B, A remains implying (or referring to) B
- 7 The phenomenological approach to the understanding of usability has theoretical roots
in common with Gestalt psychology and its notion of “demand character” or “*valenz*”
that led to Gibson’s theory of affordances (cf. Gibson 1986). This ingenious theory
suffers, however, from certain inconsistencies as well as a general blindness to the
sociocultural
imprint on perception (cf. Costall 2001) – problems that the phenomenological
approach seems more able to remedy.
- 8 Whenever I speak of modernity or modern praxis, this includes contemporary “late
modernity” or “post-modernity.”
- 9 Whether it is conceived as a reality or as a construction, a system is always entirely an
object that we confront as knowledgeable human subjects. Particularly as regards
working contexts, I have tried to explicate the relevance of systems theory as well as
the limits and problems that call for a more profound notion of human experience and
practice (cf. Keller, 1994, 1997, 1999).
- 10 Obviously, the order of a *Spiel* is nowhere near the speculative ideas of the “game
theory” concerning completely rational actors facing perfectly defined problems – a
scenario that does not correspond to very much in real life.
- 11 As explicated by Merleau-Ponty, the anonymity of our bodily being implies the self-
forgetting and de-centered experience of one’s own involvement in psychosocial and
sociocultural events and trivialities. This kind of anonymity is, of course, different
from Alfred Schutz’s notion of anonymity, which starts from the ego-logical, though
pre-predicative, typification of the sociality of most other people into “course-of-
action” and “personal types,” and only through cognitive reflection reaches a
reciprocity of anonymity involving oneself (cf. Natanson, 1986). Likewise, the
common ideas of anonymity in the sense of alienation (or “disappearing” in the crowd)
and in the sense of hiding one’s actual identity (behind a mask, in internet
communication, etc.) are not so very pertinent to our discussion here.
- 12 In Merleau-Ponty’s conception the field of presence is far from a transparent structure
in front of a self-transparent subject. This *field* is marked by various forms and degrees
of absence that indirectly and implicitly contribute to sense-making with important
momenta. Mainly receiving only a subordinate and subjected cognitive or self-
conscious foothold in this *presence*, the subject is rather de-centered and dissolved into
a body subject and anonymous subjectivity.
- 13 Husserl’s concept of *the transcendental*, indicating a pure, non-empirical subjectivity,
is contrary to the existentialist notion of *transcendence* as the intentionality whereby
we are always-already thrown into the world.

- 14 That is: something directly and unquestionably “given,” but not under controlled circumstances, like a scientific “fact.” Only upon further thematizing may the facticity disclose its implicit historical and sociocultural composition.
- 15 The issue of relevance as well as the issue of immediate association with a type are, of course, well-known in Schutz. Merleau-Ponty offers, however, a more thorough rendering than both Heidegger and Schutz as to how the style of things can *express* their usability to us, namely on the basis of their corporeal intertwinement with our own identity.
- 16 In other words: the facticity of the experience of things is previous to any theoretical or transcendental stance in which the conditions of the possibility – necessary aspects, essences and a priori laws of construction – of objects could be thematized.
- 17 See Hongo (1998) for a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s reflections as to how the experience of things is conceptually captured in everyday language.
- 18 Merleau-Ponty, 1993b: 37/1988: 543; emphasized sentence in the original text; modified translation.
- 19 Cf. Keller, 2001a, 2001b, 2004.
- 20 This section condenses a more extensive rendering that is presented elsewhere (cf. Keller, 2004).
- 21 The question of the relevance of the typology in association with the growing globalization of modernity must be left open here.
- 22 Perhaps Heidegger was seduced into his indistinct conception by the word “*Zeug*” (usually translated as “tool,” but as “piece of equipment” in Heidegger 1993), which among other things means matter, stuff, material or thing, and which is used in various ways as a postfix, such as in the most direct word for tool, *Werkzeug* (literally: work-thing). However, the late Heidegger becomes attentive to the technological attitude of modern life that, so he claims, absorbs us as well as things as “resources” – in effect the alienation of a culture dominated by the praxis of consumption.

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