

What's the Use? On the Uses of Use

by Sara Ahmed. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. 296 pp.
PB 978-1-4780-0650-3. \$26.95/£18.89.

Ece Canlı Reviewed by

To cite this article: Ece Canlı Reviewed by (2022) What's the Use? On the Uses of Use, Design and Culture, 14:1, 95-98, DOI: [10.1080/17547075.2021.1935556](https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2021.1935556)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2021.1935556>



Published online: 14 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 220



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

(82). As several essays in the volume suggest, this limits the freedom of self-determination. Wilson writes that the democratization of development and democracy is the most profound example of hypocrisy (46).

“Art Without Death” interrupts the great number of essays that present historical narratives. It is staged as a conversation between Arseny Zhilyaev and Anton Vidokle, in which they debate the question “Are We Human?” In “The Matter of Scale,” Pelin Tan offers a unique approach, presenting his essay as a sequence of journal entries commenting on the inevitable demise of humanity and life as we know it; a sort of post-apocalyptic reflection on the self and design.

Many of the essays encourage readers to unyieldingly interrogate their assumptions about the notion of “self-design,” driving us to question them “again and again, now and tomorrow, so that we might be able to catch a fleeting glimpse of what it might mean to be human” (11). This clever collection offers small capsules of critical reflection that allow for a spectrum of interpretations of the ever-present struggle to define one’s self, purpose, and potential. At the same time, *Superhumanity: Design of the Self* might have benefited from a framework for analysis, set perhaps in the introduction, which could have presented possible groupings of various essays that complimented one another, or even set essays in contrast for a more interrogative analysis of the content. Without such a framework, the reader is left to make their own way through the collection, thus making the volume potentially difficult to navigate. The essays themselves offer valuable and engaging interdisciplinary perspectives on design and design theory, and could be successfully assigned in a design studio, exposing students to the too-often overlooked failures in design thinking and execution.

What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use, by Sara Ahmed

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.
296 pp. PB 978-1-4780-0650-3. \$26.95/£18.89.

Reviewed by Ece Canli

In her latest book, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use*, Sara Ahmed, one of the most influential contemporary scholars of queer feminism and critical race theory (and a self-proclaimed “feminist kill-joy” [12]), takes us on an historical, philosophical, and critical exploration of use as an act, an idea, and a technique. Those acquainted with Ahmed’s earlier work may assume that it is a sequel to *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), one of her most object-oriented books;

Ece Canli is a postdoctoral researcher at CECS (The Communication and Society Research Centre) at University of Minho.
© 2021 Ece Canli
DOI: [10.1080/17547075.2021.1935556](https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2021.1935556)



instead, *What's the Use?* completes a trilogy consisting of *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014). The three share a common theoretical and methodological trajectory: diving into a single concept (happiness, will, use), tracing its philosophical histories, and unfolding its practical implications in everyday life. But in *What's the Use?*, Ahmed shifts the focus from words to things, rendering the book especially pertinent to the design field. Shuttling between a well-trodden path, a vacant toilet sign, a scruffy backpack, and a used-up tube of toothpaste, among other examples, the book explores how various material-discursive reenactments of use – or in her words, “the uses of use” – have systemically deemed certain bodies “out of place,” “misfits,” and “troublemakers” (19), and inhibited them from accessing particular objects, spaces, and institutions that are (in)formed by racism, ableism, and heterocisnormativity.

Following the introduction, the book’s four main chapters analyze use from three interconnected registers: inquiry into everyday objects, genealogy of an idea and a technique, and ethnography of an organization. In this exhaustively interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach, Ahmed enlists design, biology, psychology, and pedagogy, drawing from feminist, trans*, and disability studies, and employing archival, biographical, and ethnographic data. While this can make the book a demanding read, Ahmed’s lyrical style crafted with palimpsestic repetition, meticulous articulation, and semiotic playfulness with images ties up all the loose ends ingeniously, yielding a unified understanding of use.

In the first chapter, “Using Things,” Ahmed examines linguistic and material conditions of use as a transformative entanglement and a contact zone between people and objects. Because it deals directly with designed things, considering their forms, affordances, usability, and intended functionalities, it is arguably the most accessible part of the book for design scholars. Ahmed’s analysis of these familiar concepts encourages us to “think *from* use” (65) and thereby to understand how use is unequally distributed across bodies with different genders, sexualities, races, and abilities. Here, Ahmed teases out various performative states of use – in use, out of use, used, unused, overused, used up, and usable/unusable – to demonstrate how some bodies’ relationship to use is constantly contested. A “usable” door turns out to be “unusable” for a differently abled person; a public bathroom designed according to the binary gender regime becomes unfit to be “used” by a gender nonconforming body; and the colonizer appropriates indigenous land, justifying it as “unused.” Ahmed also introduces the maxim “the more a path is used, the more a path is used” (41), which echoes throughout the rest of the book to emphasize the vicious cycle by which dominant uses imposed

as universal dismiss the specificities of different bodies, rendering them “unfitting” and “useless.”

Chapter 2, “The Biology of Use and Disuse,” pursues the genealogy of use, delving into nineteenth-century biological and sociological thought to uncover how use was constituted both as a generative power for living beings and as a method for social advancement (69). Ahmed looks closely at the evolutionary theories of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, both of whom conceptualized use as “a mode of directionality” (79): the more a blacksmith’s arm is used, the stronger it gets and the further it is inherited by his sons whose strong arms can work better. This somatic fatalism is cogently transposed to industrial capitalism, wherein lower-class bodies serve as the social organism’s arms, facilitating social progress. Britain’s early cotton factories, built on factory workers’ wage labor and slaves’ forced labor extracting raw materials from US plantations, exemplify the required usefulness of (social) organs. Ahmed not only shows industrialization’s absolute dependence on colonialism, racial capitalism, and slavery, but also that the association of use with value, health, and worthiness, and disuse with degeneracy, waste, and death, informed the eugenic practices of the time.

How use was developed not only as socio-biological idea, but as moral duty, political apparatus, and educational technique is the focal point of the third chapter, “Use as Technique.” Here we visit the British educators Andrew Bell’s and Joseph Lancaster’s monitorial schools contrived in colonial India and expanded to British neighborhoods where, in an effort to create docile bodies by channeling the capabilities of children to useful ends, utilitarianism became a disciplinary apparatus. Jeremy Bentham’s Chrestomathic schools, designed using panoptical principles, were key to the program, compelling students to police each other through surveillance, hierarchization, obedience, and mimicking the master. These schools’ doctrines, Ahmed stresses, designated the diffusion of usefulness and the prevention of idleness as civilizing mission against which the “unused,” “unemployed,” and “vacant” were deployed as mental and physical degeneration to such an extent that not only the bodies of the poor but also that of the dead, the incarcerated, and the mentally ill were exploited to create useful knowledge.

Echoing ideas from her *On Being Included* (2012) and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and providing a preview of her forthcoming book on complaint, the last and the longest chapter of the book, “Use and the University,” blends earlier arguments around eugenics and educational practices and turns to the ideological establishment of the modern university. The chapter is based both on Ahmed’s personal experiences with institutionalized sexism and racism, and on testimonies from diversity workers, academics, and students who have lodged complaints against sexual harassment. It reveals how

institutions with dysfunctional policies for structural inequalities “use,” “overuse,” and “use-up” the term diversity as a pretense to preserve the privileges of those who perpetuate discriminations by dominating recruitment processes, academic assessments, and citational practices as used paths.

Ahmed leaves us with a way out. After denouncing various biases of use, the conclusion, “Queer Use,” briefly sketches out possibilities of queering use, or, in other words, making the world inhabitable for those systemically deemed “useless” or “out-of-use.” Ahmed defines queer use not only as using objects, spaces, and intuitions “in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended” (199), but also as defying the hegemonic uses of use, not getting used to them, creating less-used paths, unveiling potentialities that already reside in things, lingering (over) things, not getting to the point, reclaiming the useless and the degenerate, failing to use, and reusing, misusing and eventually dismantling ruling structures. In this activist plan that entails collective and creative endeavor, queering use does not mean abandoning use, but instead being useful to each other by sharing, caring, and transforming the experience of “misfitting” into the acquisition of new skills to survive. It is a proposal for a lifelong design project.

In times when compulsory heterocissexuality, white supremacy, and ableism still prevail like “built-in-design[s]” (205) through constant materializations, the book stands as a must-read for the design field. That Ahmed reads use mainly from the viewpoint of “the designed” and “the user” makes this book a complementary source to the ongoing agency-oriented discussions around queer(ing) design. It is, in the end, not a book about “user-centeredness” but about the decentralization of use that navigates us through possibilities of *undesigning*, *misdesigning*, and *redesigning*. It is a reminder that frictions, disruptions, and disorientations are urgent ways of enacting non-discriminatory design politics.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Willful Subjects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.