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DESIGNING FUTURES

How can ethics shape design theory and praxis

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RESUMO

A investigação aqui conduzida foi motivada por uma crescente fissura dentro do discurso em torno da disciplina do design. À medida que se torna cada vez mais claro que as soluções do passado não só falharam, como foram falaciosa e defeituosamente concebidas desde o início, esta investigação pretende sugerir e potencialmente providenciar algumas formas de olhar tanto para o passado como para o futuro. Para esse fim, a presente dissertação pergunta se a existência de um exame ético consciente e minucioso como etapa inerente e a priori no processo de design poderia ajudar a orientar uma teoria e prática de um design que se encontra em evolução; e, se assim for, procura também fornecer algumas direções iniciais quanto a possíveis respostas — ou, no mínimo, um potencial ponto de partida para ajudar a delinear as formas que essas respostas possam assumir. O quadro em foco é, portanto, uma exploração da relação entre design e ética. Nomeadamente, qual é, que forma assume, e qual devia (ou não) assumir.

Ao longo desta investigação, torna-se claro que a ética não é apenas inerente ao processo de design, mas também indissociável do mesmo. Implicações éticas, quando não explicitadas, permanecem ainda assim implicadas no processo de design, especialmente dado o papel deste último como configurador da interface através da qual percebemos e interagimos com o mundo, com os outros, e até conosco próprios. O que isso significa é, no seu âmago, uma questão ética e requer, portanto, um processo de deliberação cuidado, informado, e holístico para a tomada de decisões — em todas as formas que estas possam assumir. Este tipo de consideração ética, deste modo, necessita e envolve o desenrolar de questões relativas à forma como se deve agir e que tipo de vida se deve levar; e, por conseguinte, como esta deve ser desenhada — especialmente considerando que a forma como vivemos e existimos no mundo é mediada por interfaces desenhadas, sejam elas sistemas, ambientes, objectos, ou tecnologia. Assim, este trabalho pretende ser um exame sobre a forma como a ética é exercida no âmbito do design, e também sobre as suas implicações intrínsecas para o designer, para o design, e para as sociedades e culturas em que os nossos designs se inserem. Deste

modo, uma análise das formas como a ética e o design se intersectam é excepcionalmente relevante, e especialmente apropriada tendo em conta o papel multifacetado do design enquanto simultaneamente reconfigurador material e reconfiguração em si mesmo — papel este que o posiciona e eleva enquanto ato presente com base num passado para projectar um futuro conceptualizado — ou configurado por design.

O trabalho investigativo encontra-se então dividido em três momentos principais, cada um deles dividido por uma questão incitante bem definida. O primeiro, **Part 1: Ethics, or What**, está primariamente focado em desenvolver aquilo que são a ética e o design, tanto individualmente como em relação um ao outro. Visa, assim, uma perscrutação de como os princípios e considerações éticos são indissociáveis de qualquer prática e processo de design, independentemente do facto dessa percepção ser consciente e informada ou inconsciente e insipiente. Para além disso, o capítulo fornece ainda uma visão geral de como a retórica da ética tem permeado tanto a disciplina como a profissão do design, incluindo uma análise do conteúdo e eficácia dos códigos de conduta ética mais relevantes, bem como algumas considerações sobre as próprias credenciais éticas da profissão.

O segundo, **Part 2: Politics, or Why**, aprofunda um pouco mais, a razão pela qual estas questões são tão relevantes. Em ligação com a parte anterior, esta que lhe segue procura oferecer algum exame crítico àquilo que são os valores hegemónicos vigentes e porque é que esses os são — tanto na sociedade em geral como aplicados ao design. Deste modo, este capítulo apresenta-se, acima de tudo, como uma reflexão crítica sobre a política que é inerente tanto à ética como ao design, bem como sobre as suas implicações numa sociedade que é desenhada, e com tudo o que isso implica. Consequentemente, argumenta também que abordagens e processos de design que se assumem como neutras favorecem pressupostos éticos e epistemológicos hegemónicos que, pela sua própria natureza, são concebidos de base para favorecer uns em detrimento de outros — pratica esta que é excludente e, portanto, anti-ética. Desta forma, conclui-se ainda que um design informado e cuidadosamente deliberado se pode constituir como ferramenta política.

Construindo sobre as partes 1 e 2, a terceira, **Part 3: Futures, or How**, pretende oferecer algumas orientações quanto àquilo que poderá ser a implementação de um paradigma de design centrado na ética, recorrendo à importância de estudar o passado por forma a moldar um futuro que é sustentável à nossa existência e tudo aquilo que isso implica tanto ambiental como socioculturalmente. A este respeito, e baseando a investigação em possíveis configurações futuras ancoradas em epistemologias feministas, queer e pós-coloniais historicamente marginalizadas, centra-se então a questão de como se poderia proceder à implementação de uma fusão última e basal entre design e ética — fusão esta que veria como sinónimos ‘bom design’ e ‘design ético,’ e na qual um design não ético ou anti-ético não seria sequer uma possibilidade porque, simplesmente, não estaria sequer em contensão. Nesta veia, é realçada a importância do exercício crítico, algo que assume uma presença acentuada ao longo do documento na sua totalidade, mas que, neste último capítulo toma a forma explícita de um exame crítico das qualidades e defeitos de algumas práticas de design propícias a gerar concepções de futuros sustentáveis para todos. Em particular, discutem-se as abordagens de design especulativo e de *value sensitive design* como sinédoque para a teoria e prática que se produz sob a alçada da disciplina do design, bem como possíveis pontos de partida para desenvolver o tema em trabalho futuro.

Em suma, uma preocupação explícita com ética e o exercício de deliberação ética como ponto de partida são excepcionalmente importantes, uma vez que o design não é nem pode ser neutro. Este encarna valores e epistemologias com implicações profundamente políticas e comunica significado através daquilo que escolhemos reproduzir. Assim, se não estivermos cientes do que estamos a transmitir, tornamo-nos cúmplices de um design que comunica, e conseqüentemente perpetua, sistemas hegemónicos de opressão. Sistemas estes que excluem em vez de incluir, algo que é de especial relevância para aqueles que se preocupam em moldar futuros. Esta questão é particularmente apropriada no âmbito de uma discussão centrada tanto no design como na ética, dada a natureza intrínseca do design enquanto alguma projecção material de um resultado desejado, e a preocupação da ética em deliberar à cerca de possíveis linhas de ação. Por conseguinte, há que concluir que a ética não só pode ajudar a moldar o design enquanto disciplina,

para que esta se torne mais eticamente responsável, mas também que o deve fazer. Desta forma, a ética, embora já implicitamente inseparável do processo de design, deve ser explicitamente considerada como um passo elementar e a priori neste processo.

Palavras-Chave:

Design, Ética, Política, Futuros

ABSTRACT

The present inquiry is intended to document and explore the relationship between ethics and design. It, therefore, starts by asking whether the former can shape the latter as a discipline, in both theory and practice, and also hopes to offer some suggestions as to how. Throughout this investigation, it becomes clear that ethics is not just inherent to the design process, but also inextricable from it. As such, an explicit concern for ethics and ethical deliberation matters because design is not neutral — it embodies values and epistemologies with profound political implications and communicates meaning through what we choose to reproduce. Hence, if we are not aware of what we are imparting, we become complicit in a design which communicates, and consequently perpetuates, hegemonic systems of oppression. Systems which exclude rather than include. This matters especially to those concerned with shaping futures. Such a preoccupation is particularly appropriate within a discussion which centers both design and ethics, given the former's intrinsic nature as some material projection of a desired outcome and the latter's concern with deliberating over possible courses of action. Therefore, one must conclude that not only can ethics help mold the discipline of design into becoming more ethically responsible and accountable, but also that it must. In this way, ethics, though already implicitly indelible from the design process, must thus become explicitly embedded within it as an elemental and a priori step.

Keywords:

Design, Ethics, Politics, Futures

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To all who keep me sane.

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Introduction

The research herein conducted was prompted by an increasing chasm within design discourse. Design, in all its forms, seems to be at a point of reckoning. As it becomes increasingly clear that past solutions have not only failed but were flawed from the start, this research hopes to provide some ways in which we can look back, as well as forward.

To that end, this work asks whether a conscious and thorough ethical examination as an inherent and a priori step in the design process could help guide an evolving design theory and practice; and, if so, it also hopes to provide some answers as to how. Or, at the very least, a starting point for what those answers might look like.

The framework in focus is, thus, an exploration of the relationship between design and ethics. Namely, what it is, what it looks like, and what it ought to look like. Ethical implications are inherent to the design process, especially given the latter's role as configurator of the interface through which we perceive and interact with the world, with others, and with ourselves.

What that means is, at its core, a matter of ethical concern. It necessitates the unraveling of questions pertaining to how one should act and what kind of life one should lead. A life which, as it happens, is mediated by designed interfaces, be they systems, environments, objects, or technology. Thus, this work is intended as an examination of how ethics is wielded within the design purview and also of its intrinsic implications for the designer, design, and the societies and cultures within which our designs dwell.

In this way, an examination into the ways in which ethics and design intersect is exceptionally relevant. This is especially true considering design's role as both material reconfigurator and reconfiguration, which places it as a present act that draws upon the past to project a conceptualized future.

Regarding a formal structure, throughout the redaction of this dissertation, I have made some design choices, available to me within the confines of the medium. These spurred from the essence of ethical examination, which, after all, provides us with frameworks through which to examine our decisions.

Specifically, I employ the use of the first person in an attempt to reflect and substantiate the argument that a notion of universal knowledge is fallacious. I am aware that the proper manner of address within academic documents is a neutral third person; however, as I argue, there is no such thing as a neutral designer, and, by extension, no neutral author either. With this gesture, I do not wish to imply any overreach done by any of my colleagues, merely that the practice is an inherited convention which, as I contend throughout, can and ought to be questioned.

In that same vein, some care was taken to not overwhelm the prose with long paragraphs or dense academic jargon, which is often inaccessible to a general public. Given the public nature of this forum, it felt important to me to make it as accessible as possible, considering the nature of this document. This preoccupation is also reflected in the idiom I chose to write in. Beyond the fact that English is, indeed, my first language — and thus the one I feel most comfortable with, which also does not count for nothing — it is also the one which allows for more readers. In addition, within the languages I felt comfortable choosing between — namely, Portuguese or English — the latter was the one that allowed for the most uncomplicated phrasal structuring.

Further, the document was insularly designed with the intention of facilitating readability. Divided into three major moments, each of them is parted by a well-defined inciting question, and the subsections within them behave in a similar manner. This was a conscious decision, intent on providing the reader with a clearly delineated purview of investigation, so as to narrow down the scope of the information being taken in at a time. In this way, I hope, the reader might feel less overwhelmed and thus more comfortable and receptive to the arguments furthered within this discussion.

The first moment, **Part 1: Ethics, or *What***, is primarily focused on documenting what ethics and design are, both alone and in relation to each other. It digs into how ethical principles and considerations are inextricable from a design practice, regardless of whether we pay them heed. In addition, it provides an overview of how the rhetoric of ethics has permeated the design discipline and profession.

The second, **Part 2: Politics, or *Why***, delves a little deeper, into why these questions are so relevant. It is, primarily, an investigation into the politics inherent to both ethics and design, as well as its implications upon a designed society. Accordingly, it argues that purportedly neutral approaches to design favor hegemonic ethical and epistemological assumptions. These, by their very nature, are designed to favor some in detriment of others, which is exclusionary and thus, unethical.

Building on parts 1 and 2, **Part 3: Futures, or *How*** hopes to offer some direction as to what the implementation of an ethical design paradigm might look like. In that regard, drawing from marginalized epistemologies, it centers the question of how one could go about implementing an ultimate merger of design and ethics — one whereby good design would be synonymous with ethical design, and unethical design would not even be in contention.

Part 1: Ethics, or *What*

1.1 Design: a preamble

Design, though a young profession, has always stood at the heart of human innovation (Manzini, 2015). It has been, and remains still, an omnipresent fixture of human existence. Indeed, as writes design scholar Ezio Manzini:

Design, in the most generic sense of the word, began over 2.5 million years ago when Homo habilis manufactured the first tools. Human beings were designing well before we began to walk upright (Ibid, vii).

Manzini thus puts forth a general definition of a design practice, anchored in the creation of things towards an end — in effect, the making of tools (Ibid). In this way, design has transformed society by granting us the key inventions of civilization. Its power has allowed us to construct houses, grow food, build cities, transmit knowledge, and countless other things, both simple and complex (Fiell and Fiell, 2018).

And from this, design grew, transforming, evolving; sectioning itself into multiple and ever-expanding disciplines¹ (Manzini, 2015; Canli, 2017). Nowadays, there is a variety of design subcategories, some designated according to the medium they employ — such as graphic and product design — and others according to the ideological contexts in which they operate — like human-centered design or participatory design (Canli, 2017). All do, nonetheless, share a common feature — “all of them materialise *designed* outcomes, derived from an activity of *designing*, with a *designer* involved in the process” (Ibid, p. 10).

As argues Manzini, “[a]ll goods and services are designed,” (Manzini, 2015, vii) as design is, above all, a process, through which we shape and perceive our world (Ibid). Indeed, the dictionary definition of design includes an entry as a verb and another as a

¹ According to Manzini, urban design and architecture, for instance, began in ancient Mesopotamia, wherein likely spawned interior and furniture design (Manzini, 2015). Typography and graphic design followed, first emerging with the advent of cuneiform writing, in Sumeria (Ibid).

noun (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; cited in Manzini, 2015). Design, as a verb, is defined as “to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to plan; to conceive and plan out in the mind; to have as a specific purpose; to devise for a specific function or end” (Ibid). As a noun, it describes “a particular purpose or intention held in view by an individual or group; deliberate, purposive planning; a mental project or scheme in which means to an end are laid down” (Ibid).

Design, hence, implies some sort of materialization (Canlı, 2017). It takes on a “concrete form in the work of the service professions that meet human needs, a broad range of making and planning disciplines” (Manzini, 2015, viii), in service of a specific intended outcome. Here we see a central theme — that of a purpose; design as an act of conceptualization aimed towards an intended outcome (Manzini, 2015). And though it has evolved from the creation of rudimentary tools into that of increasingly complex systems, goods and services, this has remained constant. Indeed, as scholar Herbert Simon described it, to design is to “[devise] courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon, 1996, p. 111; cited in Manzini, 2015).

In this way, design is also concerned with communicating meaning within the context of the society by and for which it designs. If one designs to achieve a specific outcome, one must also be able to communicate its meaning. Niklas Luhmann developed a systems theory for society as a set of interactions coded as communication (Luhmann, 1975). Social systems thus become systems of exchanging information — of communicating an intended meaning as the desired outcome — with society being the most encompassing one.

Building on this idea, one can construe design as the interactions between all the links in this chain — the designed outcome, the process of designing, and the designer themselves (Canlı, 2017) — both amongst one another and with other human and non-human interactors (van der Velden, 2014). This constant interaction thus allows the continual iteration of new configurations and possibilities.

It is, precisely, in this process of “material (re)configuration” (Canlı, 2017) that I anchor the definition of design used throughout this work, employed to signify a meaning that goes beyond an understanding of design as a single, albeit sectioned, discipline. In the words of scholar Clive Dilnot:

All things, natural and artificial, have configuration. That is they are physically structured, and through that structuring enabled to act in certain ways. Design is nothing more, or less, than the act of (re)configuring. ... design (re)-configures and therefore re-directs how things act (Dilnot, 2015, pp. 122-123).

Thus, as argues scholar Ece Canlı, this reciprocity of design, as something which is both, and simultaneously, reconfiguring and being reconfigured, is key in understanding the effects and outcomes thereby produced (Canlı, 2017). All designed things are designed as a product of a desired outcome, originating from the aforementioned interaction between outcome, process, and agent. In return, however, “all designed things (from artifacts, spaces, sites, technologies, images to sartorial, digital, medical and cyber instruments) ... act back and reconfigure the world;” and, in so doing, also our “identities, selves, ... our everyday lives, environments, social structures, politics, relationships, movements, habits, value judgments and so forth” (Ibid, p. 11).

Thus, the quality of the designs with which we surround ourselves unquestionably bears on the quality of our lives. It is what we interact with in the world — it is responsible for the objects, services, and applications we use every day. Some interfaces are designed to retain all of our attention (Vertegaal, 2002), and some products are designed to have low shelf lives (Bulow, 1986). Nonetheless, design is, indeed, shaping and curating our values, cultures, and experiences — it is framing our minds (Niedderer et al., 2014).

In becoming aware of this, one should also recognize the potential repercussions and, therefore, its importance for the people who engage with these products, as well as for the designers who create them. As such, we can leave neither our present nor our future

generations of designers indifferent to the value of the process with which they engage and the weight of its responsibility; especially where it intersects with technology.

Throughout this first chapter, I will delve into an exploration of ethics as applied to my understanding of design, as I have described it above. That definition, however, is broader than the traditional academic purview considered under that same name. This happens, as explained by Manzini, due to the diversity found among the subcategories which lay under the design umbrella (Manzini, 2015).

They have distinct traditions, methods, and vocabularies, used and put into practice by distinct and often dissimilar professional groups. Although the traditions dividing these groups are distinct, common boundaries sometimes form a border. Where this happens, they serve as meeting points where common concerns build bridges (Ibid, viii).

And thus, one such bridge I intend to form here is that between the study of ethics as applied to the academic discipline of design and that of technology. As argues scholar Mahmoud Keshavarz, a holistic understanding of design, as both noun and verb, is important in order to understand that which occurs beyond the designed object (Keshavarz, 2016). As he asserts:

This design and designing runs the whole gamut from the articulation of artifacts and artifactual relations to environments, situations and policies, from interfaces to regimes of practice (Ibid p. 76)

— something technology, especially in recent years has had a significant and ever-expanding role in shaping (Arthur, 2009).

Likewise, which such significant technological development happening so quickly, and so pervasively (Ibid), studying the manner in which ethics shapes design while ignoring that same work being done under the purview of technology is inadequate and incomplete. Thus, the designer, as “material (re)configurator,” (Canlı, 2017) is well-

positioned to lay the foundations for ethical consideration and implementation in all designed things, from design proper to designed technologies.

1.2 What even is ethics?

Our daily lives are comprised by a series of decisions: decisions about what to do, what not to do, what should we do; what is right, and what is wrong. Ethics is the field of philosophy that deals with the basis for those decisions. “[It] involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior” (Fieser, 2020). Ethics² is concerned with all aspects of the human experience — from the individual to the conglomerate — and it specifically hinges on the importance of free will (O’Connor, and Franklin, 2018).

Indeed, in order to be an ethical agent, one requires agency. Kant even described what he defined as practical philosophy, which came to be thought of as what we understand Western ethics to be (Rauscher, 2016), as being preoccupied with “rules of behavior in regard to free choice” (Ibid). Thus, it is only by being an active and willing participant in an action that one can be held accountable and responsible³ (O’Connor, and Franklin, 2018; Rauscher, 2016).

The importance of ethics in informing which decisions are best thereby becomes apparent. And though the prompts may be simple, the answers are far from easy in their contingency. Indeed, “[i]t’s not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live” (Williams, 2011, p. 1). As remarks Plato’s Socrates⁴:

² ‘Ethics’ and ‘morality’ are often employed interchangeably. Indeed, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on the topic treats both as equivalents to ‘moral philosophy’ (Singer, 2020). There are, however, some distinctions. Accordingly, morality may be regarded as a state of virtue, and ethics as the code that enables what is virtuous. Morality is a personal value system, while ethics is, instead, the standards for ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ set by a given community or social system (Grannan, 2020). Ethics thus provides the reason as to why something is moral.

³ Three major distinct types of ethical and moral responsibility have been described (Watson, 1996). These focus on “the kind of responses licensed toward the responsible agent” — answerability — “the nature of the licensing relation” — attributability — and “the necessary and sufficient conditions for licensing the relevant kind of responses toward the agent” — accountability (O’Connor, and Franklin, 2018).

⁴ Socrates never wrote anything. All of his we have documented came from Plato’s writings.

[T]he greatest good to man is to discourse daily about virtue and those other matters about which you have heard me speak and examine both myself and others, and [a] life without examination is not worth living (Plato, Apology, 38a2-6).

In this way, ethics is also concerned with what makes life worth living — the ‘good life’ (Frede, 2017). What that good life entails, however, is contingent, and depends upon one’s understanding of one’s own nature as well as one’s perception of the conditions which lead to fulfillment (Ibid). In other words, it is shaped by morality, which, in turn, is shaped by the standard assumptions and values permeating the environment in which one lives. This is ethics.

We see, then, further, yet still subtle distinction between ethics and morality. The former is the collection of moral values — the system by which morality — that which is good and bad — is shaped. This is why, in this work, I will be focusing on ethics, rather than morality. I am, of course, still interested in morality in some way. I will be advocating for what I believe to be moral, or good, according to the ethics upon which this document centers; but I will stray from litigating forms of moral relativism⁵. This, within a discussion aimed at paradigmatic change in the form of ethics, I find to be a futile effort. Thus, my approach to this debate might best be summarized by Wittgenstein’s notion that some problems, particularly those of such abstract nature, are often best dissolved, rather than solved (Wittgenstein, [1921] 2011).

But precisely because there are several distinct manners in which to formulate one’s conceptions about right or wrong and good and bad, many systems of ethics have been developed. Traditionally, the field of ethics has been described as divided into three areas (Fieser, 2020). The first, meta-ethics, contemplates the nature of right and good, and thus also the nature and grounds for ethical claims (Ibid). The next, normative

⁵ Succinctly, moral relativism is the belief that moral judgments are true or untrue — deemed good or bad — based solely in relation to a particular viewpoint, or perspective, and that none is superior (Westacott, n.d.). This is an important concept. Indeed, it is particularly useful in its critique of a universal value set, arguing that distinct cultural vernaculars often display different moral priorities that are no less important than those assigned to the hegemonic perspective (Ibid). There are, however, criticisms leveled at it as well. Namely, that it ignores diversity within a group or culture, that it implies that clear moral wrongs can be acceptable, or that it weakens both the ability and the possibility of a society to be critical of itself (Ibid).

ethics, deals with the bases and standards used to deem something right or good (Ibid). Finally, there is applied ethics, which is concerned with the concrete applications of ethical principles to specific cases (Ibid).

It is important to note, however, that while this template is a useful one for the study of ethics and ethical decision-making, it is also limiting and should not be used as a static one. One's own experience with applying a given ethical approach can and should appraise how appropriate this division is.

Much the same way, ethical theories are frequently split into three types. There are consequentialist theories, focused on the ethical consequences of actions, non-consequentialist theories, which account for the intentions of the person making the decisions, and agent-centered theories, differing from the others in that these are less concerned with the morality of the actions and are instead interested in the overall character of the agent (Ibid).

Within these broad categorizations are multiple approaches to ethics, some of which have commonalities across all three groups. For the purposes of this discussion, I will highlight only a few in an attempt of distilling the key ideas of each while not going into an in-depth dissection, which is not the aim of this work.

Within the consequentialist realm, the utilitarian approach⁶ is the most significant, along with the idea of the common good⁷. Utilitarian ideas hold that an act is morally right if it maximizes the good. It stresses the notion of a net positive, whereby the total amount of good for all people must be greater than the total amount of bad for all people

⁶ Utilitarianism can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus of Samos, whose thesis was that the best life is one that produces the least amount of pain (Konstan, 2018). In the 18th century, philosopher Jeremy Bentham created a system that applied analogous principles to individual actions, which could be described as good or bad depending on the degree of pleasure or pain they would yield as a consequence. John Stuart Mill, perhaps the most well-known utilitarian in the Occidental imaginary, then modified this system by altering the standard for good. He stressed the concept of happiness in lieu of the more materialistic-coded notion of pleasure. (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019)

⁷ The idea of the common good can be linked to the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who believed that our actions should contribute to an ethical communal life (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). This was further developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, perhaps the most influential advocate of this concept. He then greatly developed this concept into the idea of a social contract (Rousseau, 2002).

(Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). The notion of a common good, in contrast, focuses more on the interconnectedness of all aspects of a society. It posits that the best society ought to be informed by the common will of the people, which would thus generate the best outcome for the people as a whole.

Under the non-consequentialist umbrella, the principal focus here will be on deontological ethics. A duty approach would be akin to Kantian ideals of morality, which place an emphasis on, of course, duty as the driving force for any action (Alexander and Moore, 2016). An action is righteous if it is propelled by good intentions, regardless of the consequences. Thus, an ethical decision is one made out of a sense of duty, because that is one's obligation. The notion of obligation is relevant because such an approach posits that they are universal, the same for all rational beings. This is extended to the formula of the categorical imperative, whereby one can act only according to a dictum that can and ought to be made into a universal law (Johnson and Cureton, 2019).

As for the agent-centered theories, the most relevant here is the value (or virtue) approach⁸. This principle contends that ethical actions are those which are aligned with ideal human values (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018). It stresses the importance of developing good habits of character, rather than simply obeying rules. For this reason, it underscores the importance of education and role models to our appreciation of ethical consideration (Ibid). I will come back to this later.

1.3 Frameworks for ethical decision-making

The study of ethics is important as it pertains to making good decisions. One should always work towards a grasp of the issues in question, along with some sort of method that allows one to explore the ethical considerations and potential consequences of an

⁸ In the West, the idea of virtue ethics was also cemented by Plato and Aristotle. It there remained the most prominent approach to moral philosophy until the Enlightenment, where it became more obscure only to reemerge in the 1950s (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018). This is also a predominant current in Eastern philosophy, where it can be traced back to Mencius and Confucius (Ibid). The latter in particular placed emphasis on the importance of acting virtuously in a sum of circumstances (Ibid).

action in order to be able to choose the best one. Such a method is particularly useful in dealing with unfamiliar or especially complex situations, which is why developing a framework for making decisions can be fruitful.

A seminar held at Brown University (Making Choices: Ethical Decisions at the Frontier of Global Science) developed three distinct frameworks that I find quite useful in providing the context for this discussion. They describe what they refer to as the consequentialist framework, the duty framework, and the virtue framework, based on the three types of ethical theories mentioned earlier (Bonde and Firenze, 2020).

The Consequentialist framework, like its namesake, is concerned with the outcomes of all viable actions and is therefore focused on those who will be in any way impacted by them. “We ask about what outcomes are desirable in a given situation, and consider ethical conduct to be whatever will achieve the best consequences” (Ibid, para. 26). This framework is somewhat pragmatic, if not simplistic, by heeding only the potential consequences of an act.

It is predicated on utilitarian ideas, as it hinges on the desire to achieve the most amount of good for the most amount of people, though it has its limitations⁹. Indeed, the most amount of good for the most amount of people does not necessarily imply that all will be able to benefit, or even that none will suffer. There is inherent compromise built into this approach, which does not preclude more extreme end-justifies-the-means-type of scenarios because the only wrong actions are those that do not increase the net amount of good.

The duty framework is intended to highlight what the responsibilities of the agent are with respect to a particular circumstance. Aligned with Kantian morals, an ethical conduct, according to this framework, is one that takes into account what one must do as well as what one should never do. The right action is the intentional one — “[it] is

⁹ For a more comprehensive critique of Utilitarian ideas, please refer to Thomson, 1985 and Williams, 1973.

defined by doing one's duties and doing the right thing, and the goal is performing the correct action" (Bonde and Firenze, 2020, para. 28).

This is particularly effective in defining a dependable system with consistent reliable rules to be followed by all persons. Because these rules are universal, the aim is to encourage equal treatment of everyone by everyone. By centering the deliberation on a set of moral maxims, irrespective of the consequences they may result in, one can act in an ethical manner while still producing an undesirable outcome. This is useful if one finds oneself in a situation whereby one's obligation dictates whether a certain action is either forbidden or necessary. This, however, becomes precarious in cases which present more than a singular imperative to comply with. Further, it lacks nuance in failing to consider any personal circumstances involved in the decision, and may even require acts that are known to produce harm in upholding the righteous imperative.

The virtue framework is built upon the idea of being virtuous and thereby acting virtuously. It asks what the agent's motivations are for a prospective action and asks again what type of character is desirable to have and if that action is congruent. "We define ethical behavior as whatever a virtuous person would do in the situation, and we seek to develop similar virtues" (Bonde and Firenze, 2020, para. 32). This sort of framework takes context into account, as the type of person one should aim to be is contingent, and therefore allows for a variety of behaviors to be ethical. This encompasses larger swathes of the human experience and acknowledges that those experiences carry with them emotions and knowledge which, in turn, bear influence on a person's character.

This flexibility, however, also leads to more complex dilemmas, given that the motivations themselves are much more subjective by nature, leading to more disagreement surrounding what attributes are virtuous. This, ultimately, may lead to more uncertainty regarding which action to take. Further, as it is based upon the agent-centered value approach, the focus on education and role models may also be limiting,

since that may lead one to reinforce sociocultural norms of good behavior instead of examining them critically.

Though no one framework is faultless, they all have useful insight into making ethical decisions (see Fig 1). This is important to note, as only by understanding the limitations of such a system can one use it effectively. In fact, narrowing down on one approach might be itself a problem, since by focusing on only one perspective other important aspects may elude us. All three frameworks should hence inform each other, and one should understand how interrelated they are. Indeed, the questions posed in each framework needn't be mutually exclusive. They may actually lead to similar results, but because the ethical spotlight is on different fixtures, applying them in conjunction will undoubtedly lead to better insight.

	Consequentialist	Duty	Virtue
Deliberative Process	What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)?	What are my obligations in this situation, and what are the things I should never do?	What kind of person should I be (or try to be), and what will my actions show about my character?
Focus	Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action.	Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.	Attempts to discern character traits (virtues and vices) that are, or could be, motivating the people involved in the situation.
Definition of Ethical Conduct	Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences.	Ethical conduct involves always doing the right thing: never failing to do one's duty.	Ethical conduct is whatever a fully virtuous person would do in the circumstances.
Motivation	Aim is to produce the most good.	Aim is to perform the right action.	Aim is to develop one's character.

Fig 1:

Table highlighting the main contrasts between the three ethical frameworks in study (Bonde and Firenze, 2020).

1.4 We shape our tools

In the December 2006 issue of *Popular Science*,¹⁰ the Grand Award for Best Innovation of that year was given to the HurriQuake¹¹ nail (Clynes, 2006). This in itself does not seem particularly remarkable, but this happened in a year when other contenders included the growth of new body organs, a car capable of reaching 407 kilometers per hour, and the cloning of a lamb. So why did this simple nail design win?

Researchers found at the time that, in recent hurricanes, structures suffered even more damage when they were ripped apart, and attributed this to a limitation in the traditional nail's design, which had existed largely unmodified for over two hundred years (Ibid). According to the editor, the HurriQuake nail was thus selected specifically because of its wide-ranging effects on numerous people's lives (Ibid). It was the purpose of the nail in regard to a specific function that determined its redesign.

This anecdote is emblematic of the way in which we make decisions influencing the kind of things we want, as well as those we need. Technological innovation, however, though it has been largely driven by the principles of usability, ergonomics, efficiency, or functionality, has not so much been informed by a deeper understanding of ethics, even though they are inherently interconnected (Verbeek, 2008).

Technological innovation has plenty of ramifications. To quote the first of Kranzberg's laws, "[t]echnology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 545). As Melvin Kranzberg himself explains it:

Technology's interaction with the social ecology is such that technical developments frequently have environmental, social, and human consequences that go far beyond the immediate purposes of the technical devices and practices themselves, and technology

¹⁰ *Popular Science* is an American publication dedicated to reporting on science and technology for the general public (Popular Science, 2020). It is also the recipient of upwards of fifty-eight awards, including awards for journalistic excellence from the American Society of Magazine Editors — in 2003, for General Excellence, in 2004, for Best Magazine Section, and, recently, in 2019, for Single-Topic Issue.

¹¹ The HurriQuake nail is a type of nail designed specifically to strengthen the structural integrity of buildings, particularly in the face of hurricanes or earthquakes, hence the name (Clynes, 2006).

can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances (Kranzberg, 1986, pp. 545-546).

Kranzberg seems to be saying that because the environment in which technological creations are deployed is immensely complex, their consequences are unpredictable. There is, nonetheless, a much more profound implication in this statement: that technological artifacts have inherent moral values (Verbeek, 2008). Indeed, technological artifacts are predominantly described simplistically as material objects produced by human agents in order to reach some practical function. (Verbeek and Vermaas, 2013). Randall Dipert described them as

intentionally modified [tools] whose properties were intended by the agent to be recognized by an agent at a later time as having been intentionally altered for that, or some other, use (Dipert, 1993, p. 17)

— much like our friend the HurriQuake nail.

1.5 Human tech, human values

Technological innovations are, thus, not divorced from human values, and three positions have been offered in regard to how exactly they become implicated in technological designs. They are the Embodied Position, the Exogenous Position, and the Interactional Position (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

In the History of Science review literature, the Embodied Position is what is often referred to as technological determinism (Smith and Marx, 1994). It posits that the designers imbue their own personal values and intentions into their artifacts, which results in a situation whereby, once deployed, they determine human behavior by whatever purpose they embody (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). In examining this kind of technological determinism, one can have a so-called ‘hard’ approach, as well as a ‘soft’ one.

The hard version sees technology as developing independently from social issues (Ellul, 1964). Specifically regarding the embodiment of values in that technology, hard determinists argue that the very intentionality of the designers developing those artifacts becomes a part of them (Appadurai, 1988). At its logical conclusion, though, this implies that these artifacts carry with them mental states, which critics deride.

[They] question the plausibility of imputing agency to 'technology'.... How can we reasonably think of this abstract, disembodied, quasi-metaphysical entity [that of technology], or of one of its artifactual stand-ins (e.g., the computer), as the initiator of actions capable of controlling human destiny? (Smith and Marx, 1994, xii)

This position may, however, hold more credence as the Artificial Intelligence domain expands and these systems are increasingly more able to mimic human creativity and agency¹².

The soft position, as the name illustrates, is more flexible in these beliefs, which is, perhaps, why it is more common. Defenders of this current recognize that the artifacts themselves do not literally personify their creators' values (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). They also contend that even the designers are themselves influenced by external factors such as the sociopolitical context in which they operate, which deters a particular technology from dominating and overriding the established circumstances (Ibid).

They do agree, however, that if a particular piece of technology were to establish itself, it would become exceedingly onerous to revoke the values it embodies (Ibid). But their main point is that “designs ensure behavior¹³” (Ibid, p. 1179), and an interesting example is that of a door.

¹² See, as an example, an essay entirely written by an Artificial Intelligence to convince humans that robots mean us no harm (GPT-3, 2020). See also Torrance, 2011 and Tonkens, 2009 for a more thorough exploration of the potential of and for machine ethics.

¹³ In other words, design carries within it the intention put therein by the designer. In order for people to be able to interact with a designed artifact, they need to understand how, and this is something the designer must codify within the design itself.

As Don Norman wrote about so extensively in his seminal book *The Design of Everyday Things*, a good design is one that effortlessly informs you how to operate it (Norman, 2013). If you ever had trouble opening a door, it's because that door failed to communicate to you how to open it. But if you intuitively assess how to operate it, as Norman argues you should, that is because the design itself conditioned how you would engage with it. Concisely, plates are for pushing, and knobs are for turning (Ibid). Thus, a significant portion of the work of the designer necessarily involves inscribing their values “in the technical content of the new object” (Akrich, 1992, p. 208).

The exogenous viewpoint asserts that it is one's societal context, be it race, class, gender, politics, etc., that will dictate how a given piece of technology will be engaged with (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

To understand the origin of a particular kind of technological power, we must first learn about the actors. Who were they? What were their circumstances? ... Why was this innovation made by these people and not others? Why was it possible at this time and this place rather than another time and place?... Instead of treating 'technology' per se as the locus of historical agency... [advocates of the exogenous position] locate it in a far more various and complex, social, economic, political and cultural matrix (Smith and Marx, 1994, xiii).

This, though, suggests that such artifacts are not neutral — not neutral to ethics, not neutral to aesthetics, not neutral to accessibility, not neutral to functionality, even. And this is due to the large favor placed upon technological developments that greatly advantage those who hold social, economic, or otherwise political power (Noble, 1991; Smith, 1994; Winner, 1986). An example of the exogenous position being applied is a study conducted by Richard Bulliet, in which he examines three distinct technological innovations in the Islamic culture of the 5th century — the inventions of block printing and wheeled transport and the harnessing of draft animals (Bulliet, 1994). None of them had an immediate significant effect in Islamic society or economy, despite the fact that they were objectively advantageous for the latter, because, Bulliet argues, there were

‘social filters’ such as race, class, and lifestyle that acted as deterrents to their widespread dissemination (Ibid).

It has, nonetheless, been argued that increasingly recent technologies lend themselves more to being influenced by sociocultural factors, and, similarly, more established ones tend to bend more towards the deterministic approach (Hughes, 1994). This, as Thomas P. Hughes argues, is due to the reciprocal and time-dependent nature of the relationship between society and designed technology (Ibid). One does not determine the other; rather, both influence one another — society is irreversibly modified by the introduction of a new technology, and the latter in, this way, is also propagated and inevitably iterated within that same environment over time¹⁴ (Ibid).

The final description of how values are implicated in a design, the interactional position, prioritizes the intentions of the people who interact with it over those of the designer (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). It concedes that the features built into an artifact inherently align themselves with certain virtues and deter others, but claim that its actual use will be determined by the desires of whoever engages with it. Let us turn to the nail once more. It is intended for construction, yet, as demonstrated by the *Instructables* article “12 Unusual Uses for Nails,” depending on the end goal of the user, it could also be used to make jewelry, a puzzle, a bottle opener, or even a hammer (seamster, 2017; see Fig 2).

¹⁴ According to Hughes, once the design has been implemented, the mere existence of that technology will ensure its endurance, though possibly in mutating forms (Hughes, 1994). He speaks of the notion of ‘technological momentum,’ with time as a unifying factor between the push of society and the pull of technology (Ibid). Thus, in Hughes’s work, he argues that when a technology is yet recent, it is easier for society to exert control over it — this is what he calls social determinism (Ibid). When that technology matures, however, it becomes ever more embedded within that same social environment, making it harder to control and, thus, carrying with it its own deterministic sway — what he describes as technological momentum (Ibid). Simply put, Hughes proposes a system whereby the relationship between society and design technologies begins with a model of social determinism, which evolves into one of technological determinism as that technology matures and engrains itself within its environment (Ibid).



Fig 2:
Some suggestions from “12 Unusual Uses for Nails” (seamster, 2017).

Furthermore, an already deployed technology often changes over time at the hands of the people who interact with it (Hughes, 1994). This can be explained through the lens of the exogenous stance, whereby a particular technology may be altered through societal pressures, causing it to be improved upon or even misused or abandoned out of societal rejection or slow adoption (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). More often, however, this transformation will be the product of an iterative process, in which technologies are continually reappropriated based on the differing aims of the successive users (Ibid).

A classic example of this is how kleenexes came to be. The product we know today was originally used as bandages and gas-mask air filters in World War I (Panati, 1987). After the war, it was marketed as a makeup remover but, soon enough, “wives complained that husbands were blowing their noses in [them]” (Ibid, p. 207), and lo the current iteration of the Kleenex was born.

Another more current example is that of software updates. Developers learn more about their product each time an update is made, which allows the updates to build on each other to create the desired system through repeated cycles (Larman, 2003). This is made possible by the knowledge that comes with the use of that system and subsequent

developments. As such, at each iteration, design modifications are made and new functional capabilities are added (Ibid).

The interactional approach is itself bifurcated. One aspect of it stresses the characteristics built into the technology as propellers (Friedman, 1997). As an example, if one agrees that somehow disabled people should be granted the same access to technology, one can choose to build an infrastructure that enables that. Failing to do so is to actively impede upon the human value of universal access (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

The complement to that places more emphasis on how the context of organizational structures shapes the ways in which people engage with technology (Orlikowski, 2000). Proponents propose “a view of technology structures, not as embodied in given technological artifacts, but as enacted by the recurrent social practices of a community of users” (Ibid, p. 421). The focus notwithstanding, the interactional position holds as its foundation that design and its contingent social context are conceptually interwoven, which allows for user agency in the face of uncongenial values posed by a given technology.

1.6 And they shape us

We shape our technology as much as it shapes us. Technology, and design in tow, are exceptional whisperers. They shift and subtly curate our opinions, values, and experiences. Marshall McLuhan, to whom the title of this section is a reference, put it best when he proclaimed “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 7). The ‘medium,’ as he described it, is “any extension of ourselves,” which results from “the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (Ibid).

What he means, then, is that artifacts, as media¹⁵, affect any society by their characteristics — the way they were created, and how. That is, in effect, their content (Balka, 2000).

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered (McLuhan and Fiore, 2005, p. 26).

A medium or technology's 'message,' hence, is precisely the societal shifts they produce, and, thus, how they affect human behavior — “the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 8).

Even the way we dream is directly influenced by the audiovisual media we consume. Television¹⁶, researchers have found, impacts our psyche so thoroughly, that it determines the colors of our dreams (Murzyn, 2008; Okada, Matsuoka and Hatakeyama, 2011). People who had grown up with black and white television sets were more likely to dream in black and white, while those who had developed in the age of Technicolor, and beyond, dreamed overwhelmingly in color (Ibid).

Our actions and interpretations of the world are deeply entwined with the technologies we use. Our culture is dependent upon the medium through which we interact with it. The word 'medium' itself has different, complementary meanings. It can be a channel through which to communicate information (thus the focus on its content), but it can also refer to an environment. This is especially common in scientific disciplines such as physics or biology. To a biologist, a medium is an environment containing the nutrients in which cell, tissue, or organ cultures grow; in which organisms grow (Kell et al.,

¹⁵ It is important to note that, to McLuhan, the terms 'media' and 'technology' are mostly equivalent (Logan, 2016). McLuhan regards all media as technologies and tools. To him, “a chair is as much a medium as is a newspaper” (Ibid, p. 135). Further, it could be argued that, to McLuhan, all media are metamedia — all require an interface through which to communicate and all use already established media as content (Marchessault, 2005).

¹⁶ McLuhan had his own ideas about television. See McLuhan, 1994 and Antecol, 1997.

2005). Change the medium and you change the culture, in all interpretations of the word.

Indeed, as we seem to have entered a fourth Industrial Revolution¹⁷ (Schwab, 2017b), the corresponding challenges are unprecedented. Its key points of divergence from the Third Industrial Revolution are its velocity, scope, and impact (Ibid). Technological developments have always been advancing at an increasingly rapid rate — that is the premise of Moore’s Law¹⁸. At this point in time, however, as Thomas Friedman argues, the exponential growth in computer chip speed (the original formulation of Moore’s law) has correlated to exponential growth in the potential and power of technology. As a result, we are not faced with linear evolution, rather with exponential growth (Friedman, 2016).

Such speed is disrupting nearly every industry throughout the world (Schwab, 2017b), and that those tools that we created are now starting to shape us in ways that are still at the edges of our comprehension. This needn’t be negative; but one must wonder whether such a rapid rate of technological growth might be superseding our ability to cognitively understand its implications.

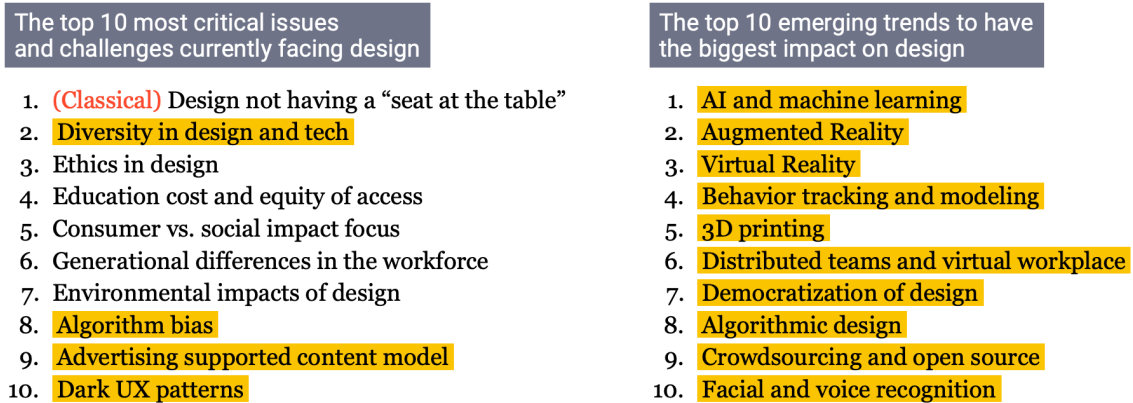
This is especially true of the discipline of design. Designers are now asked to perform increasingly complex tasks with increasingly more sophisticated technology to increasingly more impactful ends. Not that long ago a pervasive debate in the industry had been whether designers should code (Vieira, 2020). Now, though, as designers are experimenting with Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence, design is becoming more and more computation-based, as illustrated by John Maeda’s *Design in Tech Report* (Maeda, 2018; see Fig 3). As designers are and will continue to be creating products with the ability to drastically affect millions of people, depending on the ways

¹⁷ Briefly, the current Fourth Industrial Revolution, building on the previous one, is characterized by a fusion of technologies that blur the lines between the physical, digital, and biological realms by way of ongoing automation of traditional manufacturing and industrial practices by modern smart technology (Schwab, 2017b).

¹⁸ Moore’s law refers to the observation, made by Gordon Moore, that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit doubles about every two years (Gregersen, 2020). This was an empirical observation made in 1965, and was meant as a projection of a historical trend, rather than a physical law.

in which ethics and ethical decision-making play a role in the conception of those products, they may either improve countless lives or do irreparable harm.

Classical Designers are slowly beginning to evolve



Highlight corresponds to computational design.

Fig 3:

An excerpt from Maeda’s *Design in Tech Report* highlighting how the most predominant issues design is facing as a discipline are related to algorithmic and computational processes (Maeda, 2018, p. 22).

1.7 Neutrality is not neutral

As discussed, technology is not neutral. And, as mentioned, there are a plethora of ways in which an artifact or technology can itself embody or reflect the moral decisions that were made in its conception. We’ve also seen why it matters. We shape our tools and they shape us, as the adage goes.

This way of thinking, though, seems to be more aligned with (or at least more cognizant of) a value theory of ethics, and a value framework for decision making, even if they all bleed into each other in some way. However, in placing a spotlight on how things ought to be; that is, what values they should embody, one may fail to account for other major ethical issues. By placing such focus on a value theory of ethics, one is neglecting the other ethical frameworks; namely, the aforementioned consequentialist and duty approaches. Questions like “are they increasing the amount of good” and “are they complying with their duties and obligations” are also essential.

As technological developments become more and more significant, the impact they have also becomes greater and greater, which is why we should take special care to act responsibly. All three of the presented ethical frameworks provide important insights into how to develop and deploy technology. They should not, likewise, be considered arbitrarily, or even unevenly, for one trying to prevent unfettered consequences to our tools and therefore to ourselves. One should, arguably, always exhaust whichever methods one establishes for making decisions, whatever they may be. Even more so if those decisions are of such import, as they have been shown to be. Accordingly, one should look not just at those frameworks, but at their intersection — at producing the most good for most people, obeying the law and doing no harm, and thinking about what kind of virtues we should aspire to as a society. Simultaneously.

Faced with all this, ethics cannot be optional. It is, after all, the imperative that has made society possible. As such, we cannot afford to disregard the frameworks that keep our societies possible. Our choices matter, even the ones we don't make.

1.8 Towards technoethics

The ethical implications of new technologies, as discussed, are exceptionally relevant in our contemporary society, particularly in regard to fields of study responsible for technological advances with great societal impact. In response, theoretician James Moor, developed his Moor's Law (Moor, 2005). He posits that as the social impact of technological developments grows, the associated ethical problems increase (Moor, 2005, p. 117). This is understood to occur because an increasing number of people are being affected by these developments; but also because the rapid technological advancements are themselves providing unprecedented opportunities for actions which have not yet been ethically or lawfully regulated (Luppicini, 2009).

This means that the consequences of our actions are still very ill-defined and, as such, an ethical agent should be very wary of their actionable decisions — especially the designer/technologist, as the intermediary — as with them comes the responsibility and

accountability which befall the ethical agent. Hence, technology, in line with everything so far mentioned, ought not to be considered a solution to already existing ethical concerns, since its potential consequences are too unpredictable. Instead, it should be viewed as an aspect of societal evolution, which will, inevitably, bring about some change, which our similarly evolving ethics should meet (Massumi, 2015).

Notwithstanding, ethics as applied to technology is somewhat of a novel concept¹⁹. Ethics, though inherent to technology, has not always been a part of the developmental process. Indeed, the field of technoethics²⁰ first emerged in the 1970s, only fifty years ago (Ibid). The term was coined by Mario Bunge, who viewed those closely connected to technology, such as technologists and engineers, as ethically responsible for the societal impact of technological innovation and subsequent use (Bunge, 1975). In response, he endorsed the establishment of new ethical ideologies to address the particular issues posed by technological advancements on societies (Ibid).

The technologist must be held not only technically but also morally responsible for whatever he designs or executes: not only should his artifacts be optimally efficient but, far from being harmful, they should be beneficial, and not only in the short run but also in the long term (Ibid, p. 72).

¹⁹ Though this is true in respect to how we think about it now, the ideas behind the concept have been around since the time of Socrates. He was, according to Plato, against the technological innovation of writing, believing it to “cause memory to ossify” (Fisher, 1966, p. 169). This, for Socrates, was an ethical stand, with concern for the model of the ‘good life’ that he held (Fisher, 1966). To him, technological advancement, the advent of writing, in particular, would deter one’s virtue — “men will trust writing and not recollection, they will hear much, and write much and learn nothing, appear wise and be fools” (Ibid, p. 169). Moreover, with the coming of the first technological revolution, the philosophical current of pragmatism also echoed this concern for the consequences associated with new designs and technologies. Indeed, as wrote Charles Sanders Peirce, “[c]onsider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, 1878, p. 293). Or, in other words, to determine the meaning of an idealized conception, one must take into account the consequences which might arise from it, and the totality of these effects is that design’s meaning. This might be considered akin to an embodied position of how ethical values becomes imbued within designed artifacts and technologies, which, again, argues that the designer’s intentions are codified in the design itself, and will, thereby, produce the intended outcomes (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

²⁰ Technoethics is an interdisciplinary research area built upon theories and methodology from various areas of study such as ethics, philosophy, or information studies to extend insight into the ethical considerations of technological systems towards the practice of advancing a technologically reliant society accordingly (Luppigini and Adell, 2009).

A paramount issue with which our evolving societies are grappling is the ever more influential scientific and technological breakthrough forcing us to reevaluate how we view such technology. This is especially noteworthy in the hard sciences such as biology, and physics and engineering because these are the most likely to lead to developments capable of exceeding human capacity and thus causing changes that were not able to be foreseen (Luppicini, 2010b).

Advancements in medicine, transportation, or communication technologies are all colligated with ethical quandaries of increasing complexity, which they originated or facilitated. Increased dependence upon new technologies thus challenges even the very foundations of previously stable institutions and societal covenants, thereby raising policy issues in regard to the revision and consequent implementation of new ethical guidelines, professional codes of conduct, and laws (Ibid).

Let us turn to the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a relevant case study into ethical principles as applied to technology, as a holistic analogy to the work done strictly under the design purview.

AI is a good synecdoche for technology, and particularly pertinent to the present discussion not simply as an apt example of the previous point, but also as an already significant field of study with yet increasing reach on which all aspects of society are poised to become vastly reliant. Indeed, as mentioned, AI, a computational technology, is becoming an ever-expanding fixture of the theory and praxis of the field of design (Maeda, 2018). AI takes an especially important role when contrasted with the notion of a 'knowledge society,' whereby social progress may be explained as the diffusion of knowledge and subsequent increase in instances which allow for personal choices due to industrialization (Luppicini, 2010a).

Indeed, industrialized nations grew progressively more reliant on investments in the production and distribution of knowledge in numerous sectors such as education, labor, and development (Abramovitz and David, 2000). The significance of knowledge for

society became even more apparent with the integration of specialized areas of scientific study:

Contemporary society may be described as a knowledge society based on the extensive penetration of all its spheres of life and institutions by scientific and technological knowledge (Stehr, 2002).

Thus, new scientific and technological innovations are transforming our societies into knowledge societies by becoming profoundly engrained in its pillars — culture, private and public affairs, labor and educational sectors, public institutions, or social practices (Luppicini, 2010a). Knowledge specifically produced by scientific and technological endeavors is actively redefining crucial details of social life, such as how governments make decisions, how students learn, how healthcare is provided, how ethnic groups preserve their cultures, how business is conducted, or even how scientific discoveries are handled.

This further highlights how much the technological advances already made, as well as those yet to be made (particularly in the context of a knowledge society), require an exhaustive study of their social and ethical implications. This will be expanded upon in part 2. Hence, adequate theorization must be conducted so as to leverage the undeniable good such consequential implications can bring about, as well as guard against the harm. This, of course, is far from uncomplicated and requires an understanding of the technology as well as the context in which it will be deployed.

AI is a great example of such a case. It has far-reaching implications in all of the fields mentioned above and multiple others; as well as a proportional concern (Floridi and Cowls, 2019). Accordingly, there are several propositions for ethical frameworks for the development and application of such systems. In a recent paper, Floridi and Cowls conducted an analysis of the highest-profile sets of ethical principles for AI, on which I will base my analysis given that their work is intended as a review of the state of the art, thus helping narrow down the scope of this specific examination.

The paper examined six significant initiatives interested in socially beneficial AI and found that there is significant overlap (Ibid). They were The Asilomar AI Principles²¹ (henceforth referred to as Asilomar; Asilomar AI Principles, 2017), The Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI²² (henceforth referred to as Montreal; Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI, 2017), the general principles suggested in the second version of *Ethically Aligned Design: A Vision for Prioritizing Human Well-being with Autonomous and Intelligent Systems*²³ (henceforth referred to as IEEE; IEEE, 2017, p. 6), the ethical principles offered in the Statement on Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and ‘Autonomous’ Systems²⁴ (henceforth referred to as EGE; EGE, 2018, pp. 16-20), the “five overarching principles for an AI code”²⁵ (henceforth referred to as AIUK; House of Lords, 2018, §417), and The Tenets of the Partnership on AI²⁶ (henceforth referred to as the Partnership; Partnership on AI, 2018). In it, they develop a unified framework of five core principles for ethical AI, on which I will rely for my own analysis.

They identified four of those core principles as commonly employed in the field of bioethics — beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice — and suggested a fifth one — explicability (Beauchamp and Childress, 2012; cited in Floridi and Cowls, 2019). This makes sense given that bioethics, as a discipline of applied ethics, is the one which most closely echoes digital ethics insofar as dealing with agents and the environments in which they operate (Floridi, 2013). This further strengthens the relevance of the ethics of AI as a technological parallel to the ethics of design within its own academic discipline.

²¹ These were developed under the Future of Life Institute, in collaboration with attendees of the Asilomar conference of January 2017.

²² This was drafted with the help of the University of Montreal as a follow-up to the Forum on the Socially Responsible Development of AI of November 2017.

²³ This was a crowd-sourced global treatise published in December 2017. It received numerous contributions from global thought leaders in an effort to develop guidelines and recommendations for an ethical development and design of autonomous and intelligent systems.

²⁴ This was published in March 2018 by the European Commission’s European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies.

²⁵ As described in the *AI in the UK: Ready, Willing and Able?* report by the UK House of Lords Artificial Intelligence Committee published in April 2018.

²⁶ This is a multi-stakeholder organization comprised by academics, researchers, civil society organizations, companies building and utilizing AI technology, and others.

The principle of beneficence translates to the promotion of well-being and the preservation of human dignity. The main goal is to “prioritize human well-being as an outcome in all system designs” (IEEE, 2017, p. 6; cited in Floridi and Cowls, 2019). AI thus should “be developed for the common good and the benefit of humanity” (House of Lords, 2018, §417). This echoes the Utilitarian consequentialist ideas of the most amount of good for the most amount of people as mentioned above and, likewise, also carries its drawbacks. Striving for a ‘common good’ is, of course, a laudable goal. However, what that is varies wildly between different cultures and ideologies (Green, 2018), and in enforcing a particular viewpoint one might leave many people behind.

Furthermore, if the aim is to “ensure that AI technologies benefit and empower as many people as possible” (Partnership on AI, 2018; cited in Floridi and Cowls, 2019), we would fail to address the potential harm that might be done to those we fail to benefit. Indeed, improving the lives of as many people as possible does not preclude harming others.

The principle of non-maleficence is a sort of response to the broadness of beneficence. Each of the works analyzed inspire the creation of beneficent as well beneficial AI, yet also stress the importance of doing no harm by warning against the negative consequences of misusing such technologies (Cowls et al., 2018). The IEEE underscores an urge to “avoid misuse” (IEEE, 2017) and Montreal argues that developers “should assume their responsibility by working against the risks arising from their technological innovations” (Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI, 2017). These admonitions, however, are not clear in their intentions, as it is left ambiguous as to whether it is the developers or the technology itself that should not maltreat (Floridi and Cowls, 2019).

This uncertainty ties directly into the question of autonomy. Autonomy, as it pertains to AI, is the question of who is deciding (Ibid). It involves a balance between retaining and

delegating decision-making power, which calls into question human autonomy²⁷. As per the Asilomar principles, “[h]umans should choose how and whether to delegate decisions to AI systems, to accomplish human-chosen objectives” (Asilomar AI Principles, 2017). It is thus made clear that, under this ethical model, the agency of human beings is to be encouraged and that the autonomy of technological systems should be limited. Moreover, that machine autonomy should be made inherently reversible by design in the case that human autonomy might need to be protected or upheld (Floridi and Cowls, 2019).

The power to make decisions, though, is contingent. Not everyone has the same agency in different social contexts. That is the basis for the justice principle. The main argument is that “the development of AI should promote justice and seek to eliminate all types of discrimination” (Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI, 2017). It further warns against the risk of employing biased datasets in the training of AI systems (Floridi and Cowls, 2019). In addition, this principle advocates for fairness in regard to the elimination of unfair discrimination and the promotion of diversity, as well as the prevention of new threats to justice (Ibid). The justice principle as mentioned across the analyzed works, nonetheless, is broadly described and yields some confusion as to whether humans are the recipient or the giver of the knowledge thus produced.

The answer to this dilemma is dependent upon the context from which we analyze the question. Whether humans are the recipient or the giver is thus a fallacious starting point to this discussion. We may be either, and which one we are hinges on each of our individual circumstances. The social context is intrinsically disparate between different people with different social standings, especially given that only a small fraction of the human population is currently responsible for the development and advancement of the

²⁷ This very phenomenon was described by Foucault, who, among other things, wrote about the concept of ‘biopower’ (Foucault, 1978). He described it as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Ibid, p. 140). Thus, to him, this was a political technology of power which allowed for the domination of large groups of people and societies (Foucault, 1978). It was specifically described as a form of control over the human body through the ‘biopolitics’ of a population, exerted through the hegemony of societal structures and values which become engrained into social conventions over time and thus regulate human behavior by making one amenable to this social order (Ibid). This form of social subjugation is, thus, essential to the establishment of such hegemonic systems as that of capitalism (Ibid), which will be addressed later.

technology we consume and thereby affects our lives (Ibid). The added principle of explainability is hence a way of enabling the other four principles by promoting a basis of intelligibility and accountability. In order to prevent negative consequences, one must understand the medium, as well as the environment in which it exists.

For AI to be beneficent and non-maleficent, we must be able to understand the good or harm it is actually doing to society, and in which ways; for AI to promote and not constrain human autonomy, our 'decision about who should decide' must be informed by knowledge of how AI would act instead of us; and for AI to be just, we must know whom to hold accountable in the event of a serious, negative outcome, which would require in turn adequate understanding of why this outcome arose (Ibid, pp. 8-9).

Floridi and Cowls note, however, that these principles are the result of western publications with corresponding western values and priorities. They add that perspectives from regions and cultures not here present or otherwise underrepresented would benefit this framework and allow it to be more broadly applicable (Floridi and Cowls, 2019). Moreover, they contend that the advancements and subsequent employment of AI technologies have the potential to impact society in both positive and negative ways, and that

[c]harting the course that is socially preferable will depend not only on well-crafted regulation and common standards, but also on the use of a framework of ethical principles (Ibid, p. 11).

AI, as a case study, is thus representative of the broader discussion surrounding the ethics of technology, as the AI ethical debate shares the same conclusions and similar concerns, as it also already takes into account the larger and older discussion surrounding the ethics of science and technology (Floridi and Cowls, 2019). Indeed, abutted with the substantial and impending technological and scientific developments,

as mentioned, is a growing need to reexamine the corresponding ethical implications. This is demonstrated by the abundance of literature on ethics and technology²⁸.

Howbeit, there is a lack of sources dedicated to the distinct and manifold areas of research and theories in use today²⁹ (Luppicini, 2010b). This speaks to the youth of the field and contributes to its instability. Floridi and Cowls also discuss this: “the sheer volume of proposed principles threatens to become overwhelming and confusing” (Floridi and Cowls, 2019, p. 2). This, they add, poses two potential hindrances. Namely, that the numerous proposed ethical principles are similar and thus redundant, or that they are vastly distinct and generate confusion and ambiguity³⁰ (Ibid).

To this, I would add that the suggested principles may themselves be at fault. Language such as “preferable,” “seek to,” “promote,” “should,” “avoid,” or “as many people as possible” is conditional. It suggests that there is an ideal but also that it is not imperative. Language matters not just because these principles may be more easily discarded as a consequence but also because the terms one uses to describe something, especially when that thing is new, will create and shape the public’s perception of it (Moore, 2019). Language matters because, “[b]y definition, a technological project is a fiction, since at the outset it does not exist, and there is no way it can exist yet because it is in the project phase” (Latour and Porter, 1996; cited in Moore, 2019).

Furthermore, the ideals of “human well-being,” “common good,” and the “benefit of humanity” are vague and insufficiently judicious as they omit the intrinsic and structural relationships between AI systems and their environment (Ibid); and, by extension, those between technologies and the contexts in which they are deployed. In striving towards

²⁸ See Tavani, 2007; Jonas, 1985; Floridi, 1999; and Johnson, 1985.

²⁹ Floridi and Cowls also describe AI as being “a research area in search of a definition” (Floridi and Cowls, 2019, p. 3). This lack of adequate and comprehensive theorization is also paralleled within the field of design studies (Love, 2000; Fry, 2007; Cash, 2020). This will be touched upon further ahead in part 3.

³⁰ The worst outcome to this ambiguity, as described by Floridi and Cowl’s article, might be a scenario in which a “market for principles” is established, whereby “stakeholders may be tempted to ‘shop’ for the most appealing ones” (Floridi and Cowls, 2019, p. 2).

‘the good,’ the questions of which good and for whom are always looming³¹. Treating a common social good as a conceptual territory in which to act places those actions at risk of being identified as good even if they fail to adhere to ethical principles held by others (Ibid). Moreover, this may also happen if they don’t utilize any principles at all or even if they employ a set of principles that actively violate social justice yet retain the moniker of ‘good’ (Ibid).

This facilitates a pro-technology stance akin to the classic “we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good” argument, which, in this context, fails to take into account that “data science lacks any theories or discourse regarding what ‘perfect’ and ‘good’ actually entail” (Green, 2018, p. 19; cited in Moore, 2019). In addition, this type of argument implies an incremental reform approach to technology-centric strategies for social progress (Green, 2018) without having to consider whether this is actually the case (Moore, 2019).

This notion that the deployment of a technology within a social context is enough for it to bring about positive social change is akin to the embodied position, or technological determinism, mentioned above (Dalton and Thatcher, 2014) — that by willing an artifact or technology to be good, and thereby imbuing in it, virtues that are considered good by the designers and developers, is enough for it to yield good results.

1.9 Ethics in design

In a similar manner to that of Floridi and Cowls, a comparative analysis of ethical frameworks for the academic discipline of design was conducted. Likewise, the aim was to dissect the contents and assess whether and where they converge or diverge. I looked at seven documents from high-profile institutions in design. Those are:

³¹ Design, and designed technologies by extension, is inherently political, and, as such the idea of designing AI for an abstract good that is contingent and thus ill-defined depoliticizes the issue (Moore., 2019). This will be further explored in part 2.

- ▶ *Design Business + Ethics*, published by the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA, 2009);
- ▶ *Code of Ethics for Professional Designers*, published by the French Designers Alliance (AFD, 2012);
- ▶ *Code of Ethics*, published by the Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA, 1996);
- ▶ *Code of Conduct*, published by the Chartered Society of Designers (CSD, n.d.);
- ▶ *Ethics for Starving Designers*, published by the Ethics for the Starving Designer project (henceforth referred to as ESD; Goh, 2012);
- ▶ *GDC Code of Ethics*, published by the Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC, 2019);
- ▶ *Model Code of Professional Conduct for Communication Designers*, published by the the International Council of Design³² (ICoD), the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, and the International Federation of Interior Architects/Interior designers (ICoD, 2011).
- ▶ *Code of Ethics*, published by the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA, 2020).

These documents were chosen because they were the most cited and influential proposals specifically written for the practice of design and were all published by accredited and noteworthy organizations. Jointly, they describe five distinct categories of topics covered: social responsibilities, personal responsibilities, professional responsibilities, responsibilities to designers, and responsibilities to the code.

At first glance, we can immediately see that all of these documents mention most of the devised categories and that, of those, they reference professional responsibilities the most often (see Appendix A).

This is supported by the data reflected in the raw data (Appendices A and B) and the graph below (see Fig 4). It shows that there is indeed a concern for all these categories of responsibilities, but with a major focus on the professional ones in contrast with all

³² Previously known as ico-D and formerly as ICOGRADA.

the others. This makes sense, as these are documents focused on the ethics of the practice of the profession of design. This, however, also means that other important categories are underrepresented in these proposals; and this matters because these are the only types of documents specifically intended for the practice of design. In addition, these are the most popular ones, which means these are the ones most designers are reading.

Frequency by Category

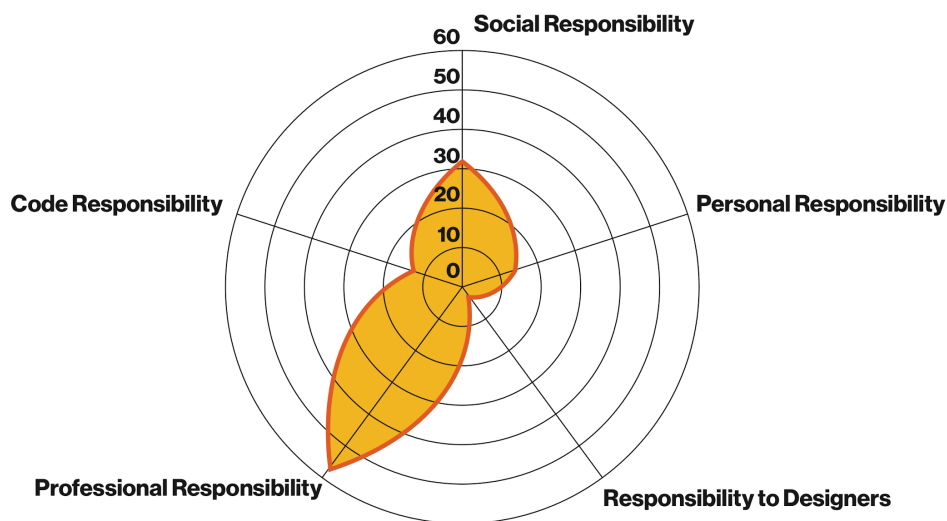


Fig 4:

A graph of absolute frequency of topics in each document divided by category (AIGA, 2009; AFD, 2012; AGDA, 1996; CSD, n.d.; Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011; IDSA, 2020). I counted how many texts referenced the topic and added the numbers pertaining to each assigned category. Topics belonging to more than one category were counted once in each of the categories to which they belong.

Moreover, a significant portion of these documents reference each other. Indeed, AGDA and AFD both cite the ICoD document as inspiration (AGDA, 1996; AFD 2012), and GDC mentions both ICoD and AIGA (GDC, 2019). AIGA's influence on the landscape of design, in particular, is undeniable (Heller and Finamore, 1997), which makes it worthy of more scrutiny. Indeed, AIGA's proposal is unique in that it is the only one with a section specifically addressed to the client. It starts out like this:

If you represent a corporation, institution, advertising agency, investor or public relations firm, or you are an individual in need of graphic design, you've landed exactly where you need to be. Welcome (AIGA, 2009, p. 13).

It begins with a brief introduction into the field and business of design, which includes an explanation of the value of design, tips on how to find the right designer, and how to write a design brief, to list a few examples. This is followed by a section on the “Standards of professional practice” (AIGA, 2009, p. 32). This, however, is entirely addressed to the designer and does indeed provide some valuable insight; but only insofar as the designer is concerned. It lists only the designer’s responsibilities to other designers, the client, the audience, and society, yet neglects to mention those of the client. This, in a chapter specifically addressed to the client implies by omission that they do not have any responsibilities; and does so not only to the clients who read it, but also to the designers and members of the public who do likewise. Even the issue of wage fairness is posed as a responsibility of the designer. It is them who should not accept underpaid work. That the client should not propose low wages is never posed as an issue.

This is a general trend across documents. The designer’s responsibilities to the client and to the profession are overrepresented in contrast with the responsibilities that designers have to the audience and society at large. Milton Glaser, in the AIGA 2002 Voice Conference, had this to say:

In the new AIGA’s code of ethics there is a significant amount of useful information about appropriate behavior towards clients and other designers, but not a word about a designer’s relationship to the public (Glaser, 2002).

The version of the document Glaser is referring to has since been updated and the document considered in this analysis is certainly a more thoughtful iteration, but, as Paul Nini suggests, “[designers’] responsibilities to audience members and users has not been substantially addressed” (Nini, 2004, p. 1). This holds true of most documents

considered in this analysis. The AFD, for example, asks the designer to “be righteous in order to create the proper appreciation of the client for the service provider’s quality of work and his/her skills” (AFD, 2012, Article 4). This explicitly says that one should be righteous specifically to be liked by the client.

They also ask designers to “[a]void situations where the judgment and loyalty towards the customer could become altered” (Ibid, Article 15). The wording here is, in my opinion, noteworthy as it implies that designers should not work with clients whose ethics they disagree with, yet does not specify that that judgment should be based on whether those ethics are good. Insofar as this point goes, it does not matter whether the projects designers engage with are good, so long as they agree with the client’s ethos.

The ESD document is an interesting one on many fronts. It is the only student project to gain significant traction and it is also based in Singapore, which makes it the only one based in a non-western country (albeit one that was colonized by the British Empire of the time). The ESD proposal recognizes that “graphic design is a powerful tool for communication, behavioral change and manipulation” (Goh, 2012, Principle 2). It is the only one to pose the relationship between the client and the designer to be a mutual one, framing the ethical responsibility as one that the designer should bring to the attention of the client, instead of one that the designer is expected to shoulder alone.

The ESD also introduces an interesting discussion. It holds that an ethical code must be based on “facts first, research second and personal opinion last,” yet understands that it is also contingent on factors such as knowledge and circumstance, and thus subject to change (Goh, 2012, Principle 14). This is significant as it pertains to ethical dilemmas. Most of the proposed texts maintain that one should aim to please the client, the audience, and society. But that begs the question of what to do when these needs conflict.

An interesting idea held by most organizations is that of a grievance committee, or some sort of council. These are described as panels consisting of local unbiased industry

experts. AGDA and IDSA mention them specifically as an ethical recourse to which a designer may resort if in need of guidance or in case of a conflict (AGDA, 1996; IDSA, 2020). The GDC and the AFD both use these panels as spaces for litigation (GDC, 2019; AFD, 2012) and the CSD mentions them as a way of protesting the actions of the organization itself (CSD, n.d.).

Another thing that stood out to me was a line in the AIGA document, which stated that a designer should not infringe upon the human rights of another person or group “without permission of such other person or group” (AIGA, 2009, p. 35). This I felt I had to mention because it is, quite honestly, utterly ridiculous. This is a fine sentiment in an interpersonal context but how is one supposed to ask for permission from an entire ethnic group or cultural community? This treats the audience as uniform blocks of users instead of people with individual needs and priorities and betrays the lack of concern for them that Glaser and Nini talked about.

It is, nonetheless, important to mention that these are all very valuable resources and productive efforts in the pursuit of ethics for the practice of design, though they have some limitations beyond the criticism already dealt. Namely, it is notable that these documents are not very recent and, perhaps for that reason, do not convey a sense of urgency or impetus. Most were written in the last decade and either have not been revised since or have undergone very little change. Indeed, AIGA’s *Design Business + Ethics* was originally published in 2001 and the last iteration is from 2009 (AIGA, 2009). AGDA’s dates from 1996 (AGDA, 1996).

The CSD code of conduct³³ is only available online and is not dated. However, using the Wayback Machine, the earliest available version is from 2016 and it has not seen any significant change (CSD, 2016). The AFD’s was originally published in 2009 and revised in 2012 (AFD, 2012), the same year in which the ESD project was published (Goh, 2012). The latest version of the GDC’s *Code of Ethics* is from 2019 but the earliest version I could find is also from 2012 and it is virtually unchanged (GDC,

³³ The CSD and its code actually has a very storied history which is beside the point but interesting nonetheless. See Armstrong, 2016.

2012). ICoD's original proposal dates back to 1983. It was amended in 1987, reviewed in 1997, and amended again and for the last time in 2011 (ICoD, 2011). The IDSA's entry is not dated but I was able to find it referenced as having been published in 2010 (Miller, 2014). This, in a world that has seen such technological and cultural development since, is inadequate.

Moreover, these proposals are very broad. That is intentional, as these are meant to “state the principles for an international basis of ethical standards related to the practice of design” (ICoD, 2011, p. 3). Alas, that vagueness also works to their detriment, as they lack the nuance of a more local and restricted context. Even when the documents are local proposals, they aim to be internationally applicable.

AGDA, for example, produces a “nationally ratified” code yet states that its purpose is to present members with “internationally accepted standards of professional ethics and conduct” (AGDA, 1996, para. 1). This ultimately begs the questions: accepted by whom, and how do they know that. This bleeds into another issue, also mentioned by Floridi and Cowls in their analysis of the ethics of AI — that of provenance. These documents are overwhelmingly the product of western democracies and thus reflect western standards for an ethical practice of design. Thusly, they mostly fail to take into account how the profession differs in distinct sociocultural contexts and describe a standardized practice.

In that regard, Floridi and Cowls's comment that perspectives from other regions and cultures would add value to these proposals (Floridi and Cowls, 2019) is still a very relevant one, though they argue that is because it would make the frameworks they reviewed more broadly applicable. In this context, as suggested, the broad applicability these documents aim for makes them less useful in specific contexts. There is, however, an interesting caveat that arises from this. Would adding perspectives make these documents broader, or more specific?

Floridi and Cowls were also concerned with whether the proposals they were evaluating would converge enough to be redundant or diverge enough to be ambiguous (Ibid). In that regard, the documents in the present analysis are certainly similar in significant ways, especially where they concern the professional duties of the designer. They do, however, diverge slightly where other issues are concerned. Namely, their focus on social responsibilities is not entirely consistent unless it is presented in a vague enough manner so as to encompass a wide range of general things.

When mentioning specifics, issues such as accessibility and do no harm are certainly important ones to raise, yet are only explicitly covered in two documents each — the least amount of any topic in the social responsibilities category (see Appendix A). Thus, points of diversion such as these are relevant enough to merit coexisting. Another example of this is the responsibilities to the designers category. It is the one with the least topics and the least mentions, but still offers a very important perspective to the discussion. It remarks on what designers are owed, in the context of a discussion of ethics which is heavily skewed towards what designers owe.

This matters because it provides the conditions for designers to be able to act in an ethical manner. This is especially true of the topic of education, which I will return to. According to the IDSA, its members are meant to “strive to advance design education by holding as one of [their] fundamental concerns the education of design students” (IDSA, 2020, Article VI), and the ESD asks “educators to take it upon themselves to discuss these issues with their students” (Goh, 2012, Foreword, para. 6).

Indeed, this is fundamental for any profession and field of study. Thus, in regard to design, the practice of which has the potential to so heavily affect our cultures, it becomes crucial that educators strive for an inclusive curriculum, so that students may be adequately prepared with the necessary knowledge and skill (Goh, 2012).

The language used in these documents is also not assertive. They are permeated by terms such as “should” and “avoid,” and phrases such as “[a] professional designer shall

strive to be sensitive to cultural values and beliefs” (AIGA, 2009, p. 35) are also contributing to this conditional meaning. Notice that the meaning of the latter phrase implies that one is only meant to try to be aware of differing opinions, not that one must respect and consider them and uphold their right to be held.

Similarly, one is expected to “favor quality and virtue in the designer profession” (AFD, 2012, Article 3), not be virtuous and do good work. Where potential consequences are concerned, statements like “work in a manner so that as little harm (direct or indirect) as possible is caused” (AGDA, 1996, section 2.1), “endeavour to minimize adverse impacts” (GDC, 2019, section 4.1.5), or “be informed about and specify or recommend goods, services, and processes that are the least detrimental to the environment and society” (GDC, 2019, section 4.2.1) are particularly insidious because they imply that harm is inevitable.

This language matters, as discussed before, and it shapes the way we think about a subject (Moore, 2019) and thus, how we act towards it. Designers reading that they must minimize the harm they produce through their work will infer and ultimately accept that they will do harm; and that, of course, needn’t be true.

Comparing the bioethics and AI ethics principles that Floridi and Cowls listed to this collection of ethical codes for design, some interesting comparisons arise. The idea of beneficence is generally present in these documents and seems to inform the intentions behind statements such as asking one to “[c]ontribute with his/her skills in order to improve people’s lives, work, living conditions, their health and their surrounding environment” (AFD, 2012, Article 1), or to “[accept] professional responsibility to act in the best interest of the ecology and of the natural environment” (ICoD, 2011, p. 4).

The concern with human rights that proposals by AIGA, GDC, or ICod hold (AIGA, 2009; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011) can also be tied to this. As can the issue of accessibility (GDC, 2019; IDSA, 2020) and all the other topics aimed at “promoting well-being, preserving dignity, and sustaining the planet” (Floridi and Cowls, 2019, p. 6).

Non-maleficence, however, is less underscored. There are only two documents which explicitly reference this principle — AIGA’s assertion that “professional [designers] shall avoid projects that will result in harm to the public” (AIGA, 2009, p. 34), and, generously, the GDC’s request to “endeavor to minimize adverse impacts” (GDC, 2019, Article 4.1.5). The latter, as mentioned, has flawed language, but it could be argued that the intention is that of non-maleficence.

Similarly, accounting for the consequences of one’s work (Goh, 2012), as well as carrying the responsibility to not endorse harmful products or clients (AIGA, 2009; Goh, 2012) can also be understood as an expression of this concept. After all, at the core of these statements is the prevention of harmful outcomes and the ultimate disappearance of noxious clients and products. Indeed, the very existence of a code that one must follow implies the desire to not cause harm, though it remains, unfortunately, largely implicit.

Regarding autonomy, the context here is slightly different. Within the backdrop of AI, autonomy is concerned with who has the power to make decisions, and the debate is predominantly centered on human agents versus AI systems — whether or not to delegate our decision-making power. Where design is concerned, a parallel can be made to the idea of taking responsibility for those choices. These organizations ask their members to agree, or to sign, as a way of assuming the responsibility of following their codes of conduct and all they entail. They are thereby asking designers to choose whether they are willing to accept them, and thus follow them, to consider whether they are even able to.

Justice is also present in these proposals, insofar as “promoting prosperity, preserving solidarity, [and] avoiding unfairness” (Floridi and COWLS, 2019, p. 7). Issues such as treating and depicting the audience with respect (AIGA, 2009; Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011) or supporting free speech and freedom of assembly (AIGA, 2009) are clearly related to a concern with justice; but so are others like wage fairness (AIGA,

2009; AFD, 2012; AGDA, 1996; CSD, n.d.; Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011; IDSA, 2020) or plagiarism and unauthorized reproduction (Ibid).

In addition, accessibility and the protection of human rights are as much about beneficence as they are about justice, since they are born out of a preoccupation with exclusion and oppression.

The principle of explicability was introduced by Floridi and Cowls as a compliment to the traditional bioethical principles here discussed as a way of “enabling the other principles through intelligibility and accountability” (Floridi and Cowls, 2019, p. 8). This also applies to designers and the discipline of design in a significant and increasingly relevant way.

By subscribing to a code or belonging to an organization, one is making themselves accountable to that code, that organization, and all the other subscribers and members, as well as to all those mentioned in the codes of conduct. Thus, following a set of established ethical rules is, in itself, a commitment to accountability — to uphold all the principles held by that code. And, given that, as is being argued, design is in particular need of caution in its practice, making such a commitment plays an important role. Moreover, the issue of intelligibility is distinctly relevant to a discipline which is primarily concerned with conveying the meaning behind one’s intention (Canlı, 2017; Luhmann, 1975). Hence, it applies to this discussion in two primary ways — how to convey these ethical frameworks to designers, and how to convey them to the public.

This ties in very heavily with the issue of language which was already touched upon. As they stand, their meaning lacks conviction, and thus, will likely lack diligent follow-through (Moore, 2019) by those that are meant to follow through. In addition, the broadness of these proposals also acts as an obstacle to their intelligibility. Indeed, the existence of grievance committees to clarify potential quandaries betrays the ultimate lack of clarity these documents provide in many instances.

I do not mean to suggest that ethics is a simple issue. The specific circumstances of a problem certainly matter and should be taken into account. The general tone and vagueness with which these topics are addressed, however, undeniably contributes to the arising of such ethical dilemmas since barely any specific circumstances are offered as examples or case studies. Moreover, a text intended for a particular group does not serve only to inform that group; it also informs others as to what to expect of and from that group. Likewise, it also matters what the public reading these texts will infer.

In this regard, the broad tone might make these documents more accessible to a general audience, though they will be no more enlightened about how a designer would resolve the ethical dilemmas they might face. They will, however, be informed that designers are expected to be accountable to them and in what ways. For clients, this still holds true, but there is the added context that they are the ones commissioning the work of the designers. They are the ones dictating what the product will be and the circumstances in which it is to be produced. Thus, designers must have responsibilities to their clients, but clients must also have responsibilities to the designers and to the public their product will affect. As discussed, the texts in analysis largely fail to take this into account, and, even when they address the client directly (AIGA, 2009), fail to communicate it.

1.10 It's just not that easy

Designers are, as it stands, expected to bear the brunt of the responsibilities pertaining to their industry. This does make sense in that they are, in effect, the ones *doing* the thing. But they are also the most vulnerable — as in, those with the least amount of choice, and thus ethical agency.

According to the raw data of AIGA's most recent design census³⁴, designers who have been in the industry for four years or less have an average yearly income under the

³⁴ These results, as all other outcomes of surveys, should be taken with a small grain of salt. The methods may be sound but there is always an associated bias with, if nothing else, those most likely to respond to a survey. Further, AIGA is a United-States based organization so the data will reflect those circumstances alone. That does not mean, however, that the trends it reflects cannot be extrapolated to other contexts.

median value (AIGA, 2019; see Fig 5). This is on top of a fairly expensive entry rate due to educational expenses — most respondents have indeed received some sort of degree or certification (Ibid) — and equipment and software fees.

Average Income by Years working as a designer

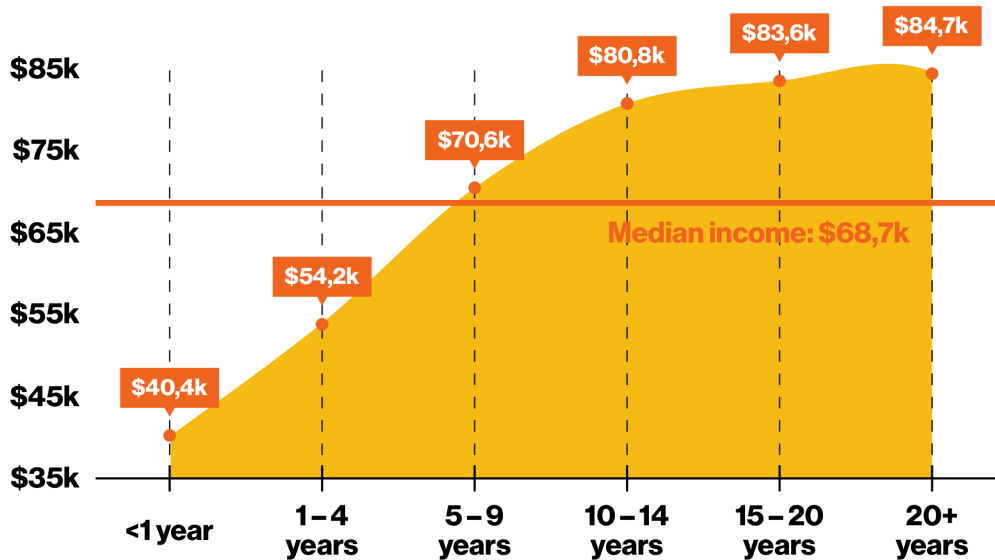


Fig 5:

A graph of average income by years working in the design industry contrasted with the median income in the United States in 2019 (AIGA, 2019; Semega et al., 2020). These values were calculated by taking the average of each income bracket and then, with those, calculating the average income for each year bracket. Because AIGA is an American-based organization, most census respondents originate from or work in that country. This is why the median income for the US was used, as opposed to that of another country or region — specifically, because it had to accurately contrast with the census data, which was collected in an American context.

Furthermore, most designers also require some other form of income and only 6% of the respondents said they have no side-job (Ibid). This, especially in the context of a gig economy³⁵ adds to the atmosphere of uncertain prospects and financial insecurity, as confirmed by 56% of the respondents feeling “a little concerned” for their job stability and another 16% claiming they “keep their things in a box” (Ibid, p. 40).

Indeed, the tongue-in-cheek title of the *Ethics for Starving Designers* project now reveals an underlying struggle. How can designers negotiate their personal ethics with

³⁵ See Vallas and Schor, 2020;

their financial stability (and, hence, ethical agency and responsibility)? And why are they the ones expected to compromise?

Within the design industry, designers are dependent on clients for work, which, as shown, they need. This ultimately means that that work can be leveraged over them. It is a subversion of the law of supply and demand — where the supply of commissions dictates the demands of the designers. Of course, the opposite is also true. Switching perspectives, the supply of designers might also affect the demands of the clients, as could the demands of the public shape the supply of commissions. Designers do have some agency, as does the public; just often not the most.

Either because they lack the information required to act or because they simply cannot choose otherwise due to external factors such as financial insecurity, those most vulnerable, as discussed, cannot be held accountable all of the time because they are not responsible all of the time (O'Connor, and Franklin, 2018). That is, they are not always ethical agents because they do not always have the privilege of freedom of choice. This inevitably contributes to the idleness of the aforementioned ethical proposals, as they are not addressed to those who can most actively affect the environment in which they are intended to act upon.

Another of the largest contributors to them being ultimately ineffective is that they are not legally enforceable. They are conditional documents written in conditional language for an organization with conditional membership. They provide a framework for ethical behavior — a guide — but only to those who seek it. In that respect, one of the greatest challenges facing these proposals lies precisely in making clients, designers, and the public alike equally aware of the importance of an ethical design practice.

The client and the designer must be aware of their responsibility and influence, and the public must know to ask for it. Hence, if designers are uninterested or unable to be more selective with the projects they undertake and clients are unwilling or likewise incapable

of commissioning ethical products, adequate legislation should be put into effect. This will be discussed more in-depth further ahead.

Given the scale and complexity of the global economy as well as our knowledge about human nature, it would be extremely naïve to rely simply on spontaneous and voluntary ethical behaviour by individuals and corporations to ensure fairness or improve human dignity. Regulation, combined with serious enforcement, is required to guide our behaviour and ensure the rule of law (Malan, 2018, para. 1).

Whether it be by a single credible body or the government itself, the design profession thus finds itself in need of regulation (Malan, 2018; McCollam, 2014), especially considering how consequential the projects that designers work on nowadays (Monteiro, 2018a; 2018b). A strong argument is that for licensing designers (McCollam, 2014). There are those who argue that design should be a licensed profession with training, testing, and accreditation (Monteiro, 2018a; 2018b).

The Graphic Designers of Canada even incorporate it into their code of conduct, asking their members to “promote certification in the graphic/communication design profession” (GDC, 2019, Article 8.2.2). The driving force behind this is to enforce the industry’s self-regulation and thereby making sure that those who participate in the production processes are aware of and comply with the apposite ethical standards of the profession (McCollam, 2014).

The counterargument to this, as is often the pushback against any kind of regulation, is that it might suppress innovation, which implies that the only reason that these big companies have been able to grow as fast as they have is due to a lack of regulation and, therefore, licensing designers would be counterproductive (Monteiro, 2018a). To this Mike Monteiro, an esteemed designer and author who speaks at length about this issue, adds that:

Unregulated growth kills people. ... I don't care about you, or your company, or your stakeholders. That can't be our number one concern. Our number one concern needs to be society, the people in it, which, by the way, includes [designers] (Ibid, para. 20).

While I agree with his statement, I feel it takes an erroneous premise as its basis. The ultimate goal should absolutely be the protection of the consumer and society as a whole. Licensing designers, however, cannot be the only solution. Designers are not the commissioners — they are not the companies, they are the workers. Licensing designers only addresses the issue of unethical designers, not that of unethical commissions. In that regard, I worry that by enforcing the role of the designer as the sole actor with ethical duties might act more like a band-aid than an actual solution.

That being said though, licensing designers is certainly a step in a better direction, as argues Monteiro (2018a; 2018b). Indeed, licensing designers is similar to what all those organizations were aiming at by having their members subscribe to their codes of conduct. They were, in essence, attributing the privilege of membership and accreditation by that institution to those that met its standards. They were failing, in part, because of a lack of clear expectations due to a plurality of authorities — a concern which licensing, as imposed by a single regulatory body would address (McCollam, 2014). Moreover, this would also aid the public in providing a way to “measure a standard of expectation for their level of service, and a way to address any grievance with a lack of it” (Monteiro, 2018b, para. 73).

Further, the speed at which we are introducing new designs into our social environments, as argued, makes it difficult to truly assess what damage they might make (Schwab, 2017b; Arthur, 2009; Kranzberg, 1986; Luppicini, 2009), a concern that licensing would hope to mitigate³⁶ (Monteiro, 2018b).

That, however, while an important increment, is still placing the onus on the designer alone to assume the responsibility of solving the problem. Hence, sweeping and

³⁶ Monteiro goes even further, arguing for the need for unions (Monteiro, 2018b). This will be addressed later.

comprehensive legislation is required in addition so that we are able to regulate both designers and the companies who commission the work in the first place, especially when they are entwined with consequential emerging technologies with increasing societal impact.

This is not hypothetical. Indeed, industry heads, civil society leaders, and legislators have recognized that the views we hold of technologies largely fail to take into account the complexities of our interactions with them, and thus that these technologies are impacting our societies in ways that might be detrimental (Philbeck, Davis and Larsen, 2018). “The values and ethics of technological development must be addressed at this critical moment in history” (Ibid, p. 4), including “from the top down through regulation” (Philbeck, Davis and Larsen, 2018, p. 9).

Let us consider an example. In 2015, those who used Facebook’s Messenger app on an Android system were greeted to an adorably innocuous cartoon yeti proclaiming that users could “[t]ext anyone in [their] phone” (Lien, 2018; see Fig 6). When prompted, they had the option to either activate the feature by tapping the big blue “turn on” button or press the greyed-out “not now” (Ibid). What Facebook didn’t tell them, however, was that by activating the feature they were handing Facebook access to their contacts and call and text history (Ibid).

It wasn’t until three years later that the public found out that Facebook had indeed collected that information and had, allegedly, stored it (Ibid). Facebook argued that, because their users had to opt into the feature, they knew they were allowing the company to access their data (Ibid). This, of course, is not the full picture. What Facebook failed to acknowledge is that the prompt involved a very sophisticated design strategy, by now all too common in the technology industry. As Don Norman describes it, “[a]n affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the

capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used³⁷” (Norman, 2013, p. 11).



Text anyone in your phone

Continuously upload info about your contacts like phone numbers and nicknames, and your call and text history. This lets friends find each other on Facebook and helps us create a better experience for everyone.

[Learn More.](#)

TURN ON

NOT NOW

[Manage your contacts](#)

Fig 6:

A screenshot of what Android Facebook users were faced with when prompted to activate a feature that would allow the company access to their personal contacts as well as their call and text history. (Lien, 2018).

A large blue button *affords* to be tapped, while a greyed-out text barely even *affords* to be read. Thus, it is no wonder that millions of people tapped the blue button — thereby activating the proposed feature — as it was the only thing that *afforded* to be directly interacted with. The cute yeti was also intentional, as the cartoon illustration is meant to be friendly and disarming (Lien, 2018). Even the language is carefully thought out. Notice how it doesn’t simply say “yes” or “no” but rather “turn on” and “not now.” This implies the decision to activate the feature, and thus hand over the user’s personal data, as the only correct option, while declining to do so is framed as merely delaying the inevitable.

³⁷ Techniques such as these are often applied in what is known as ‘persuasive design’ — a design practice based around the manners in which to influence human behavior through a service or artifact’s ‘affordances’ (Mazé, 2019). In this way, persuasive design is aimed at guiding behavior and, thereby, “[induces] self-discipline, regulating, affirming and ‘governing’ particular behaviors in forms intended to be internalized and reinforced in an ongoing manner in everyday life and social practices” (Ibid, p. 27). These subtle nudges are often described as ‘dark patterns,’ which users tend to perceive as “sneaky and dishonest” yet are frequently unable to detect (Meir and Harr, 2020, p. 170).

None of this is explicitly illegal and serves to highlight the need for appropriate and comprehensive regulation. The problem with this, in the simplest terms possible, is that it's hard. A significant portion of the challenge is that the full impact of rising technologies is difficult to assess when they are still emerging (Ibid) and, thus, scholar Daniel Malan argues that

relying only on government legislation and incentives to ensure the right outcomes is ill-advised. These are likely to be out-of-date or redundant by the time they are implemented (Malan, 2018, para. 3).

Hence, the need for a solid ethical standard that is inherently embedded within design and its practice is apparent, as it becomes clear that no one solution can stand on its own. The need for regulation is unquestionable, provided it is adequate. Even among business leaders “the question is not whether there should be regulation, but rather what type of regulation and accountability are most appropriate” (Philbeck, Davis and Larsen, 2018, p. 5). According to Malan, the best way to secure positive developments in an environment as complex as this is to employ a basis of clear values such as upholding human dignity and the pursuit of the common good (Malan, 2018).

In reading that, though, the more attentive reader may have already raised the red flag. Indeed, as has been discussed, these are very vague terms, which raise as many questions as they answer (Green, 2018; Moore, 2019). This approach, however, is employed because it still seems to be more effective than the impossible task of constantly updating legislation to account for new technological developments (Malan, 2018). To account for this, some legislators have implemented a ‘comply or explain’ principle, particularly in the EU and the US (Sturm, 2016). That is, instead of drafting binding laws, regulators put forth a code of conduct which companies must strictly abide by unless they can publicly explain why a certain principle does not apply to them (Malan, 2018).

This, again, is strikingly similar to the codes of conduct discussed above, as well as to the process of licensing. The key difference is that they are meant for every actor in the chain of production, not just designers. Under this principle, along with the required legislative reform, perhaps there would be a legal responsibility for Facebook to demonstrate how the dignity of its users is protected³⁸.

Though this ‘comply or explain’ principle seems to have been met with wide acceptance (Sturm, 2016), we mustn’t ignore the immense complexity of the global regulatory environment, which requires us to keep up with an ever-evolving and interdisciplinary technical specificity, in addition to upholding a solid ethical basis on which to deliberate (Malan, 2018).

This last point, however, is not an easy one to resolve. “Every human being has a number of intertwined responsibilities and each of them is as personal and intransferable as a joy or a grief” (Bunge, 1975, p. 69). Values, hence, are likewise. This is another great challenge to the adoption of a standardized code of ethics. Indeed, this in itself raises a number of other ethical quandaries such as whose ethics should be adopted and who gets to decide.

These are, indeed, the concerns embodied by the debate surrounding moral relativism (Westacott, n.d.) and there are no perfect answers, by the very nature of its substance. Moreover, some values will inevitably be sidelined in favor of others; but, as *The Ethics for Starving Designers* project reminds us: “[d]o not assume moral superiority and expect those you work with to be ethically perfect. People make mistakes” (Goh, 2012, Principle 10). Or, to invoke Wittgenstein again on the matter, there are no perfect answers in philosophy and, indeed, some questions are best left unanswered — and thus contingent rather than absolute (Wittgenstein, [1921] 2011).

³⁸ They certainly attempt to every time there is a big scandal, a notable one being the company’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg testimony to the US Congress in 2018, over data misuse and breaches in user privacy (Wong, 2018). It’s important to clarify, however, that a testimony in the US Congress is not a legal trial, but merely a process by which congressional committees gather and analyze information provided by the testimonies to shape any proposed legislation (U.S. Government Publishing Office, n.d.). Facebook has never had to argue for their protection of their users’ interests in a court of law, instead occasionally receiving penalties in the form of fines they can afford without much financial damage (Patel, 2019).

1.11 But is design inherently unethical?

People may make mistakes, yet, according to Don Norman, humans do not.

Do we err when we walk along a weaving path? Of course not—that is how people walk. It is only when engineers and designers require us to walk in straight lines that we call the behavior erroneous—so too with almost every place where people err... Society has invented machines and designs that require inhuman acts. We require precise numerical precision from the human body that did not evolve with precision (Norman, 2003, p. 129).

Thus, it's not so much human error as it is bad design. Take the US Presidential Election of 2000, in which George W. Bush was famously elected over Al Gore³⁹ (Kettle, 2001). The 'butterfly ballot' used in Florida's Palm Beach County (see Fig 7) has been directly tied to over 2,000 Democratic voters having accidentally voted for the Reform candidate Pat Buchanan (Wand et al., 2001). That in itself is already bad enough, but it gets worse. Bush was declared the winner of the state by a margin of only 537 votes, meaning that the butterfly ballots alone may have cost Gore the election⁴⁰ (Mestel, 2019).

The real problem, however, was not that people engaged with the design incorrectly; it was, rather, that the principles behind the conception of the design were flawed from the start. The ballots were not poorly made. They were designed to be as cheap as possible, not usable. There was no problem with the ballots themselves. There was, indeed, a problem with the goals and priorities of the commission (Norman, 2003).

³⁹ Later recounts in Florida determined that Gore, not Bush, had won Florida's electoral votes, which would have been enough for the former to win the presidency. The supreme court, however, intervened and in a 5-4 decision elected to not conduct an official recount, thereby handing the state to Bush and thus the presidency (Kettle, 2001).

⁴⁰ There are yet more examples of bad ballot designs which undeniably contribute to sway the results of elections. See Mestel, 2019.

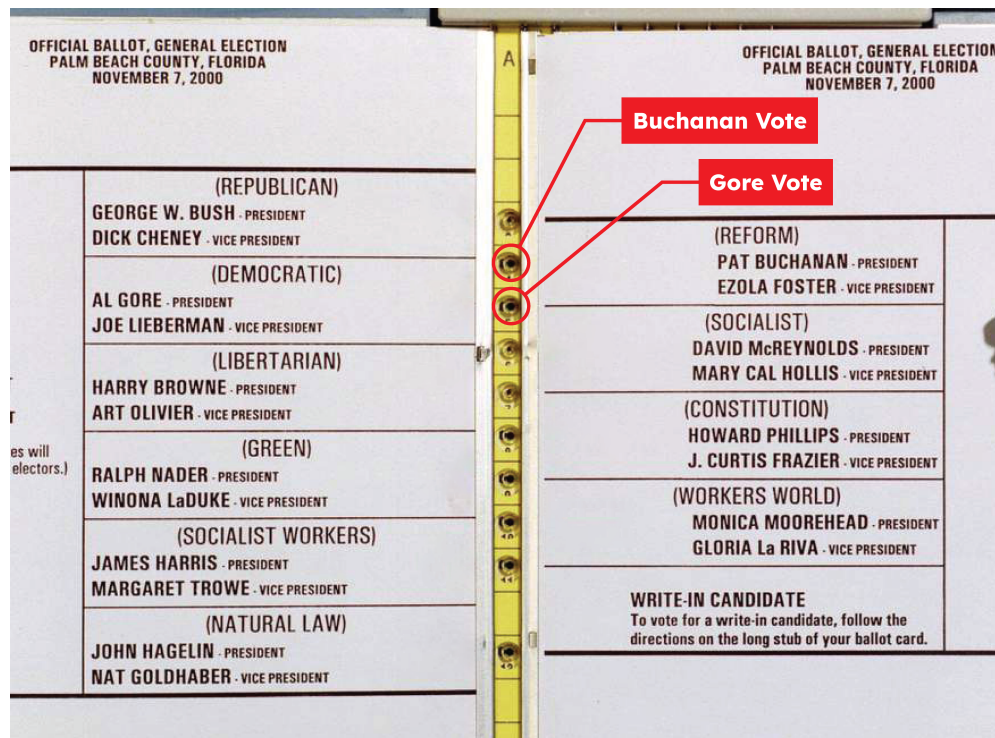


Fig 7:

Florida's Palm Beach County's infamous butterfly ballot. The space allocated for voters to select their chosen candidate was misaligned with the row of the given candidate, causing some to accidentally vote for the wrong person. (Mestel, 2019).

So if design is beholden to the commissioner's priorities, is it, in this way, inherently unethical? There is certainly a preoccupation with ethics as it relates to design (see Fig 8). That is, after all, what is being explored in this dissertation. But that preoccupation has not yet materialized in significant ways. Facebook is still employing manipulative design strategies to deceive its users (Lien, 2018) and Google literally removed its famous "don't be evil" mantra from the preface of their code of conduct (Cuthbertson, 2018). And like these companies behave many others.

Still, people do care about ethics. And corporations know this. Let us take food labels as an example. In Europe, the number of ethical and environmental claims made in food and drinks rose from 24% in 2015 to 32% in 2019 (Southey, 2020). This is because consumers are seeking out not only ethical labels, but, increasingly, ethical brands as well (Ibid). Indeed, a 2018 survey conducted in the US and the UK found that 88% of consumers would like brands to help them be more ethical (Townsend, 2018).

Most important issues facing design

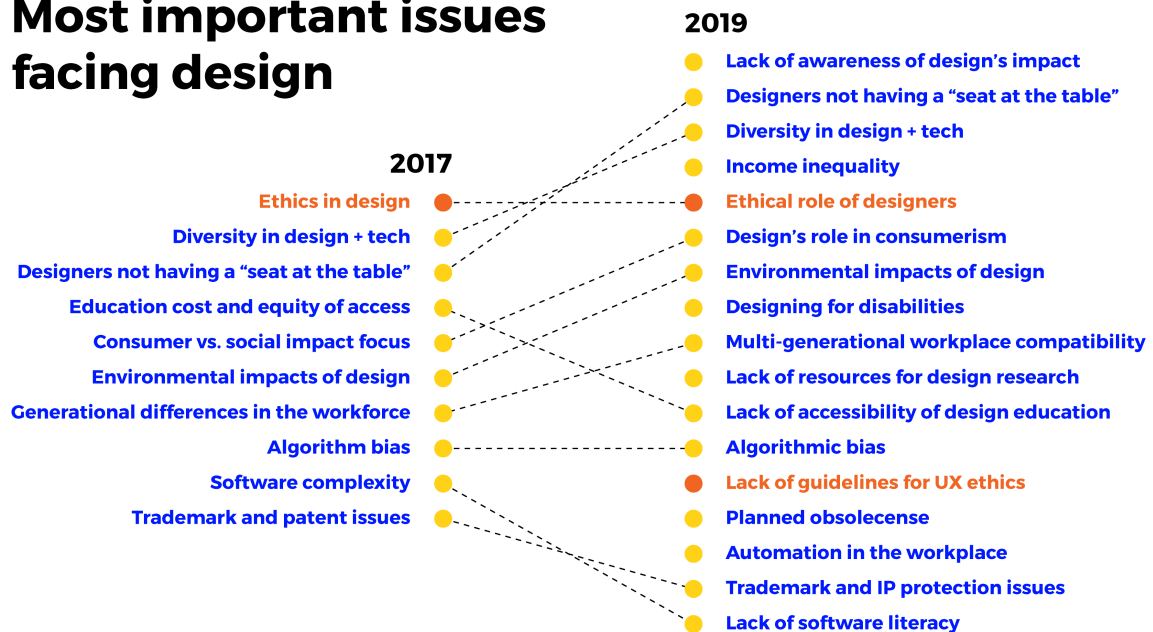


Fig 8:

A figure from AIGA's design census mapping out what participants had thought were the most important issues facing design in 2017 and how they evolved in 2019 (AIGA, 2019, p. 57). I highlighted the ones that explicitly mention a concern for ethics but an argument could be made that most of the listed issues are dealing with ethics in one way or another.

In 2018, Nike released a controversial commercial starring Colin Kaepernick⁴¹ and prominently featuring a number of black athletes in a climate of severe racial tension (Nike, 2018; Gibson, 2018). In such a climate, Nike took a big risk, knowing beforehand that the ad would spark outrage among some. Nike's gamble, however, paid off, quite literally. As a result, the company's shares reached record highs and the ad made them a profit of \$6 billion (Ibid) while also earning them an Emmy (Vera, 2019). Following Nike, Gillette tried a similar approach, producing what they referred to as a short film about contemporary masculinity (Gillette, 2019; Meyersohn, 2019). Predictably, the ad also provoked some vitriolic responses yet the company still experienced what can be described as "unprecedented levels of media coverage and customer engagement" (Meyersohn, 2019. para. 3).

⁴¹ Kaepernick is a civil rights activist and former American football player who became most famous in 2016 for protesting police brutality and systemic racism within American society by taking a knee rather than standing for the country's national anthem (Olusoga and Olusoga, 2020). He thus joins a proud and longstanding tradition of black protest within sports, which made him a very controversial figure (Ibid). Following the protests, Kaepernick was blacklisted by the NFL and vilified by then-president Donald Trump and most of the country's right-wing (Ibid).

People clearly want to buy their shoes and razors from companies whose values are aligned with theirs. Presenting ethics, however, is not the same as being ethical. And here, design plays a major role. Companies have figured out how to appropriate the aesthetics of ethics, while leaving out the substance. That is how we end up with an admittedly inspiring commercial from a company that we know has had and continues to have numerous issues with, among other things, forced labor in their supply chain (Fifield, 2020). Or an actually thoughtful ad discouraging sexist behaviors from a brand whose parent company routinely charges women more for pink versions of the same products⁴² (Pink.tax, 2019a). Forgive me, a ‘short film.’

These aesthetic decisions are thus profit-driven and thereby deliberate. Hence, I return to the question: is design inherently unethical? One could say, as some have pointed out (Schwab, 2017a), that being bound to a client’s priorities at least as much as, if not always more than to those of the public, puts the practice of design in an incriminating position. That by placing such emphasis on the end goals and priorities of the clients one necessarily fails to respond to the needs of consumers, thereby failing to protect them and perhaps even actively harming them.

This is, indeed, unethical. It is, in its purest sense, bad design. It is, however, only so because of an industry built on bad priorities; because, that system was itself designed so that the clients’ agenda will supersede the responsibility to the public. Humans don’t err. Design, as an industry, is working as intended. Thus, these concerns are undeniably valid, but they are not inherent to the discipline nor the practice of design. They are, though, inherent to a capitalistic system which was designed that way.

⁴² The ‘pink tax’ is a global phenomenon “whereby goods and services cost more for females than males for no good reason” — the name originating in the fact that most of these “feminine” products are pink or come in pink packaging (Pink.tax, 2019b, para. 1). A 2015 study from the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs even found that products intended for women were more likely to cost more across every single industry in analysis, and that, on average, products marketed to women cost 7% more than similar products for men (Menin and de Blasio, 2015).

Part 2: Politics, or *Why*

2.1 Sonic memes against capitalist regimes

If you frequent leftist spaces, you most likely have heard the phrase “there is no ethical consumption under capitalism,” or some of its variants. This phrase reportedly originates from a meme⁴³ put in circulation as part of online leftist discourse shared in platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit (Lockhart, 2017; see Fig 9).



Fig 9:

There is no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism meme, displaying the popular video game character Sonic the Hedgehog (gajeam, 2016).

The meme, almost certainly intentionally ironic, displays the phrase accompanied by popular video game character Sonic the Hedgehog, a capitalist creation. This slogan, with distinct Marxist and anti-capitalist undertones, may be interpreted in two ways (Lockhart, 2017). One reading implies that one’s participation in commerce under a capitalist society renders one complicit in unethical consumption and thus we should try to reduce it or, if possible, completely eliminate it. The other views capitalism as such a massive system under which we are necessarily coerced into bad behavior that we, therefore, have the moral imperative to change it and, ultimately, to overthrow it.

⁴³ There is something to be said about the political power of memes. That is not the purview of this investigation but I would refer you to Strelka Mag, 2017 and Metaheaven, 2013.

According to scholar Eleanor Lockhart, the meme originated in the aftermath of a feminist campaign led by prominent British actress Emma Watson (Ibid). It featured t-shirts reading “This is What a Feminist Looks Like,” which were then held as inherently progressive objects, only for it to be discovered that they were being produced under appalling labor conditions (Ibid). The meme, put in this context, thus echoes an important point made also by rhetorician James Aune — that we can craft objects, stories, and rhetoric with the best of intentions, yet they do not inherently merit praise unless they are improving lives by effecting change in the system (Aune, 2006). But that they do not merit praise, however, does not mean we should feel bad for consuming these products — provided they are not intentionally harmful, of course.

The lack of nuance in the slogan itself, “no ethical consumption under capitalism,” however, can also stir up some much more harmful feelings of ennui. It can be used to excuse bad behavior under the argument that, because something was created under capitalism, it will always be bad, rendering it a pointless exercise to ask it to be better (Lockhart, 2017). Further, it can also be used to cynically reject any kind of positive measure on the part of corporations since they would necessarily be the product of capitalist machinations (Ibid). Thus, as Lockhart states, “‘there is no ethical consumption under capitalism’ is a generally-true point which has cascaded into postmodern malaise” (Ibid, para. 9).

Though I will admit to occasionally succumbing to sardonicism of the like, I agree with acclaimed scholar Dana Cloud, who warns against becoming trapped inside that mindset, arguing that sentiment must be combated if we are to produce any sort of positive change (Cloud, 1994; 2018). It is thus on the back of the first couple of interpretations of Sonic’s wise words that I would like to build upon for this discussion.

In that regard, I would be remiss not to mention the Ethical Consumerism movement. This is a form of consumer engagement and advocacy, premised on the notion of voting

with one's dollar⁴⁴. This has, since its beginning, been used as a tool aimed at challenging and ultimately changing the behavior of the producers of goods or services, mostly by those who feel politically disenfranchised (Newman and Bartels, 2011). Thus, it is often employed as an attempt to impact societal values and priorities, largely through purchasing those products deemed to be ethically produced and boycotting those that are deemed harmful. In this way, this type of socially conscious consumption takes on political connotations — as political consumption itself.

Political scientist Michele Micheletti even argues that this manner of political consumption may be understood as a form of “citizen engagement in politics” (Micheletti, 2003, p. 59). According to her, this is often more popular than other kinds of demonstrations, given how it provides a more anonymous and risk-free way of engaging in political activism⁴⁵ (Micheletti, 2003).

Personally, I am conflicted about the notion of having a moral imperative to boycott a thing. On one hand, I believe that if one is able to avoid an unethical product one should do so. On the other, however, the choice not to consume is often not a choice at all, a critique which is often pointed out about the concept (Haydu, 2014). The decisions surrounding what we buy are becoming more complicated as we are increasingly presented with more expensive yet more ethical products in opposition to the cheaper yet potentially more unethical ones. This is a regressive dilemma⁴⁶, one which calls for money to be pitted against morality, as it necessitates that there will be those who can

⁴⁴ The concept of dollar voting describes a hypothetical effect of consumer preference — and thereby purchase — on the behavior of producers through payment, or lack thereof, for a given product or service (Newman and Bartels, 2011). Its history can be traced back to the American Revolution in the United States, when the American colonists protested British taxation without representation by boycotting a number of British products (Ibid).

⁴⁵ It should also be pointed out that boycotts played a major role during the American civil rights movement of the 60s (i.e., the Montgomery bus boycott, motivated in part by the arrest of Rosa Parks and the rape of Racy Taylor, as part of a larger effort to protect black women from racial and sexual violence; McGuire, 2011) and they seem to be on the rise (Newman and Bartels, 2011).

⁴⁶ Indeed, it is a dilemma which can be traced back to the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th, with the writings of Edmund Burke (Robin, 2016). Burke opposed Adam Smith's Labor Theory of Value, which, briefly, is the idea that it is, in Marxist terms, the amount of socially necessary labor which determines the economic value of any given good (Gordon, 1959). Burke, by contrast, argued that value was bestowed upon a good or service, independently of any other prior factor, only at the moment of purchase (Ibid). Thus, in Burke's view, value was dictated only by the consumer — and, specifically, by those who can afford a particular product.

afford to pay for their ethics and those who have no choice but to become complicit in unethical behavior. This is a false choice because, as it goes, there is no ethical consumption under capitalism. Indeed, there must be something inherently unethical about a system which selects ethical credence by purchasing behavior. Especially when considering that, under this system, wealth is often accrued on the backs of precisely those who cannot afford to buy their ethics by those who can afford a clean conscience⁴⁷.

Thus, the Ethical Consumerism Movement is an honorable effort, albeit one which is founded upon the illusion of choice. Rejecting the effort towards more ethical consumption because it won't end capitalism, however, is not what the phrase "no ethical consumption under capitalism" is intended to do (Lockhart, 2017). Indeed, this argument only dismisses ethical consumption as a radical solution — as *the* thing that will overthrow capitalism. Instead, it encourages the endeavor as something tangible that one can do (provided one can, indeed, do it) to shake the system, and, in this way, to bring back Aune, improve lives by effecting some change in that same system (Aune, 2006). After all, this very argument could be made of unions. They have not ended capitalism but they have certainly improved the conditions of workers.

If I am allowed a gripe with the message, however, I feel like the phrase "no ethical consumption under capitalism" simultaneously removes and places the responsibility entirely on the consumer. As discussed, one might feel disillusioned by the thought and not make any effort towards improving upon the situation when they would have the ability to. At the same time, though, the emphasis on consumption, once again, puts the onus on the consumer to be the agent of change. There is, likewise, no ethical production under capitalism, and omitting that aspect suggests it need not be remarked upon. And, as we've seen, language matters (Latour and Porter, 1996; cited in Moore, 2019).

⁴⁷ Burke also maintained that price and value were the same thing (Robin, 2016). In this way, whatever the buyer pays for a thing is what it is worth. This is, in effect, the philosophy behind free market capitalism (Ibid). Thus, one's labor is only valued to the extent as it serves the interests of the wealthy classes; and, in such a system, the affluent wield disproportionate power, as it follows, then, that the more money one has, the more value one can dictate.

It's not necessarily your fault that you cannot consume ethically. As Sonic keeps reminding us, there is no ethical consumption under capitalism. It's the fault of a massive system presenting us with options we shouldn't even be allowed to make. As expresses ethics researcher Matt Beard:

In the past, I've assumed the appropriate emotion to accompany making a good moral purchase is pride. Recently, I've started to feel like resentment is a more accurate — and more motivating — emotion (Beard, 2020).

Therein lies the power of the slogan. There is no ethical consumption under capitalism, so let us do as much as we can to improve upon the system itself. And while trying not to become trapped in that postmodernist malaise, let us understand that, as well as why, often, our best intentions may fall flat.

2.2 A few words on capitalism

I wanted to take the opportunity to clarify what exactly it is I'm advocating for, echoing Cloud's warning against lethargy. Indecisiveness only works to reinforce what is already there, and what is there is recognizably not great. In informing my critique of capitalism with Marxist theory, however, I am not trying to imply that we should switch to a Marxist regime. That would require a much more extensive research, which falls outside the purview of this investigation. Instead, here, I merely wish to point out that, verifiably, our current system, as it is, is not serving us well (Mattick, 2011).

Nonetheless, I am not so naive to think that one can simply and casually overthrow capitalism. It's not so simple. According to Marxist thought, capitalism has to fail in order to bring about the conditions to supplant it (Sowell, 1985). I'm sure that's bound to happen any day now. Except I'm writing this from the home I haven't left in about a year because of a pandemic to which millions of people the world over have literally or economically succumbed.

What I do wish to do, is clarify why I think capitalism, as a socio-economic system — well, *the* socio-economic system — has a place in this discussion. It is ubiquitous, and no longer locally contingent:

The old insistence that [capitalism] is integrated and internally governed at the national level is now being questioned. Its forms of organization are worldwide; it has organized the world (Andrews, 1982, p. 135).

Thus, it shapes everything we do; every time and everywhere. Indeed, according to Debord's paraphrasing of Hegel, "[t]ruth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it" (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 112). And, emphatically, the ethics we imbue in our designs, or, rather, the lack thereof, can certainly be traced back to capitalist priorities.

Indeed, according to Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer:

All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. ... The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce (Adorno and Horkheimer, [1947] 2002, p. 95).

This leads me to the final point I would like to make in this small interlude. I do not subscribe to this black and white position that everything produced under capitalism is "trash."⁴⁸ Unlike Adorno, I actually like jazz, and, in my opinion, plenty of powerful art has been produced under capitalism.

To summarize, I echo Hegel's notion that the unfolding of history is, in essence, a rational process; meaning that, at any time in history, society is based on a collection of principles (Hegel, [1837] 1975). And because there are always contradictions within those principles, tensions arise, eventually leading to a rupture in which society has to

⁴⁸ Adorno really, really hated jazz. He saw it as mass art which could never attain the status of what he considered to be serious music (Witkin, 2000).

reorganize according to new ones (Ibid). I believe we are a point of tension, in which what we want is simply not matching what is available. Thus, my goal is to describe that tension in the hopes that we can reorganize under new and better paradigmatic ethical principles.

2.3 An unyielding spectacle

As suggested, intent, unfortunately, is not all the matters; because it's not all there is. Persuasion and distraction still abound, clouding intent. Indeed, in his seminal book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord critiques a society which he saw as being ever more obsessed with images and appearances over reality, truth, and experience (Debord, [1967] 2004). Though it was published in 1967, it becomes even more relevant in an age of such pervasive media and digitalization.

Debord argued that capitalism had “produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival — but only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher level” (Ibid, p. 20). In short, the implication is that the technological advancements brought about within a capitalist context ensured that our basal survival needs were now being fulfilled with relative ease; and, faced with this, in its constant need to find new markets, the capitalist enterprise simply redefined what survival meant.

Debord thus argues that we are now in pursuit of what he called “augmented survival” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 22) in which we no longer merely want consumer goods but consider them a need — necessary to our (augmented) survival. What he is saying, though, is not that we should be content with just having food and shelter. Rather, he is suggesting that capitalism encourages us to perpetually and increasingly think about what else we need — and not just want, but *need* (Teurlings, 2017).

This, as Debord describes by drawing from the Marxist notion of alienation⁴⁹, contributes to dissociation from an array of human characteristics (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017). “[F]ree conscious activity is replaced by alienation; ... the social collective is replaced by individualism; social institutions are replaced by social solipsism” (Ibid, p. 21). Thus, if the ability for critical thought is being supplanted by a lack of reflection (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017), those that would be one’s genuine desires are being superseded by manufactured ones — the so-called state of “augmented survival” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 22).

He takes his critique of consumerism further still, following it with the notion that, at the time of writing, capitalism was experiencing “a general shift from having to appearing — all ‘having’ must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances” (Ibid, p. 11). Debord is thus arguing that our desire for those things we came to consider as necessities is not really born out of a genuine belief that they will perform better, and is instead predicated on the will to improve how we appear to others. So, in referencing a “society of the spectacle,” he is proposing that late capitalism⁵⁰ has encouraged us to become steadily more preoccupied with image and appearance above all. Form over function, if you will.

Unquestionably, we are glutted by image-based media everywhere we go, even when we do not wish to be. Advertising, for example, is often invasive and non-avoidable. It’s

⁴⁹ Within the Marxist tradition, the term ‘alienation’ describes the manner in which a person, entity, or collective becomes estranged, or detached — alienated (Bottomore, 1983). This might happen in three distinct ways. Namely, one can become alienated from one’s own product or process of production, from the environment in which one lives, and from other people, including one’s self (Ibid). This, according to Marx, happens as the direct result of a capitalist society, in which workers are no longer able to direct their own actions, define their own relationships to other people, or own the values, goods, or services produced by their own labor (Ibid).

⁵⁰ The term originated with Marxist scholars, starting Werner Sombart, but was popularized by Ernest Mandel, who used to describe the economic period elapsed between the end of World War II and the early 1970s, during which multinational companies, mass communication, and international finance all grew in popularity (Lowrey, 2017). Mandel thus hoped to warn against these pressures of increased automation and wage stagnation which, he feared, would have severe societal repercussions due to worker dissatisfaction (Ibid). Scholar Frederic Jameson then revitalized the concept by building on Mandel’s work, arguing that a globalized and post-industrial economy had made everything commodified and consumable (Ibid). From there, the concept evolved into its modern use and was revitalized in recent years; its contemporary use largely having grown to describe “a catchall for incidents that capture the tragicomic inanity and inequity of contemporary capitalism” (Ibid, para. 15). This recent surge in usage also seems to imply a general feeling that contemporary capitalism cannot continue as it is, especially as its problems become not only ever larger but also more apparent (Lowrey, 2017).

ubiquitous. Even if you pay the premium to cease being subjected to it in the media you consume, it still permeates the streets. There was even a startup with plans to advertise in the sky itself (Christian, 2019). The project leader in charge of this endeavor even described the commodification of the night sky as “the next logical step in advertising⁵¹” (Ibid, para. 2).

This may seem absurd, but it can actually serve as an example of the Marxist concept of reification, on which Debord draws for his critique of the spectacle. This notion of reification was originally developed by Marx to “analyze the social relations of production within capitalism. ... [It] describes a process whereby the social relations of capitalist labor grow out of human control and appear as things, governed by natural laws” (Gartman, 1986, p. 167). Expanding the concept into a cultural and political dimension, Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, argues that what is reproduced as part of a given culture is the reified social form of the capitalist economy (Gartman, 1986). In this way, Lukács’s description of reification implies a process of reduction, whereby human substantive attributes are converted into concretized and quantifiable properties for the purpose of dominance (Ibid). Indeed,

[t]he fetishism of the commodity⁵² - the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’ — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 17)

— much like advertising in the sky, both literally and figuratively.

For Debord, the “image is the final form of commodity reification” (Jameson, 1991, p. 124), to which philosopher Frederic Jameson adds this ought to be, specifically, the

⁵¹ As bizarre and depressing as it sounds, he is not wrong. Though there are still a number of obstacles preventing such a thing from happening now, it yet remains a plausible future (Matignon, 2021).

⁵² Commodity fetishism — itself a form of reification — is another Marxist concept whereby our conception of specific relationships, such as that between production and exchange, are perceived as social relationships between things, rather than between people (Gartman, 1986).

concept of the material image, or photographic reproduction (Jameson, 1991). Indeed, according to Debord, the spectacle is a “world view that has actually been materialised, a view of a world that has become objective” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 7) — like a photograph, which is continually reproduced. And as consumers relish in this society of the spectacle — one which is sustained by continual images of itself — these photographs, as material images, become a form of simulacra, described by Plato as “identical [copies] for which no original has ever existed” (Jameson, 1991, p. 17).

Appropriately enough, the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced (Ibid)

— a culture which permeates the society of the spectacle, as described by Debord.

To me, however, the most interesting aspect to this, as it relates to “the spectacle,” is that modern advertising, as well as often being based upon these material images, either moving or still, is largely predicated upon selling us products based on the effect they might have on our appearance — how much will they increase our social standing (Debord, [1967] 2004). Let us consider some examples.

Starting in 2006, and up until 2009, Apple ran their famous *Get a Mac* ad campaign. It featured a minimalist white background and two actors who introduced themselves as a Mac and a PC while acting out a small vignette (Filipowicz, 2020; see Fig 10). The campaign produced sixty-six individual ads in total and was a resounding success for Apple (Ibid). Indeed, it was so successful that I still remembered it over a decade later, even though it did not even air where I am from. Though the ads do offer some suggestions concerning why one might prefer to buy a Mac over a PC based solely on functionality, they hinge primarily on selling the public the idea that the kind of person who uses a Mac is more youthful and cool than the stuffy old PC user. And it worked. Not only was it a commercial success, but also instrumental in recasting Apple’s reputation with consumers (Ibid).



Fig 10:

A still from the *Viruses* ad, the first to appear on television in the US (Filipowicz, 2020). On the right is the actor Justin Long, portraying the Mac character garbed in casual clothing. On the left is humorist John Hodgman (who, interestingly, resembles Microsoft founder and Apple rival Bill Gates), suited up to portray the PC.

But the focus on appearance and images is not just confined to selling us products. Indeed, Politics itself is the primary domain for spectacle. There is a wealth of references to pull from as examples but none is perhaps more clear than the whole political career of one Donald Trump. As Douglas Kellner states:

Trump represents a stage of spectacle beyond Debord's model of spectacle and consumer capitalism in which spectacle has come to colonize politics, culture, and everyday life, with the chief manipulator of the spectacle in the United States, Donald J. Trump, now becoming president and collapsing politics into entertainment and spectacle (Kellner, 2017, p. 4).

To describe only a few instances that support this, let us think back to how Trump, first as candidate then as president, has pivoted how he presents himself. He went from projecting a personification of wealth and exuberance, to a champion of the working class, and, despite his multiple affairs, he has also managed to endear himself with the US's white, evangelical community (Kellner, 2017). In addition, Trump scarcely campaigned on policy, preferring instead to comment on the appearance of his opponents, often in the form of short nicknames such as Lying Ted, Tiny Marco,

Crooked Hillary, or Sleepy Joe. This was done to project a disparaging image of his opponents, while simultaneously casting him as strong and competent in direct comparison.

Yet another instance of the spectacle is the use of language. I have stated here on more than a single occasion that language matters; and it matters because of the spectacle. Language shapes the way we think of things. Indeed, there is a yearly award given by a German council of linguists and journalists founded upon exactly that idea, the *Unwort des Jahres*, which translates to the ugliest/worst word of the year. The award is given out with the intention of “[highlighting] how language can be used to denigrate democracy or human rights” (*The Local*, 2021, para. 4).

The most recent winners, in 2021, were *Corona-diktatur* (Corona-dictator) and *Rückführungspatenschaften* (repatriation sponsorships). The former has been used by anti-lockdown protesters to accuse Angela Merkel of using the pandemic to set up a dictatorship (*The Local*, 2021). The latter, though, I find more interesting. It is a phrase coined and employed by the European Commission to refer to occasions in which a member state assumes the responsibility of deporting someone whose asylum request has been denied by another state (Ibid). The use of the term “sponsorship,” however, is a blatant attempt at putting a positive spin on the practice of deportation, which was the reason cited by the jury as to why this word was selected. Interestingly, the 2017 awardee was the now-infamous “alternative facts,” uttered by none other than Trump aide Kellyanne Conway (Der Spiegel, 2018). The reason being that it was an obscuring and misleading expression which attempted to establish false claims as legitimate means of public discourse (Ibid). *That* is the spectacle.

A final, perhaps less obvious, example is one put forth by Judith Schwartz in an essay about the social responsibility of advertising (Schwartz, 2003). According to her, 60% of consumers believe that products which feature the American Cancer Society’s logo reduce their chance of contracting cancer. That would, after all, be a reasonable assumption to make. In reality, however, companies such as the American Heart

Association will allow the use of their logo for a single contribution of \$2,500 and an annuity of \$650 afterward (Ibid). They also include the chance to offer a given product an exclusivity contract which will keep their logo away from competitors (Ibid). In effect, what is being sold here is, both literally and figuratively, an image — the appearance of health benefits; a spectacle.

Schwartz goes even further in stating that, when the illusion is revealed, the spectacle might actively cause harm. Speaking specifically on, as she describes it, “cause-related marketing,” she argues that nonprofits’ credibility might be negatively affected if partnerships are not chosen with heed, and that companies only have an incentive to usurp visible cause with mass appeal (Ibid).

This, under the light of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, is entirely consistent. Indeed, only popular things will increase our social standing. He writes: “The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialised” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 7). He was adamant about the notion that the spectacle is, indeed, already diffused throughout society, and that we all participate in it and are, to some extent, responsible for sustaining it. Further, he asserts that “real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing and aligning itself with it” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 8).

So it’s not just advertisers, politicians, or corporations who have come to prioritize appearance over substance — it’s all of us, the public, as well. This may help explain why it is that we are, ostensibly, content with settling for the aesthetic of ethics. It is, perhaps, because we don’t actually personally need what we consume to perform better — both efficiently and morally — that we don’t quite mind that it doesn’t. That they appear to, is enough.

2.4 Design as spectacle

The word ‘spectacle’ originates from the Latin root *spectare*, meaning “to view, watch, behold” (Harper, n.d.). As such, it implies an intrinsic concern for an audience above the scenery itself. This definition, however, has evolved to encompass an ever-expanding display of media development. Recalling Debord’s work:

In the spectacle, a part of the world presents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very centre that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 16).

Here, the connection and a continual evolution towards the notion of ‘watching’ is clear. Further, it also implies the performance of spectacle, with which one must engage, as well as perform, precisely due to the cultivation of the so established “one-way relationship” (Ibid). The latter, ironically, is hence what unites the spectators because it actively forces them to participate and engage with that dynamic of a mutually isolating relationship. And it seems like there is no going back.

There is this idea in design, spawned from a metaphor introduced by scholar Beatrice Warde in an essay entitled *The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible* (Warde, 1956). In it, Warde contends that type design should be invisible, likening it to the preference for a clear vessel for holding wine — the Crystal Goblet. Warde’s advocacy for the transparency of the vessel stems from her belief that “the most important thing about printing is that it conveys thought, ideas, images, from one mind to other minds” (Ibid, p. 13), and, thus, focusing on the goblet would be a distraction. Thus, if the spectacle is an illusion — distraction from substance — the Crystal Goblet is meant as a lack of distraction — unobstructed substance.

I find this really interesting, especially in a contemporary context in which the infusion of design has become so ubiquitous in every aspect of society, yet largely remains

unnoticed. I am twenty-five years old and did not have a computer in the house until I was around ten. Today, however, not having one would be nearly impossible and it would actually be the lack of a computer which would be far more noticeable than its presence. Indeed, to quote an article that came out precisely around the time I was ten years old, “[w]e are entering the age of Ubiquitous Computing, and its most distinguished advantage is invisibility of computing,” which they define as “the invisibility of Human-computer Interaction, as people can focus their attention on the content instead of the tools they are using” (Wang et al., 2005, p. 231). Does that seem familiar?

The aforementioned concept of ‘affordance’ is also predicated upon this principle. Namely, that the user should immediately recognize and sense how the object may be used; that function should not be obscured by form. It’s as Steve Krug put it — “don’t make me think” (Krug, 2014). But the concept of affordances, as originally proposed by psychologist James Gibson, is described as what the environment offers the individual (Gibson, 1979). In other words, to see things is to perceive what they afford. Thus, the concept is, in fact, and above all else, predicated on the relationship between the objects and the user; or, to tie this back to the spectacle, between the scenery and the spectator. Furthermore, as design itself seems intent on becoming a Crystal Goblet, designers keep performing, and I mean it in both senses of the word, actions of so-christened ‘user-experience’ with the specific aim of engaging the audience through the spectacle.

So are these notions truly opposites — the Crystal Goblet, as transparency, and the spectacle, as distraction? If design is everywhere, and yet subtle enough for us to not perceive it for what it is, even as we engage it, is that unobstructed message or a distraction from its substance? I would argue that it is both. The message *is* distraction. That is the spectacle. In this way, design is often done in service of the spectacle. Indeed, it often *is* spectacle.

To understand design as such, I find it useful to begin with that which has been cataloged as propaganda — a term used to describe a form of communication intent on

influencing an audience with the primary objective of furthering an agenda (Taylor, 2003). Propaganda has, traditionally, been idealistic rather than realistic, and though it had, historically, been a neutral descriptive term, from the 20th century onward it became negatively associated with manipulative coercion techniques (Ibid).

These tactics are powerful and have won wars and minds (Ibid). The cataloging of those techniques can neutralize their effectiveness by making us aware of their existence. Nonetheless, we remain vulnerable to new ones even as we are able to recognize those past. The quintessential propaganda tool is the poster, most suitable because, at the time, it was easiest to mass-produce and thus the most able to reach a wide audience (Ibid). These posters understood the power of imagery and repetitive messaging in their attempts to seamlessly embed bias into the quotidian lives of the general public.

Indeed, the media phenomenon of, for example, 1930s Nazi propaganda is still widely held as a model for one of the most active uses of design as a tool for political engagement (Yourman, 1939). Designers began considering things such as accessibility and mass-production, and started to push beyond publishing literature⁵³. Hitler and Goebbels even founded The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, which was intended to effectively communicate Nazi messaging through art, music, theater, films, books, radio, educational materials, and the press (Ibid).

In fact, technological developments such as the introduction of sound and color in film only helped the Nazi regime with their propaganda, allowing them to more convincingly portray the ‘enemy’ as envisaged (Ibid). *The Eternal Jew*, for instance, is a virulently anti-semitic film which depicts Jews as a plague while juxtaposing them to footage of rats destroying and contaminating food (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940). At the same time, the Nazis also produced films like Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, aimed at

⁵³ It should be said, however, that the publication of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in 1926 still had an instrumental role in disseminating the ideas of National Socialism to the general public (Yourman, 1939).

projecting a grandiose image of themselves (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935), coupled with posters exerting the same aesthetic (see Fig 11)⁵⁴.



Fig 11:

The contrast between pro-Nazi and anti-Jewish propaganda. On the left is the poster for *Triumph of the Will* (1935), in the middle the poster for *The Eternal Jew* (1940), and on the right, above, is a still from *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and below one from *The Eternal Jew* (1940).

But the Germans were not the only ones resorting to political propaganda. Across the ocean, the United States was engaging in the exact same tactics⁵⁵ (and also were not alone). Another notable example is a Looney Tunes cartoon called *Tokio Jokio* which makes use of slurs and stereotypes depicting exaggerated accents, body language, and physical appearance regarding people of Japanese descent⁵⁶ (*Tokio Jokio*, 1942). And

⁵⁴ Much could also be said about Nazi architecture, especially of that designed by Albert Speer. The Nazi architectural style is very intimately related to Nazi ideology, which was corporeally expressed through metaphorical concretization (Espe, 1981). It was constructed to create an impression upon those who gazed upon it, with the inclusion of formal elements such as horizontality, symmetry, flat roofs, uniformity, and a lack of decor — all with the intention of imparting “an impression of simplicity, uniformity, monumentality, solidity and eternity” (Ibid, p. 36).

⁵⁵ As were, for example, the soviets in the USSR (Kenez, 1985) or, in my own country of Portugal, the Estado Novo fascist regime (Gori, 2018).

⁵⁶ It’s important to note the social and historical context in which such a cartoon came to be. At the time it was made, Japan was part of the Axis during World War II and, thus, enemies of the Allied forces, of which the US was a part. Especially after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 — a year before *Tokio Jokio* — this virulent anti-Japanese sentiment was rampant in American society, even culminating with the establishment of Japanese internment camps (Sheppard, 2001) — something that propaganda such as this film certainly had a hand in furthering (Ibid).

images such as these, unfortunately, still influence dominant ideology and visual culture (Behnken and Smithers, 2015).

A more contemporary notion of propaganda may be expanded into the realms of cyberspace (Pilarski, 2020), as well as advertising (Rutherford, 2017). Concerning the former, let us take the QAnon⁵⁷ conspiracy theory and its online proliferation as an illustrative example. Recently, a certain aesthetic has emerged, particularly on Instagram, associated with social justice-oriented posts (Nguyen, 2020; see Fig 12). This look, however, has also started to show up with seemingly innocuous posts associated with child trafficking. This wouldn't seem out of place to anyone unfamiliar with the QAnon tenets, but those aware would see this for what it is — a cooption of the familiar style as a recruitment tactic⁵⁸ (Haubursin, 2020; see Fig 12).

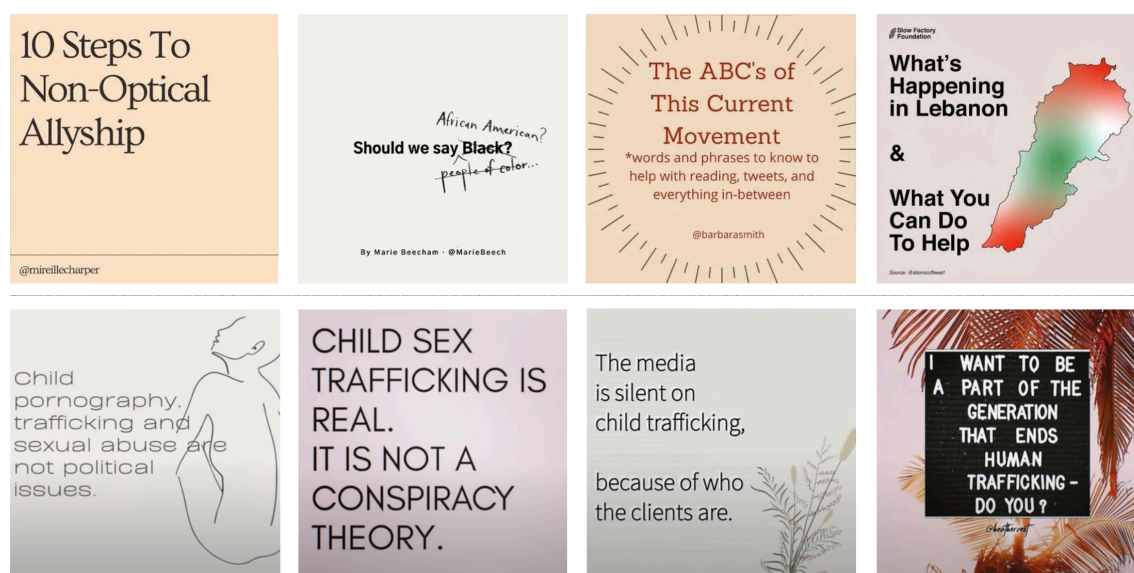


Fig 12:

Comparison between social justice Instagram posts (top row; Nguyen, 2020) and QAnon recruitment posts (bottom row; Haubursin, 2020).

Other examples might speak to the ways in which politics, social behavior, and the public's ethical concerns have become subject to the philosophy and tactics of

⁵⁷ QAnon is a thoroughly debunked far-right conspiracy theory formed in the US. Its members believe a cabal of cannibalistic Satan-worshipping pedophiles — many of whom prominent figures in the country's Democrat party — run a global child sex trafficking network and plotted against former President Donald Trump during and even after his presidency (Haubursin, 2020).

⁵⁸ This has been directly tied to a significant increase in Facebook groups branded as anti-child-trafficking, though, in actuality, these groups are predominantly QAnon communities (Haubursin, 2020).

marketing and advertising. These might include the aforementioned food labels with ethical claims (Southey, 2020), or Nike’s Colin Kaepernick ad (Nike, 2018) and Gillette’s masculinity ‘short film’ (Gillette, 2019).

All of these aim to persuade, not present a fair and transparent judgment, though their seamless integration into our daily lives often makes them hard to detect and accurately assess their intentions. And that is the point. Advertising, through the use of propaganda techniques (Rutherford, 2017), delivers its message through symbols that elicit emotions and prompt the desired action, but they must also meet the public’s wants; or, rather, their perceived wants, through augmented survival (Debord, [1967] 2004).

But for how much design can be a part of the spectacle — as a prompt in the service of distraction from substance — it can also be a call to action grounded in genuine urgency. Indeed, subsequent to the US government’s role in producing propaganda for wide distribution, private groups started employing the same tactics (Taylor, 2003). Notably, the Black Panther Party was founded in 1966, during the American civil rights era, on a self-preservationist necessity to revolt against police brutality inflicted upon African-Americans (Doss, 2001). One of its founders, Huey Newton, described the group’s symbol, a black panther as one which “doesn’t strike first, but if the aggressor strikes first, then he’ll attack” (*Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, 2015).

This symbolism was specifically meant to evoke a provoked force, fighting against systemic racism and empowering African-American communities⁵⁹ (Doss, 2001).

⁵⁹ A thing to note is the relationship between the Black Panther Party and gender equality. The group was founded before the apogee of the Women’s Liberation Movement and featured a lot of sexism, despite the many women who filled their ranks (Lumsden, 2009). This, however, changed significantly, and quite rapidly. In 1968, a number of their print outlets asked female members to “stand behind the black man” and “be supportive” (Ibid, p. 904). Only a year later, Fred Hampton, chairman of the Party’s Illinois chapter, held a meeting specifically to condemn sexism, which was deemed counter-revolutionary (Lumsden, 2009). The Black Panther newspaper, for instance, would henceforth depict women as the intelligent political revolutionaries they were, with prominent figures such as Angela Davis or Erika Huggins (Ibid). During the 1970s the Party also officially supported and endorsed reproductive rights such as contraceptives and abortion, and established a large childcare network and multiple community welfare programs concerning food distribution, education, and healthcare (Ibid). Huey Newton also publicly supported both the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement, acknowledging women and homosexuals as oppressed groups who also shared the common goal of fighting back against police brutality (Leighton, 2019). In this way, we can see that the Panther symbol did not reflect a narrow vision of man; rather, it championed the oppressed, and fought specifically for black equality, in all it entails — gender, sexual and economic liberation.

Members also used posters to spread their message and emphasize their voice, and often sported flags with their logo (Ibid; see Fig 13). The way they dressed was also significant in supporting their message. The use of black, leather, and natural hairstyles was a performance of cultural pride, which sent a political message while also allowing non-affiliated supporters to engage with the movement by adorning their aesthetic (Vargas, 2009).



Fig 13: The Black Panthers marching in protest of the trial of the party’s co-founder Huey Newton in Oakland, CA, 1968 (Bettmann/Getty Images). Note how they march with flags in a unified block and similar fashion, which combine into an intimidating display of force and pride.

After the civil rights era, more artist communities wanted to engage with the discourse surrounding equality and social responsibility. In 1977, Jenny Holzer authored a project which compiled a series of provocative maxims, which she dubbed *Truisms* (1977). She “typeset the sentences in alphabetical order and printed them inexpensively, using commercial printing processes. She then distributed the sheets at random and pasted them up as posters around the city” (Bee, Heliczer and McFadden, 2014, p. 283). This strategy was so successful in spreading the phrases throughout the globe that her *Truisms* eventually reappeared as a variety of formats, such as T-shirts and baseball caps (Ibid, see Fig 14).

Directly following Holzer's interventions, ACT UP, was formed in 1987 and began collecting artists around New York City to create public works to protest the lack of institutional action towards ending the AIDS pandemic (Kerr, 2017). The now-iconic *Silence = Death* poster was designed that same year by Jason Baumann, who described it thusly:

In essence and intention, the political poster is a public thing. It comes to life in the public sphere, and is academic outside of it. [The poster] is a product of collective world-making, the sort of collectivity which moves every one of us, as individuals and as a culture, and which is transformative⁶⁰ (Baumann, 2013, para. 2; see Fig 14).

Baumann also adds that ACT UP members understood that, whenever New Yorkers need to talk to each other, “there is always the street” (2013, para. 9), which is why they chose to produce a poster, describing the street poster as “declarative, provocative, and meant to stimulate inquiry” (2013, para. 15).



Fig 14:

The photograph on the left depicts the installation of *Truisms* in a street in Seattle, WA (Tate, n.d.). In the middle, Lady Pink, a New York graffiti artist and of Holzer's contributors, sports a shirt with one of her maxims (Ibid). On the right is ACT UP's *Silence = Death* poster (Baumann, 2013).

In our contemporary societies, however, the spectacle seems to reign. Indeed, as discussed above, its frequent use by corporations, institutions, and politicians who abuse its and their power attenuates the urgency of the unveiled real. When the spectacle repeats itself; when it stands beside other images on streets, billboards, screens, and

⁶⁰ This, of course, is dependent upon its intentions. In the individualistic society that Debord describes, the poster may, as part of the spectacle, be a way of advancing a particular message, in service of an illusory and distractive cause, as described. Such a poster, however, would not be a political one.

publications, to use an economic term, it saturates the market. All those sensory stimuli cumulate a sensory overload which desensitizes the audience.

Thus, an awareness of the spectacle may be used to spark discourse on diluted yet urgent topics, and designers have the privilege of leading these efforts. This is especially salient in such fields as marketing, advertising, or mass media. Indeed, as the advent of the internet expanded wider accessibility, the art and design purviews also shifted towards this new medium of digital media. And what it offered was an equalized agency over the distribution of information between performers and public alike, something that grassroots groups such as the Black Panthers and ACT UP have been striving towards for decades.

But again, this medium is highly vulnerable to cooption, as QAnoners are acutely aware. Indeed, we can observe this mimicry of the grassroots aesthetic and speech with the intentional point of seeming alike — of camouflaging their message. We even have Twitter bots now engaging with the spectacle by tweeting memes and appropriating grassroots language in an effort to facilitate a political objective (Cook et al., 2014). Indeed, scholar Misha Kavka warns us of exactly that. As she argues, through mediated intimacy, we have become threatened by this newfound ability to bridge a once-solid gap between spectacle and experience — staged event and actuality (Kavka, 2012). And while she spoke in the context of Reality TV as a genre, she points to a more general globalized media culture, proposing that the public no longer recognizes the external, or the physical world, as real (Ibid).

And here, Baudrillard's critique of hyperreality becomes especially prescient, having defined the term as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). In other words, hyperreality describes a symbol or representation lacking an origin to simulate.

Baudrillard goes even further in his critique of hyperreality, highlighting the blurred line it creates between reality and simulacra as dangerous (Baudrillard, 1994). Accordingly,

as designed realities and interfaces continue to establish themselves in the relationship between people and their surroundings, it becomes crucial to recognize the responsibility of not only being the one designing them, as I have argued before, but also of contributing to an accrument of symbols which, in effect, create and thus shape reality.

As designers, occupying a space in contemporary visual culture necessitates that one work directly within the medium of spectacle, thus making one responsible for the cultural space in which one operates and holds sway. This, in an environment in which — to give but a few examples — commodity racism⁶¹ still permeates package design and advertising (McClintock, 1995; see Fig 15), bathrooms are specifically and unnecessarily designed to be gendered (Castricum, 2018), for-profit prisons' business models are designed around propagating recidivism (Spivak and Sharp, 2008) and the fact that people knowingly, and even willingly, support unethical organizations (Micheletti, 2003) grants particular importance to the question of how can one design with social responsibility. Especially when real and deeply rooted problems such as these aren't always evident, and largely masked by the spectacle.



Fig 15:

Some examples of commodity racism. It's worth noting that some of these brands have changed their names and/or overall image, such as Aunt Jemima (now Pearl Milling Company), Uncle Ben's (now Ben's Original), Eskimo Pie (now Edy's Pie), and Land O' Lakes (Anthony, 2020).

⁶¹ 'Commodity racism' is a term coined by Anne McClintock which describes an embedded agenda of racism in the signs and symbols used in commodities (McClintock, 1995; see Fig 15).

Samuel Weber wrote:

In order for something to be a spectacle, it must, first of all, take place — which is to say, it must be localizable. Whether inside, in a theater (of whatever kind, including our own mind), or outside, in the open, a spectacle must be placed in order to be seen (Weber, 2002, p. 18).

So if to design is to place in the world, then designers are the ultimate stage directors, and with that power come responsibilities. I have argued earlier that designers should not be the only ones to assume any responsibility, and I stand by that. Notwithstanding, the responsibility to educate oneself and to be aware of the symbols one makes use of, and the context in which they are being used, is one's own. I pose this question as much to you as myself: are we spending enough time thinking about and researching what things mean in their historical context? My honest answer is, regrettably, no, not always. It comes, however, with a sincere commitment to do so every time, and more comprehensively — and what a rich past we have to draw from.

2.5 On Sonic, Alegria and *détournement*

Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* was not simply a descriptive work; it was also a manifesto (Teurlings, 2017). Debord sought to encourage us to not just recognize the spectacle, and how society had, ostensibly, fallen under its spell, but also to attempt to subvert it. He was, in fact, part of a group of social revolutionaries called the Situationist International (henceforth referred to as SI), whose aim was to offer a modern and comprehensive critique of mid-20th century advanced capitalism⁶² (Plant, 1992).

The spectacle was a central aspect of the situationist theory (Ibid). As discussed, this is the idea that the history of social life may be understood as the decline of being into

⁶² In political philosophy, with special focus on the Frankfurt School of critical theory, the term 'advanced capitalism' is used in a social context in which a capitalist model has been so thoroughly consolidated and developed due to its sustainment for an extended period of time (Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt and Kriesi, 2015).

having, and of having into merely appearing; at which point commodity completes its colonization of social life (Debord, [1967] 2004). Indeed, in the founding manifesto of the SI, Debord describes the established culture as a sort of rigged game, in which conservative powers halt subversive thought from accessing public discourse (Debord, 1957). He explains that such thoughts are first trivialized, and thus rendered sterile, so that they may safely be incorporated back into mainstream society, where they can be exploited (Ibid). Though first mentioned by the SI, this process came to be referred to in political theory as recuperation. Its counter-technique, however, is what the SI and Debord described as *détournement*⁶³ (Debord and Wolman, 1956).

French for rerouting/hijacking, *détournement* is, briefly put, the practice of subverting the images produced under capitalism, thereby turning them against it. It is, as Debord states, “the flexible language of anti-ideology,” and, because of that, “[it] has grounded its cause on nothing but its own truth as present critique” (Debord, [1967] 2004, p. 114). The SI’s advocacy of this technique was based on the assertion that, due to advancements in the domain of their production, all known means of expression will converge in a general movement of propaganda, through spectacle, which necessarily encompasses all the perpetually interacting aspects of social reality (Debord and Wolman, 1956). This translates into the belief that the culture itself was in a state of contestation and that, through *détournement*, the creation of new expressions and meanings out of pre-existing works and objects was a radical and preferable means of generating disruption.

In *A User’s Guide to Détournement*, the situationists argue that the technique has a double purpose. It must, at the same time, both negate the ideological conditions of artistic production — namely, the fact that all artworks are, ultimately, commodities —

⁶³ This technique was developed first by the Letterist International, of which Debord was a founding member. The group later went on to form the Situationist International, among others.

and negate this negation by producing something that is politically edifying (Ibid). A quintessential example of this is the punk⁶⁴ movement and its accompanying aesthetic. Punk's purposely provocative style is not inane; it's an ambitious attempt to signal gestures of rebellion (Nault, 2018). "In the best of circumstances, punk aims to be a wakeup call to a public otherwise anesthetized by the suffocating conformity of daily existence" (Ibid, p. 18). Indeed, the political roots of the punk movement can be traced directly to the SI (Nault, 2018).

The punk value system prioritizes non-conformity and individual freedom, as well as opposition to authority and capitalism (Ibid); and the punk aesthetic does not stray from these values. Punk products were intentionally fashioned to be mostly inaccessible to a mainstream audience (Ibid). This was accomplished, for example, by deliberate incoherence, a DIY⁶⁵ ethos, or the use of wittingly disturbing graphic imagery of a violent or sexual nature (Ibid). It is, thus, by limiting its commercial viability that the punk aesthetic serves to undercut the capitalist imperative of profitable work and consumption (Ibid).

"[A]rguably punk's most important artist" (Bird, 2011, para. 15), Jamie Reid is most well known for helming the art direction for the iconic punk band the Sex Pistols — so named to evoke the aforementioned sex and violence cornerstone of the punk aesthetic. Reid, as a figurehead of the punk movement, also drew heavily from the situationist philosophy, and *détournement* is very prominent throughout his work (Rogers, 2006; see Fig 16).

⁶⁴ Interestingly, despite how influential their work was on the movement, Debord and the Situationists disliked the punks. Beyond not enjoying the "noise," they felt the punks were also too focused on the individual, and not enough on the collective (Marcus, 1989) — a core pillar of the situationist critique of the spectacle, as mentioned earlier (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017). In so doing, however, the situationists critiqued the punks for not engaging in concerted collective efforts to actually erode capitalism, accusing them of a shallow kind of opposition, which they argued could be easily commodified (Marcus, 1989).

⁶⁵ DIY stands for Do-It-Yourself and, accordingly, describes a method of building, modifying, or repairing things without the direct aid of experts or professionals.



Fig 16:

Examples of *détournement*'s influence on Jamie Reid's work (Rogers, 2006). From left to right: *Anarchy Flag* (1976), Alternative "God Save the Queen" artwork (1977), and "Holidays in the Sun" single cover (1977).

In *Anarchy Flag*, we see a ripped and burnt Union flag, reassembled with safety pins. Upon the reconstructed flag also lie, affixed with clips, the band's logo and the name of the single the artwork was intended to accompany. The use of a flag, a national symbol of pride, was meant to deconstruct — quite literally — what that pride meant. By destroying that symbol, Reid intended to transform its original meaning into one of dissatisfaction and pent-up rage at the status quo (Ibid; see Fig 16). The band logo itself is also interesting, in that it evokes the imagery of a torn ransom note, again alluding to the violence and a DIY aesthetic characteristic of the punk movement.

The artwork for the "God Save the Queen" single was an appropriation of an official portrait of a smiling Queen Elizabeth, taken by Cecil Beaton. The single itself was intended to coincide with the Silver Jubilee of the queen. The cover art had many variations, but the original featured the queen's portrait upon an image of the flag, her eyes and mouth covered by the band's logo and song title (see Fig 16). Another version depicted the queen's image with a safety pin across her lips alongside a lyric from the single written in what appeared to be marker: "God save the queen she ain't no human being" (Rogers, 2006). Another still depicted the same image but the queen's eyes were replaced with swastikas. According to Reid himself:

The flag poster was another adaptation of the idea already used in the 'Anarchy' campaign: that there was another England not mentioned in the worldwide media coverage of the Jubilee jamboree (Reid and Savage, 1987, p. 65).

The “Holiday in the Sun” cover art, perhaps my favorite of these examples, was a direct reference to the poster work of the SI (Rogers, 2006). Reid used an actual Belgian Travel Service brochure, which depicted tourists engaging in all sorts of fun, leisurely activities, as a template to build on top of. He replaced the content of the original speech bubbles with lyrics from the single, which made reference to a Nazi concentration camp, the Berlin Wall, and Communism, culminating with the cry “a cheap holiday in other people’s misery” (Ibid; see Fig 16). This last verse was itself a reference to a situationist graffiti reading “Club Med — A Holiday in Other People’s Misery” (Ibid).

All three of these examples aptly illustrate the practice of *détournement*, especially in how it uses known visual and textual references to make a political statement. Indeed, the punk movement was so successful that it can be directly traced to a resurgence of the feminist movement. The ‘second wave’ of feminism, which began around the same time, in the 1970s, was very inspired by the punk movement, and their marriage spawned such subcultural phenomena as the Riot Grrrl movement (Genchi, 2017). The latter, is itself tied directly to the ‘third wave’ of feminism, a key figure of which was Kathleen Hannah — former singer and guitarist of the Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill (Ibid).

We can see, then, that *détournement* can, and indeed has been linked with important cultural revolutions. *Détournement* is rebellious. It is using the pink triangle as a symbol of resistance to HIV/AIDS⁶⁶; it is black pride in a nation built upon anti-black racism, and it is a Sonic the Hedgehog meme about ethical consumption under capitalism.

I posited that the slogan espoused in the latter image was a powerful one, as was the ACT-UP poster and the Black Panthers’ aesthetic. Under the lens of *détournement*, particularly as a tactic of counter-cultural intervention, we might begin to understand why. Indeed, these images all caused shifts in meaning by simultaneously generating

⁶⁶ The pink triangle was used to mark those deemed sexual deviants by the Nazis in internment camps. Such prisoners included gay and bisexual men, as well as transgender women. Lesbian and bisexual women were not systematically imprisoned in the same way, mostly because women’s sexuality was not considered at all. Those that were, however, were classified as ‘asocial’ and made to wear a black triangle (Plant, 1986).

both the recreation and the negation of previously held signs and significations to make important political points. They were culturally significant because people understood the language in which they were communicating, and thus understood the points they were making much more effectively.

To end this section on a personal note, perhaps my favorite contemporary example of this technique is an illustration done in the art style Alegria as a parody of Goya's famous *Saturn Devouring His Son* painting (see Fig 17). If you haven't heard of Alegria, you have certainly seen it. It has become ubiquitous, especially in tech branding. It is an upbeat Matisse-esque style of illustration which depicts people with non-skin-colored skin and wacky proportions doing fun things. You know the one. It's everywhere — from Facebook to Slack to Airbnb.



Fig 17:

On the left is Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, (1820-1823; Museo del Prado), and on the right is the parody *Saturn Devouring His Son* (2021; Know Your Meme), done in the art style Alegria.

These amorphous and unrealistically colored characters are so because, in representing no one, they can represent everyone. This is especially useful to corporations trying to have mass appeal. They are ethnically non-specific to represent a vague promise of diversity and, to avoid privileging any body type over another, they have an impossible one. They are designed to convey expressiveness — Alegria being Spanish for joy —

rather than individual identity or any actual commitment, and have, in that way, become a symbol of the cynicism surrounding corporate consumption.

I find the dissonance between the typical cheerful depictions done in this style and the gruesome imagery of the Goya painting amusing, to be sure; however, if I'm allowed some prose about such a seemingly simple illustration, the core reason why I personally enjoy it goes deeper than that.

Saturn Devouring His Son depicts the Greco-roman myth of Saturn and Jupiter (or Kronos and Zeus, if you're more familiar with the greek version). It had been prophesied to Saturn that one of his sons would dethrone him, so, naturally, fearing that he would be overthrown, he ate each one upon their birth. Jupiter, nonetheless, survived, and later did indeed dethrone the titan. I find this context really interesting in regard to the parody, especially when considering it as *détournement*.

The symbolism of Saturn being defeated by one of his own progeny is paralleled by the technique itself, in being the result of capitalist-bred imagery being used as an act against capitalism. Furthermore, Goya himself was grappling with the concept of power at the time of painting. Namely, about how power treats its own in order to remain in power (Harris and Zucker, 2015), which, I find, makes his depiction of Saturn's act a particularly apt one. Look at the desperation in Saturn's bulging eyes. This is an act of desperate self-preservation. When you look into the eyes of the illustrated figure on the right, however, all you see is indifference. This is not a desperate act of self-preservation; it's a midnight snack. And that is, in my opinion, seen under the light of a transgressive act of *détournement*, this work's most searing and powerful critique — that the capitalist enterprise is just as cruel, while remaining indifferent to human suffering. It reminds us, or at least me, that ethics is as urgent as it is political.

2.6 Design is political, and so is ethics

The political dimension of design is not limited to the macro-politics of state sovereignty. It doesn't deal only with propaganda or political parties; rather, there are a number of other, more philosophical and analytical implications involved in the political aspects of design. Namely, how meaning is conceived and understood, and what difference our conceptions, knowledges, and choices make — in essence, semiotics and accessibility. There is also an accompanying and inherent concern with futurity which will be covered in the next chapter.

All design is political, and profoundly so. Every instance of design, as design theorist and philosopher Tony Fry argues, “either serves or subverts the status quo” (Fry, 2007, p. 88). Further still, as states Keshavarz:

We live within political systems that have an increasing interest in facilitating as well as regulating and controlling the movement of things and bodies. To a great degree, these practices of facilitation and regulation are organised and managed through a set of material artefacts, sites and spaces. While the politics of movement might be considered only as a matter of politics, [this] is also a matter of design. The politics of movement is performed through materialised things and relations; artefacts that are not only made but are also designed to communicate as well as excommunicate certain meanings, functions, actions, possibilities and practices (Keshavarz, 2016, p. 13).

He maintains, thus, an understanding of both design and politics as not separate, but as “nexus” — as “design-politics⁶⁷” (Keshavarz, 2016, p. 93). This, he argues, despite the distinct manner in which they deal with their conditions, is because both constitute material formulations which “configure possibilities of acting in a given situation” (Ibid). They are inextricable. And this, as Keshavarz argues, should thereby place the focus not on how they behave as distinct fields of knowledge and practice, but on what

⁶⁷ Keshavarz describes his understanding of design-politics as similar to Foucault's power-knowledge binomial, describing it as the origin of the term “nexus” to describe the concept (Keshavarz, 2016). Thus, according to him, delineating a design-politics is a way of both embodying and describing the numerous ways in which politics and design have historically and materially upheld and strengthened one another (Ibid).

and how, in tandem, design-politics “produces, performs and generates” — as well as on the heft of this political role (Keshavarz, 2016, p. 76).

In this way, design is powerful, and I mean that literally. Indeed, as scholar Sanford Kwinter posits, the Foucauldian notion that power controls bodies⁶⁸ has been evolving to be more indirect (Kwinter, 2001). Now, Kwinter argues, that power is increasingly exerted mainly through the interfaces, specifically through architecture and design (Ibid). As states:

As design practice and thought are deflected away from the traditional and largely ‘aesthetically’ constituted object and simultaneously reoriented toward a dynamic macro- and microscopic field of interaction, an entirely new field of relations opens itself to the designer, theorist, or artist (Ibid, p. 21).

In this way, design carries a lot of cultural sway, in both its subtlety and its overtness. Thus, it cannot be divorced from the values and principles upon which an artifact was created. Some ideology must be presumed because it was always there, no matter how unintentional. Indeed, it is often difficult to assess how much visual communication and ideology are related, as the latter permeates every aspect of our reality (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 21).

Thus, as the impact of visual communication has been steadily and rapidly increasing through technological development — and with no signs of stopping — it is imperative to consider the ethics they are predicated upon, as has been argued. Ethical decision-making frameworks such as the aforementioned value, consequentialist, and duty, all ask questions with deeply political implications. Queries such as what values should

⁶⁸ Throughout his work, Foucault dwells a lot on the ways in which external power structures produce subjects; that is, in how regimes of social control exert power over — and thus control — bodies (Gutting, 2005). In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, he describes how disciplinary techniques produce “docile bodies” in order to make them more compliant and productive (Ibid). In *History of Sexuality*, which immediately followed the latter, Foucault introduced the concept of ‘biopower,’ which seizes the moderns forms of power aimed at living beings by holding them subject to standards of not just sexual but also biological normality (Ibid). Through these works, one can subsume the larger issue of individual agency. Not only is there an exerted control enacted through other people’s knowledge of individuals, but also one exercised in an individual’s knowledge of themselves, through these power relations dictated by hegemonic sociocultural institutions (Ibid).

things embody, whether they are increasing the amount of good, or whether they are complying with their duties are all dependent upon what ideology one subscribes to. And answering those questions is as much about what one chooses to prioritize as what one chooses to neglect.

Indeed, mainstream discourse is and has been dominated by Anglo- and Eurocentric epistemologies. This affects our ways of seeing and knowing the world, which, in turn, affects how we act in it. In particular, the discourse pertaining to design is heavily eschewed in favor of Western perspectives, thus neglecting alternative and marginalized discourses as a direct consequence.

Within the current landscape of design academia, non-Western epistemologies and practices have not been taken seriously, and this has a history going all the way back to the need to develop design methods as a reaction to what was seen as craft-based design — incidentally associated with pre-industrial, non-European cultures. Dichotomies like this one persist to this day, where the legitimacy of relying on texts that do not fall within the Western canon is constantly questioned (Ansari, 2018).

This reflects the limitations within the design infrastructure, and ultimately influences not just which design is studied and practiced, but which institutions and broader socio-political systems in which design operates are seen as legitimate — and thus which ones to emulate and aspire to.

In this regard, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight as examples of working to overthrow this paradigm two groups whose work I admire. The Design Justice Network is in international collective intent on centering epistemologies which are most often marginalized by design. They recognize that “[d]esign mediates so much of our realities and has tremendous impact on our lives, yet ... the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made” (Design Justice Network, 2018). In response to that, the Design Justice Network works to challenge the ways in which design decisions can

harm those who are most vulnerable to these systems of power by rethinking design processes through the lens of those who are typically alienated from it.

Another group with similar aspirations, Decolonising Design is an editorial platform and research group, as well as one of the few great resources on the process of the decolonization of design. Decolonization itself is a process aimed at opposing the Eurocentrism so prevalent in mainstream epistemologies by working towards the “liberation of mind over time” (Fry, 2018, p. 2). Thus, the Decolonising Design group is acting towards “the radical transfiguration of these structures” in order to “transform the very terms of present day design studies and research” (Decolonising Design, 2016, para. 6).

Fry describes Eurocentrism as “the universalization of the Western mind” (Fry, 2018, p. 4). But universality is a lie, which makes Eurocentrism an inadequate epistemology. Things have different meanings dependent on their historical and cultural contexts. Something intended to be amusing in one context can incite violent protests in another. Communication is predicated on the assumption that people will understand our message because we employ supposedly universal or objective language; and because we understand what we mean, others will understand the same (Pater, 2016). These assumptions, however, are fallacious, and to illustrate this, let me tell you about two famous people.

In a visit to Peru in 2007, American actress Cameron Diaz was seen sporting a green shoulder bag with a red star and some symbols (Ibid). Seems innocent enough, right? Well, those symbols were actually Mao’s personal slogan, “Serve the People,” written in Mandarin Chinese. This is particularly awkward when considering that in Peru, the slogan evokes memories of when the Maoist Shining Path insurgency fought the government in the 1980s and early 1990s in a conflict which left nearly seventy-thousand people dead (Ibid). Diaz profusely apologized when made aware of the blunder, but the damage was already done.

Some years later, in 2015, Taylor Swift announced a new album and world tour entitled *T.S. 1989* — her initials and date of birth. A marketing campaign was promptly launched with accompanying merchandise sporting the spray-painted logo for the event. Being a world tour, though, Swift would eventually play in China, where “T.S. 1989” would likely be interpreted as Tiananmen Square, 1989 (Ibid). This was a year of violent student protests in Beijing, resulting in a massacre and subsequent censorship by Chinese media (Ibid). When the tour arrived in China, the title had been altered and all instances of the logo swiftly (pun intended) removed from the Chinese online store (Ibid).

I’m sure neither had ill intentions and were sincerely sorry for the insensitivity they displayed, but the point is, precisely, that they were ignorant. And I do not wish to pin the blame solely on these two women or their teams, either. All of us are complicit in perpetuating our Eurocentric bias, which is why we need to make the effort to understand as best as possible the historical and cultural context of the resources we use. They are symbols themselves and, likewise, carry meaning.

Another example of this is a project collated by Loraine Furter, a graphic designer, and researcher. *Badass Libre Fonts by Womxn* is exactly what it sounds like. Namely, a collection of fonts which “aims at giving visibility to libre fonts drawn by womxn designers, who are often underrepresented in the traditionally conservative field of typography” (*Badass Libre Fonts by Womxn*, 2018, Colophon para. 1). Thus, this collection rises above a mere aggregate and becomes a statement unto itself. Typography, even within the realm of design, is a particularly male-dominated area. This is likely due to type design’s roots in the historically male-dominated domain of printing (Hagmann, 2005), but the fact remains — the practice has a significant gender disparity today. I bring this up to illustrate what deliberately using fonts designed by women means in contrast to this historical and cultural context. It’s not a neutral act.

Choices such as these matter precisely because they are meaningful — in that they are impactful and also carry and thus communicate meaning. Symbolically portraying a

value system communicates that one places value on that system. In order for this to matter, however, it cannot be devoid of the accompanying substance. Ethics, and by extension design, matter because when you choose to do something, you are also choosing not to do something. And applied to people, when choosing who to include, one is also choosing who to leave out. In this way, semiotics can also include, as well as exclude.

And thus, accessibility is essential to consider in order to design and produce resources and tools which do not exclude people. The mere fact that you are reading this sentence means you are part of the 86% of the world population who can read (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). That, however, still means that 14% cannot. That is still over one billion people, and they should not be excluded from participation in design and communication. As an example, I will turn to Mexico. During the 1920s, a little under two-thirds of the population was illiterate (UNESCO, 2005, p. 192), and largely unaware of their own history (Pater, 2016). Following a civil war in 1920, a new government was elected which commissioned famous Mexican painter Diego Rivera to paint the country's history in a series of murals to be displayed in the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City (Ibid). This way, Mexico's history became accessible to those who were illiterate as well as to those who were not.

Today, though, murals such as these have largely been replaced with the internet and other digital media. Indeed, as the inventor of the world wide web himself asserts:

The Web is fundamentally designed to work for all people, whatever their hardware, software, language, location, or ability. When the Web meets this goal, it is accessible to people with a diverse range of hearing, movement, sight, and cognitive ability (Berners-Lee, 2018, para. 1).

The key words here are “When the web meets this goal” because indeed, it often does not. The World Wide Web Consortium, or W3C, founded by Berners-Lee, published a number of guidelines for web content accessibility (W3C, 2018), yet we seldom comply

with it — “[t]wenty years into its development, the web is still fairly inaccessible to people who have physical disabilities” (Ganci and Ribeiro, 2017, p. 102). The Brutalist Website trend, for example, though it has several advantages such as reduced bandwidth or hierarchical subversion, it does also have a significantly reduced usability, which affects a number of users who might have dyslexia or similar processing disorders (Ibid). To be clear, I’m not saying we should abolish the Brutalist aesthetic, I like it too. What I am saying is that impaired usability cannot be the only alternative on offer. And I’m not the only one.

In 1999, an Australian citizen called Bruce Lindsay Maguire made a complaint to the human rights and equal opportunity commission, alleging that the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games had violated the country’s Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 by discriminating against him as a disabled individual (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2000). This, according to Maguire, had happened trifold: failing to provide braille copies of the information required to order Olympic Games tickets, failing to provide braille copies of the Olympic Games souvenir program, and failing to provide a website which was accessible to him (Ibid). The case was eventually resolved and the commission found that the Sydney Olympic Committee had indeed engaged in unlawful discrimination⁶⁹. As a result of this landmark case, Australian governments have decided to adopt the W3C Guidelines, with the Commonwealth Government requiring all agency websites to pass accessibility tests.

The way things are designed matters. Even designed environments and technologies hold significant sway. Take, as an example, scholar Sasha Costanza-Chock’s account of their experience with airport security. Costanza-Chock, who describes themselves as a “nonbinary, transgender, femme presenting person” (Costanza-Chock, 2018. p. 1) recounts the wait in line for the security check as something stressful and anxiety-inducing. This, they argue, is because they were certain that, come their turn, they would be subjected to an “embarrassing, uncomfortable, and perhaps even humiliating

⁶⁹ They were ordered to render the website accessible, which included having alt text on all images and image map links on its website, providing access to the Index of Sports from the Schedule page, and providing access to the Results Tables to be used on the website during the Sydney Olympic Games (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2000).

search by a TSA officer, after [their] body is flagged as anomalous by the millimeter wave scanner⁷⁰” (Costanza-Chock, 2018, p. 2). And indeed, the screen attached to the scanner did light up in their chest and groin areas, signifying an “anomaly” which would require the dreaded body search (Costanza-Chock, 2018; see Fig 18).

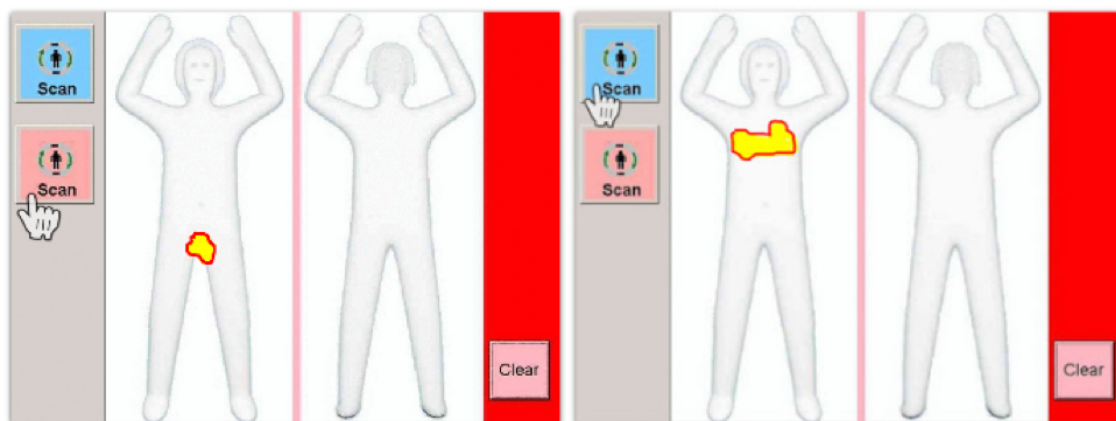


Fig 18:

The millimeter wave scanner’s binary interface. Highlighted are the “anomalies” detected by the scanner (Costello, 2016).

This, they explain, was inevitable, given the kind of environment and epistemological assumptions which permeate every step of the design processes which bred both the scanner itself and all the infrastructure behind the airport security system. Namely, a hegemonic gender normativity which only supports cisgender configurations was never questioned and, hence, was also embodied by the scanner and the security agents’ socialization and training, which also, and inevitably, shaped their conduct and experience (Costello, 2016). And this is reinforced at every step of the way, from the user interface design, to the scanning technology itself, to binarized data itemizations concerning gendered body shapes and risk detection algorithms (Ibid).

An airport security officer would thus be prompted to select either male or female on the scanner’s interface, and any body which deviates from the statistical norms of cisgender bodies would be flagged as anomalous by a risk detection algorithm also based on cishnormative data sets, themselves labeled and classified by people who

⁷⁰ Millimeter wave scanners are the most common type of technology used for body imaging and are thus deployed in a vast number of airports. The equipment in question is a full-body imaging device — a scanner — which makes use of electromagnetic radiation in order to identify things that might be hidden underneath a person’s clothes (Transportation Security Administration, 2009; see Fig 18).

operate on those same assumptions (Costanza-Chock, 2018). After this, the typical protocol is for an agent of the same gender to conduct the aforementioned body search, which, again poses the same problem.

Everything — from the datasets, to the AI models for risk assessment⁷¹, to the user interface, to the airport security infrastructure — is designed to reinforce and categorize according to binary and cisnormative bodily configurations. Any deviation from that norm is deemed a security risk, and the real people this affects — largely queer, trans, intersex, or gender nonconforming — are, in this way, regularly subjected to an increased amount of harm (Ibid; Costello, 2016).

Furthermore, People of Color and People with Disabilities are particularly vulnerable to such systematic bias, and are often at a higher risk of harm from a system so designed (Crenshaw, 1989) — one created under a hegemonic set of norms, values, and assumptions which are imbued therein and subsequently reproduced and unchallenged.

Design is not neutral, and it is so because the belief systems therein imbued are not either — our belief systems. “Artifacts have politics” (Winner, 1980, p. 1). That, however, does not mean that designers necessarily recognize themselves as political agents, or even that they recognize the political urgency of design (Fry, 2007). John Maeda once said that “[g]ood design is about clarity over style, and accountability over ego” (Maeda, 2014). In this context, I feel these words gain even more weight. To ignore this is hubris at best and negligence at worst; from all actors in the design chain, from the commissioner to the consumer. And because designers have such an influential role in society and culture, in order for “[them] to become real agents of political change it is vital that the problems be fully understood and proposed actions have actual transformative capability” (Fry, 2007, p. 88).

⁷¹ As discussed earlier, seemingly objective automated systems are not neutral. The Algorithmic Justice League collective has produced an expanding body of work documenting the ways in which AI and Machine Learning technologies are intersectionally biased (Algorithmic Justice League, 2016). For more on the topic, see also Buolamwini and Gebru, 2018.

Indeed, one wouldn't assume that exclusionary or otherwise unsustainable things are so by design, but they are. This is not to say that that is the aim one sets out to fulfill. Instead, what is most often the cause is even simpler — not even considering it in the first place. When we design 'neutral' or 'ideal' systems that use ignorance to set the boundaries of what is relevant, we inevitably restrict those boundaries to the limits of our own ignorance (Alcoff, 2007). This is how the ideal neutral ends up reinforcing and reproducing hegemonic values and assumptions (Ibid).

Ignorance does not just happen; it's reinforced and upheld by society⁷² (Ibid). Thus, the failure to consider the full context and implications of these actions means that a great deal of design actions are being directed not by intentionality, but by a lack of insight or foresight (Fry, 2007).

⁷² This is an important point in the study of agnotology — the study of culturally induced ignorance (Alcoff, 2007).

Part 3: Futures, or *How*

3.1 Some insight into foresight

It is understanding and perception which establish how we make sense of the world, be it this one or the next. This insight, however, is gathered in the context in which it is present. It is, in effect, contingent. The context in which we receive information will necessarily impact the way we interpret it. John Berger talks about this in *Ways of Seeing*, in which he describes the attempt to capture what one sees, and thereby reproducing it for others to consume, as creating an image — both literally and figuratively (Berger, [1972] 2008). Berger goes on to explain that every image embodies “a way of seeing” (Ibid, p. 10) — a record of how its originator saw the world. In this way, images can preserve things as they were, or at least how people understood them to be.

If Berger implies that images are depictions of a certain symbolic intention, then Julia Kristeva flips the cause for the effect. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva describes the process by which semiotic meaning is formulated, differentiating semiotics from signification, which precedes it (Kristeva, 1984). According to her, signification is akin to a given position, or judgment, which is created by the subject⁷³ upon their identification of the object to which meaning is to be assigned (Ibid). Semiotic meaning is, thus, ascribed to the articulation of significations, which become symbols of and to a socially constructed culture (Ibid):

This image and objects must first be posited in a space that becomes symbolic because it connects the two separated positions, recording them or redistributing them in an open combinatorial system (Ibid, p. 43).

⁷³ To Kristeva, the subject is always involved in the semiotic process because of their coexistence in a sociocultural setting — specifically, one’s “family and social structures” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 43). Within the context of that setting, one’s desires and motivations to complete a certain action, and thus go through the process of signification — one’s drives — is what she describes as the *chora*: “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25).

In this way, Kristeva's image precedes its meaning; the latter being that which designates the "way of seeing" (Berger, [1972] 2008) the former — as opposed to Berger's view that a certain intentional and *a priori* meaning is what determines the shape of the image (Ibid).

Either way, the importance of the study of history becomes apparent, especially to one concerned with the future. Indeed, scholar Christopher Rose even establishes a link between stories — themselves collections of symbols and thus symbols themselves (Rose, 2017) — and another of Kristeva's works, *Black Sun*, in which she discusses how melancholy creates an eschewed sense of temporality by producing a moment which simultaneously blocks the present and renders the future immutable (Kristeva, 1992). This inelastic notion of time — one which carries with it only past and present, not future — can, he argues, be overcome by stories (Rose, 2017). Stories which, in the present, draw from the past to propel into a future (Ibid).

Thus, the study and construction of symbols, which inevitably implies that one understand their history in a social context, is especially important for one hoping to build — to create anew — so that we may develop an understanding of which ideas succeeded, and even more so, of those which failed.

3.2 A history for the future

According to historian Diogo Ramada Curto, history should not be regarded as a sealed abstraction to be returned to for answers concerning the present. Instead,

The use of creating and writing history — which can only result from a slow learning process through which it will be possible to know large and small procedures of social change, which enfold in time with multiple textures — consists of learning to distance ourselves from a past which does not compel us. It can even be said that history — in its

most elaborate forms of conscience, with its analytical, explanatory, interpretative and constructive operations — frees us from the past (Curto, 2013, p. 13)⁷⁴.

A similar idea is also shared by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the biographical illusion, presented as a critique of traditional life history research, or the conventional biography (Bourdieu, 1998). The biography, that is, the attempt at documenting a life's chaos by delineating it into a coherent narrative is, according to Bourdieu, a fallacious effort — the biographical illusion (Ibid). This is especially true of Western cultures, in which biographies tend to be constructed as individual accounts, whose life events have been organized according to some internally consistent logic (Ibid).

Thus, in describing life experiences as either isolated or part of a pattern, or highlighting specific occurrences as particularly significant, one is engaging in a social construction of that history, centered on whatever the biographer assigned meaning to and based on the specific environment in which that work was being done, and for what purpose (Ibid). In that sense, for Bourdieu, a biography is a story, constructed around and with the aid of culturally relevant symbols⁷⁵.

In this way, art and design history is particularly useful, as it helps us think not just about the artifacts themselves, but also about the ideas behind the symbols which they embody. This, as mentioned, is essential in helping us stand further close to a conception of 'good design,' in both definition and process, that is synonymous with the a designed embodiment of ethical consideration.

⁷⁴ Original version: "A utilidade de fazer e escrever história — que só pode resultar de uma aprendizagem lenta, através da qual será possível conhecer grandes e pequenos processos de mudança social, que se desenrolam num tempo com múltiplas texturas — consiste em aprender a ganhar distância em relação a um passado que não nos obriga. Pode mesmo dizer-se que a história — nas suas formas mais elaboradas de consciência, com as suas operações de análise, explicação, interpretação e construção — nos liberta do passado." (free translation).

⁷⁵ Though the concept of the biographical illusion, to which its very name can attest, was focused specifically on biographies, or life history, this still bleeds into Bourdieu's larger point about the need for a cultural history, or an inextricable link between history and sociology (Steinmetz, 2011). Indeed, he described his own work as a "social history" (Ibid, p. 46).

This is key because though there is a recognized need for a political transformation of design (Pater, 2016; Fry, 2007), that change has not yet seemed to follow. Fry gives us three reasons for why that may be, which I will attempt to buttress and consolidate in order to build on the argument that the future of design — indeed our own — is contingent, thus making the matter urgent.

Reason one: “design has never created its own political culture (like the culture of trades once epitomized by guilds and unions that professional organizations just do not create)” (Fry, 2007a, p. 91).

This is rather important, as it would allow design to develop an endemic sense of ethics, detached from capitalistic market interests. In that regard, architectural critic Reyner Banham, as detailed by Alice Twemlow, spoke of an “‘aesthetics of expendability,’ as a way to celebrate disposable consumer goods and to counter an entrenched and elitist value system based on durability and permanence” (Twemlow, 2017. p. 6). Indeed, as scholar Francisco Laranjo argues, the very essence of capitalism, and an accompanying financial crisis, have further hampered the already precarious public and political discourse of design (Laranjo, 2015). Present circumstances such as these, however, “[highlight] the fragilities, limitations, but also the potential of the discipline” (Ibid, para. 3). In such a setting, then, one cannot help but contrast this potential with its role in the unethical promotion of harmful and growing consumption.

This concern is also shared by a number of other design scholars (Malan, 2018; McCollam, 2014; Monteiro, 2018a, 2018b), and I’ve already discussed their preoccupation with licensing. Licensing, in particular, is also a topic of matter to some design organizations, such as the GDC, mentioned earlier (GDC, 2019). The call for designers to be licensed requires some sort of centralized accreditation, which, in turn, requires an accreditation body. Furthermore, the effort to have members subscribe to an organization mirrors this demand for an institutional arbiter. In effect, both these approaches reveal a desire for both regulation and political heft — for there to be an arbiter.

I argued that it was precisely due to a lack of political heft that the design organizations discussed earlier were failing to enlist enough members to achieve those two goals, as they were too plural to accrue any significant political power (McCollam, 2014). This is precisely the concern mirrored in Fry's reasoning.

There is, however, another important aspect to the lack of a political culture⁷⁶ in design. Indeed, I also posited that that licensing should not be regarded as the only step to be taken, since it only addressed the issue of unethical designers, not that of unethical commissions. The other significant thing lacking in the design ecosystem is, as Fry mentions, unions, and, consequently, labor power.

This absence is significant, as unions have historically been key to important labor developments and social progress. To help illustrate just how much, I will recount a brief history of labor laws in the United States of America. The USA is a particularly interesting case study, as it is simultaneously one of the birthplaces of the modern labor movement and, currently, one of the countries with the most active suppression of labor activity⁷⁷ (Smith, 2003).

By the 1930s, the power of labor could not be suppressed any longer and, in the midst of the great depression, American workers organized with a degree of militancy not seen

⁷⁶ This political culture in design, as argued in part 2, is rooted in what Keshavarz describes succinctly as the design-politics nexus (Keshavarz, 2016). Design, as politics itself, has a hand in shaping and reproducing values through not just artifacts, but also environments and social conventions (Ibid). In this way, a political culture in design is anchored in the notion of design as process and action aimed at “[changing] the material history and practices of our societies” (Tonkinwise, 2014, p.31), such that it might provide design with a political heft “that could resist the surge of capitalism toward this or that technological imperialism” (Ibid).

⁷⁷ Indeed, the International Workers' Day is celebrated on the 1st of May in honor of the Haymarket affair. This was a seminal event, which occurred in 1886 in which workers in Chicago went on strike for an eight-hour workday and were then promptly murdered and their leaders hanged (Smith, 2003). Though the massacre we came to know as the Haymarket affair happened on the 4th of May, the demonstration began on the 1st, hence the date we celebrate (Ibid).

since and, as a result, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) signed the National Labor Relations Act, in 1935⁷⁸ (McAlevey, 2020).

But, alas, this labor militancy would not be tolerated by capital for long, and thus began a furious effort to undermine that law, almost immediately after it was signed. The result was the Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947, only twelve years later. This bill was designed to create an incentive for workers not to join a union since, as decreed, they would now get whatever the union won whether they paid their union dues or not (Ibid). That is fundamentally and very nakedly unfair, so the intent was then to create a structure whereby the labor movement would eventually bleed itself out (Ibid).

The political power of organized unions is undeniable, and, perhaps, there is no better example of this than the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was only possible because of the powerful labor power behind it (McAlevey, 2020). This strength also becomes evident when we compare the height of the labor movement to our current time, which stands as one of its lowest points.

In 1937, two years after the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act there were over 4,740 strikes in a single year, which corresponds to the greatest strike wave in American labor history (Holtzman, 2015). In 2020 there were eight — the third-lowest number since 1947, the year the Taft-Hartley Act was passed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Such a low number, however, is not due to the current pandemic, as there were only ten in 2019, which corresponds, along with 2018, to a surge in the number of striking workers (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). We can plainly see, then, that a decline in union power leads to a decline in strikes, and thus the political power of the worker's block, which was precisely the aim of the Taft-Hartley Act.

⁷⁸ This was the first time that the law guaranteed private-sector workers the right to organize unions and bargain collectively (McAlevey, 2020). The result was a flurry of labor activity, and the landscape of the American worker was transformed overnight (Ibid). Indeed, the political power of labor unions during this period of American history is a big reason why, when we think of 1930s America, we think of impoverished masses and the Great Depression, yet when we think of the 1950s we think of a house in the suburbs and economic prosperity.

That, though, is not all it was intended to do. The bill was also, according to McAlevey, “aimed at undermining human solidarity” and “was part of a broader long-term effort to rewire humans from acting collectively to acting individually” (Ibid, Chapter 2, Section 3, para. 4). And because systemic change requires collectivist action, this is a very effective way of preventing it. This is a large part of why designers are not presently capable of effecting this kind of systemic change. Because they are not collectivizing⁷⁹ (Fry, 2007a), they are not amassing the kind of political power required to produce it, and, as I believe I have demonstrated, that power directly correlates to effective organizing⁸⁰.

Reason two: “designed objects (material and immaterial) have never been adequately politically theorized” (Fry, 2007a, p. 91).

With such rapid technological development come unprecedented challenges. And because we only tend to recognize our shortcomings when challenged, we are now realizing what they are and coming to terms with them. Theory, in design, is one such shortcoming; especially one geared for and towards the discipline and practice’s inherent political dimension.

Design has had a fraught relationship with theory. It has, traditionally, focused more on craft — in making and doing — yet has, in recent years, expanded into university settings. This shift has positioned design as a research field, and, as such, it requires the

⁷⁹ In an age of increasing alienation and individuation, as Marx and Debord argued (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017), collectivizing presents an also increasing challenge. As Shoshana Zuboff argues, in the era of ‘surveillance capitalism,’ monopolistic companies and engage in a form of neocolonial “digital dispossession,” whereby “claims to self-determination have vanished from the maps of our own experience” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 100). This is important to understand, as this lack of self-determination is what allows the dispossession to run amok (Zuboff, 2019), further contributing to Marx’s notion of alienation and, consequently, of increased individuation (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017).

⁸⁰ It should not escape notice, however, that the establishment of an infrastructure focused on professional zeal and vigilance might be contradictory to veering away from the elitism of which Twemlow spoke (2017). The success of such structures, however, specifically that of trade unions, has been tied to the health of the organizational democracies they are inserted within (Korkut, 2006). In short, the strength and success of a union has been shown to be positively correlated to democratic decision-making processes, while elitism and a lack of democracy lessens a union’s effectiveness (Ibid). Within such a context, unions and interest groups were deemed of crucial importance in assuring a system for the representation of interests which might otherwise go unrecognized (Ibid).

use of theory (Henriksen, 2016). Theory development, however, seems to have broken down in design research (Cash, 2020).

According to a study led by researcher Philip Cash, there has been no substantial change in theory development in design research between 2004 and 2018 (Ibid), despite numerous calls to action (Love, 2000). And because, as Cash found, theory begets theory, its development has been consistently low in design research (Cash, 2020). This only adds to the collapse of what Cash refers to as the “theory building/theory testing cycle,” which only adds to a negative impact of design research (Ibid, p. 127). Furthermore, because there has been little to no change in theory development, this field has reflected a similar “stagnation in research quality and impact,” which, Cash adds, “[poses] a direct threat to the future of the design research field” (Ibid).

This poses a direct threat to our ability to respond to the challenges of increasingly dynamic times, leaving us vulnerable to such swelling development, and to the consequences which may therein arise. This is, of course, why we need adequate theorization, a need which has been recognized in mounting calls to action (Love, 2000; Fry, 2007), yet not only has it not been met, but it seems to require a “revolution” (Ibid; Cash, 2020, p. 130).

This is where ethics fits into the picture, as political theorization itself. It is, in effect, because we never properly theorized about it, that we lack it; and because we lack it, we need it. This is a vicious cycle, which we perpetuate even in the way we educate prospective designers. Again, because we don’t really think about it, we don’t teach it; and because we don’t teach it, we don’t learn it. And because we don’t learn it, we don’t think about it, thus contributing even further to the stagnation of the theory-building/theory-testing cycle.

The importance of education seems to be understood, with organizations such as the aforementioned IDSA holding its members’ responsibility to it as a tenet of their code of conduct (IDSA, 2020). That impetus, however, seems to be left in the abstract,

especially where it concerns such important topics as political theorization — which does include ethics — despite a growing desire from students to be educated on the topic (Nini, 2020). Such an education, however, should not be limited to the confines of academia; it should also be accessible to the public. After all, one can only know to demand if one knows what to ask.

I myself have a Bachelor's in Engineering Physics from Instituto Superior Técnico (IST) and, hopefully, will have a Master's in Communication Design from Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa (FBAUL) after you appraise this document. None of the institutions I attended offered a class on ethics, nor was the topic ever discussed. In my time at IST, the classes on offer were strictly technical or theoretical hard sciences. There were no classes even tangential to a discussion surrounding ethics or even a more general discussion regarding the political implications of our role as engineers, and there still aren't (Instituto Superior Técnico, n.d.). At FBAUL, these discussions were still not specifically aimed at engaging with these topics as they are, nor was the labor aspect of the profession mentioned at all. We were, however, pointed to some related reading material, should one choose to engage with it. This absent or buried education is, in this way, insufficient. Students' learning experiences are significant in shaping their practices (Ibid). This is made even more relevant when considering ethical frameworks themselves into this effort, and not merely their theoretical discussion.

I have mentioned the value of education in a virtue framework of ethics. Indeed, a curriculum that focuses on the intentionality of good design, when adequately politically theorized, might foster in the designer the desire to emulate good examples by imbuing good values in their designs. But this is relevant to duty and consequentialist frameworks as well. Indeed, the same might also foster the desire to adhere to a certain moral code when producing designs, or to focus on designs which maximize their positive consequences (Haug, 2017).

As Jorge Frascara argues, the isolated act of crafting, when devoid of socially oriented intent, is not fulfilling the purpose nor the duty of design (Frascara, 2017). That, however, is the prevailing model in use within design education; focusing heavily on “formal/visual and technological concerns” rather than on the people for whom design designs (Ibid, p. 125). This is important because we do not design in a vacuum; we design within a lived-in environment, with all that entails. Thus, as asserts Frascara, a design education that does not teach about people is incomplete (Frascara, 2017).

Design education must consider all the above discussion, and help students develop the necessary competences, not just visual competence. Instruction and education are different and complementary. To instruct is to train. To educate is to foster the development of independent judgement and the adoption of values. A good designer has to be both instructed and educated to become a good member of society (Ibid, p. 127).

In this way, the role of the teacher — as role model — gains particular relevance (Frascara, 2017), especially when considering a value framework of ethics (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018). As Jorge Frascara argues, the charge of the teacher must be to teach designers to learn, which is, then, inexorably accompanied by a responsibility to truly “educate” and “instruct,” as he describes these tasks to be, thus creating a “point of tension between the subject of study and the student, not between the subject of study and the teacher” (Frascara, 2017, p. 127).

Thus, as design continues to grow as an academic field, so too must our commitment to produce and teach adequate theory developments. Of particular importance are those of a political nature, since they are primarily concerned with the implications of what we bring into the world. As Fry declares:

Getting to the issue of what design education needs to become requires a passage through three determinate contexts. The first is to acknowledge that the world we

*humans have created is broken (by us for us)*⁸¹. The second is to place design education within the framework of higher education (as a broken servant of a now broken institution)⁸². And the third passage seeks to grasp the changing nature of what design now is as elemental to the broken and as an agent of breaking (Fry, n.d.).

And it is precisely because there has not been adequate political theorization of design subjects, in part due to a broader lagging of theorization in general, that we have been unable to do any of that breaking (Fry, 2007a).

Reason three: “within the history of design there has been a continual refusal to acknowledge that for design to acquire real political agency the practice of design itself has to undergo a major political transformation — design practice is not fixed: it is malleable” (Fry, 2007a, p. 91).

I’ve already talked about the importance of history in adjusting for a future. But what if that past is not clear? Indeed, the history of design is particularly controversial. One would think, from a purely factual perspective, that providing an account of those facts would be a simple task. This issue, however, is significantly more nuanced than that. In fact, in recounting the history of design, it has been suggested that one should consider such factors as:

- *What is the subject matter of the history of design — what aspect of design should be the focus of attention in a history?*
- *What are the important facts about that subject? - What connections among the facts make an account reasonable and convincing?*

⁸¹ As Fry argues, it is we the cause of our “wounded world” (Fry, 2007a, 88). In the same way that we, as Colomina and Wigley describe it, depend upon and are challenged by the technology we create — our designs (Colomina and Wigley, 2017) — so too, in the world which holds it all, are we both the inflicter and the inflicted (Fry, 2007a). Thus, this problem is one of and by anthropocentrism — “it is our being (in-the-world) that needs to be healed for the sake of the being-of-being” (Ibid, p. 88).

⁸² See, again, Frascara, 2017.

- *What purposes are served in providing an historical account of the subject, particularly for a discipline and related professions that are primarily oriented toward present and future action?* (Buchanan, Doordan and Margolin 1995)

None of these questions have simple answers. In fact, their uncertainty highlights the volatility of design history. In her attempt to assess the existence of an established canon of design, scholar Martha Scotford wonders whether the simple existence of one might be a problem (Scotford, 1997), and the reasons why are intimately tied to the political answers to the questions posed by Buchanan, Doordan, and Margolin (1995). She worries that

the existence of a graphic design canon, so early in the development of graphic design history and criticism, may focus too much attention and research in certain areas, to the exclusion of others equally significant (Scotford, 1997, p. 226).

She goes on to argue that an established canon — a fixed design practice — may actually communicate that the best is known, and, conversely, that anything which deviates is simply not worth knowing. This, she views as “unfair, dangerous, and shortsighted” (Scotford, 1997, p. 227).

As James Baldwin stated, “history is not the past” (*I Am Not Your Negro*, 2016). It is a collection of choices each historian makes, either consciously or unconsciously, which places focus on the value and validity of alternatives to those choices (Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin 1995).

On that point, Scotford speaks of a ‘messy history’ in contrast to a ‘neat history’ (Scotford, 1994). This, she presents in the context of a study on the view of women in the overwhelmingly male profession of graphic design. She explains:

Neat history is conventional history: a focus on the mainstream activities and work of individual, usually male, designers. Messy history seeks to discover, study and include

the variety of alternative approaches and activities that are often part of women designers' professional lives (Scotford, 1994, p. 367).

The implication of the existence of this messy history is, thus, that the female alternatives were never considered valuable enough to be a part of that conventional history — the distaff side to design's spear side. That matters because this exclusion, and many others, are the result of political choices, which continually undermine the transformative power of design by veering towards the conventional — the fixed.

“Design history has a history” (Buchanan, Doordan and Margolin 1995, p. 3), and that history is part of our broader understanding of the discipline of design, both its present and its future. And the tension that exists between this yet-nascent discipline, along with the emerging field of design studies, and the established study of history is exactly why the telling of history itself must be carefully examined; so that we may steer away from the fixed and towards the malleable, so that we may not continually fall into the trappings of hegemonic stagnation.

All of this is not to say that designers are incapable of producing good work, as in the kind of work which embodies ethics. Fry did not agree with that either, citing some examples given by Victor Margolin (2004) as an example of such an occurrence (Fry, 2007a). Fry's point, and mine, is that designers, as it stands, are generally ill-equipped to produce transformative work — the kind of work which embraces its messy history and embodies the political agency of the revolution which both Cash and Fry describe (Fry, 2007a; Cash 2020). “Moving from the unsustainable to sustainment cannot happen without design as it could be, rather than as it is” (Fry, 2007a, p. 91).

3.3 (De)Futuring

A discussion concerning the future is particularly apt in the context of design studies, we are, after all, talking about “design as it could be” (Ibid). That, however, is a recent addition to the academic design discourse (Mazé, 2019).

Indeed, design and most such disciplines as architecture or geography have traditionally been preoccupied primarily with space rather than time; with being rather than becoming⁸³ (Grosz, 1999). There is, nonetheless, and always has been, a constant and inherent presence of becoming in design — especially considering the latter as a process of coming into being. As an example, we can return to Herbert Simon’s assertion that design requires one to engage with the formulation of “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (1996, p. 111), and, thereby, also in “representing differences between the desired and the present” (1996, p. 122).

This is, in effect, the impetus behind philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s term ‘futuraity,’ which she describes as the “notion of the emergent or the event” (1998, p. 38). She contends that a state of being has historically been and is still being prioritized over one of becoming, and, as result, that becoming has become erroneously subordinated by deterministic laws of nature or a pre-established history to which it should not be bound (Grosz, 1999). Faced with this, Grosz argues that:

Unless we develop concepts of time and duration which welcome and privilege the future, which openly accept the rich virtualities and divergent resonances of the present, we will remain closed to understanding the complex processes of becoming that engender and constitute both life and matter (Grosz, 1998, p. 38).

Further, the popular rhetoric surrounding ‘change,’ ‘progress,’ ‘transformation’ or other such platitudes is likewise fueled by assumptions about futurity and becoming. So a concern with futurity is there, be it in the theorization and practice of design or, simply, in a more abstract desire for change. This does not, however, often overcome banality, largely due to a lack of thought concerning the hegemony of the values framed as being ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ (Mazé, 2019).

⁸³ To Grosz, this notion of ‘becoming’ is anchored in coming difference, or divergence. It is this, she argues, that is the catalyst to the proliferation of variants, and is thus, responsible for cultural variety through the advent of transformation (Grosz, 1999). “Every thing, every process, every event or encounter is itself a mode of becoming that has its own time, its own movements, its own force. These multiple becomings both make and unmake, they do (up) and they undo” (Grosz, 2011, p. 2). And, in this way, as catalysts for change, these emerging differences — becomings — are embedded in every dimension of creation or transmutation; from material (re)configurations to biological organisms and living matter to social institutions and cultural phenomena (Grosz, 2011).

As such, we mustn't direct whatever concerted effort to any possible future; rather, we ought to be cautious in pointing to a preferred future — and do so with political intent (Ibid). As discussed, when choosing what to leave in, one is also choosing what to leave out, and the same way design and ethics are political, so too is futurity.

Whether it is made explicit or not within design, identifying and making a difference between what is real, now, and what is, or is not, negotiable or preferable in the future is a political act (Ibid, p. 24).

In the face of perennial debates on what can be known, or even worth knowing, which characterize institutionalized histories, we may end up, even if unconsciously, reproducing flawed knowledge with severe socio-political implications (Mazé, 2019). As an example, let us examine the popular use of the term ‘futuristic.’ The dictionary definition of the word is of something “relating to, or characteristic of the future, futurism, or futurology” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). But one need only do a simple search for the term on any search engine (see Fig 19) to see that its use has evolved beyond its more neutral meaning into “having or involving very modern technology or design” (Lexico, n.d.).

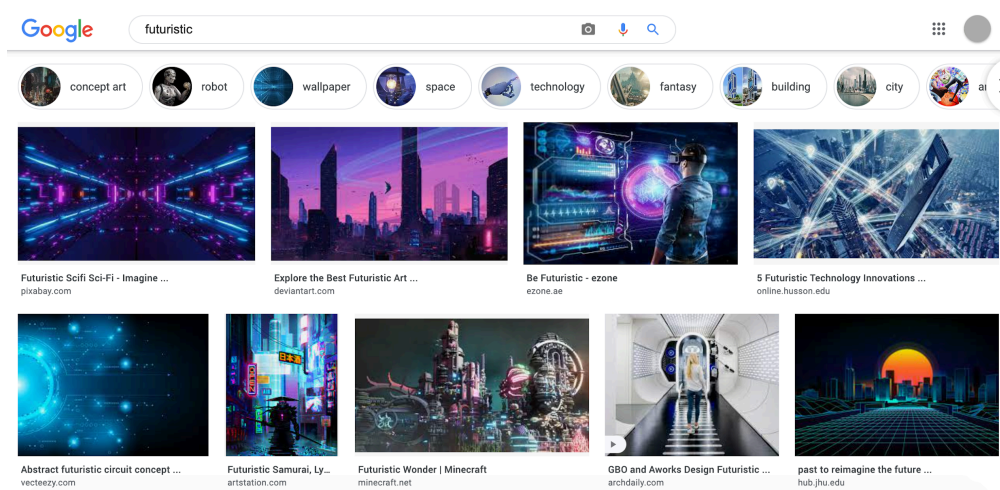


Fig 19: A print screen of my Google Images results for the term ‘futuristic.’

This illustrates well how pervasive and positively coded the predominance of technocentrism in discussions of our futures has become; and, again, this is so largely

due to the lack of scrutiny and subsequent reproduction of biased and incomplete knowledge (Inayatullah, 1990).

The field of future studies has traditionally struggled to imagine futures that are not technological and material, further perpetuating the notion that the future is easily determined and might be arrived at through linear pathways paved on predictable developments of certain technologies which privilege a specific kind of sociocultural “progress” (Mazé, 2019). And that is if social advancement is even taken into account, which, as it turns out, is not often, especially when contrasted with that concerning technical aspects (Wangel, 2011).

Choosing which ratiocinations to reproduce is political. Privileging that which can be known through quantification excludes many important phenomena. Those such as social and cultural practices, psychological dynamics, or socio-ecological events mostly evade quantifiable measurement, except in the case of restricted, and thus limiting, contexts (Mazé, 2019). But that they are less predictable does not make them any less important. The difficulty posed by these unquantifiable phenomena, however, may help explain why the futures labeled as “probable,” “possible,” or “preferable” are widely lacking in explorations of the social (Wangel, 2011).

A concrete example of this has been synthesized in an article authored by scholar Ulrika Gunnarsson-Östling, in which she analyzes all the papers published in the scientific journal *Futures* concerning futures studies and feminism, gender, or women (Gunnarsson-Östling, 2011).

From this inquiry, she derived some striking and important conclusions. She found that the images and activities derived from futures studies generally exclude women and non-Westerners, as well as feminist issues or those of particular relevance to women (Ibid). This, she argues, is exacerbated by the fact that these studies are usually opaque in their underlying assumptions, and therefore lack the critical and reflexive perspectives required to envision feminist futures, which, likewise, stand as deviations

from those assumed (Ibid). This is made all the worse because we actually require these conceptions of feminist futures to serve as contrasts to the hegemonic male and Western technocentric futures (Ibid).

The final big takeaway from this study was that futures studies tend to view women as passive victims rather than agents of change themselves, further contributing to their alternative futures being largely ignored (Ibid). This is part of a larger tendency to assume that these social aspects of society will simply develop as they will on their own time and thus require little to no intervention (Wangel, 2011). This is, of course, demonstrably not true, but easy to go along with if you are not the one being marginalized. After all, you are only willing to watch the world burn if you have the privilege of not being on fire. Hence, the exclusion of sociocultural phenomena furthers political implications regarding that very choice, affecting, as a result, the representation and prioritization of certain epistemologies (Mazé, 2019).

In that regard, researcher Jerome Glenn suggests that, in actuating any particular project for the future, we ask not “how well do you know it?” but, instead, “what difference does it make?” (Glenn and Gordon, 2003, p. 8); the latter of which allows for more plural political dimensions and intentionality. Indeed, in order to actually produce change, one must first propound that things can and should be changed. That exercise is essential when posing political examinations concerning what or whom should be present, and what can or should change in the future; as well as what difference that would make, and for whom (Mazé, 2019).

These questions, as discussed, already permeate the discipline and practice of design, and not only as it pertains to a political exercise.

Indeed, it is often through designed scenarios and visions that futures studies take form within policy, planning and the public sphere. Thus, political questions are not only relevant to the content development of scenarios and visions but to the designed forms

of rhetoric through which they are represented, materialized, communicated and deliberated (Ibid, p. 26).

With that in mind, posing the future as a design problem is thus an exercise inextricable from design activity, and overtly considering it an objective of design implies within the practice that these questions regarding our futures are also relevant thereto. To that point, philosopher John Rajchman argues for an “art of seeing and acting” (Rajchman, 1999, p. 43), unbound from deterministic futures and predictions, in which the arts, including design, are put forth as ways of knowing unto themselves — as ways to experience and relate to futurity.

This relationality is an important transformative aspect of design, and acts as a principle upon which to appreciate “design’s inter-related connections across space and the impact of design over time” (Fry, 2018, p. 9). That is why realizing design’s political agency is so critical — because it makes clear that that agency acts in two directions. Namely, that it has the ability to actually subvert the status quo by bringing things into being which destabilize structural establishments (Ibid), and thus, in Grosz’s terms, becoming (Grosz, 1999).

In that regard, a key to futural design is that of ‘design-in-time,’ a term which describes an urgent methodology predicated upon the care to design with purpose and insight (Fry, 2018). That insight must be informed by futurity while simultaneously recognizing that the future is not abstract, nor deterministic (Ibid). Rather, it is moldable as long as we understand that it is shaped by actions in both the past and the present (Ibid).

It follows, then, that the act of designing in the present:

be based upon designing back from the projected endpoint of a structure, system or product, and what it can be expected to cope with over its design life: these become determinate factors at the moment of design (Ibid, p. 3).

This practice of futuring, though, must be taken to entail more than non-deterministic ways of thinking futures and futural actions (Ibid). It must also consider and engage with defuturing forces, which “negate the future for life as it is now known” (Fry, 2018, p. 4).

3.4 On sustainment

Defuturing acts are, thus, detrimental to not only our human lives, in all their aspects, but also to that of all elements contained in the ecosystems upon which we rely (Fry, 2018). With that in mind, it’s worth considering that unsustainable actions, desires, values, and assumptions are actively shortening the very limit of our existence.

Indeed, according to the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, if there is no significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, some parts of the Earth will become largely uninhabitable as soon as by the end of this century (IPCC, 2015). That’s in only eighty years! How aggravating is it that our hypothetical children might still be alive to see it? It’s not just our planet that’s suffering, though. Up to one million plant and animal species face extinction due to human activity (Tollefson, 2019). And we are actively exacerbating our own through countless anthropogenic hazards such as war, negligence, or prejudice, all of which amount to countless casualties (Sandberg, 2018).

It is, thus, important to understand that a lot of what is done under the banner of development has been “impositional, destructive and defuturing” (Fry, 2018, p. 7), which, again and always, is not neutral, but profoundly political. ‘Development,’ much like ‘futurity,’ is a term neutral in origin, but which has evolved to acquire mostly positive connotations. As such, we equate it to positive values; yet, what those values are is the result of a long and, as discussed, biased history of questionable, largely andro/Eurocentric priorities (Fry, 2018; Scotford, 1994).

It follows, then, that some things must be designed out of existence. That may appear antithetical to the presumed logic of design as a practice of bringing into being; but, as I have postulated just a few pages earlier, design should be less about being than it should be about becoming. These processes of becoming, however, require action (Grosz, 1999), which may, indeed, entail acts of annulment. That is where the concept of elimination design comes into play (Fry, 2018).

Dealing with a world being made unsustainable requires dealing with what is, be it: modes of thought, theories of knowledge, professional and creative practices, institutions, industries, government, systems, products or services. Such listing will include much that needs to be eliminated (Ibid, p. 9).

Thus, in recognizing that harmful things exist, one must accept also that they should be expunged. That which harms ecologies, damages psyches, or is otherwise fatal must, then, be not erased; but, instead, eliminated by design — with intention and care — in order for our future to be allowed to become, rather than just be.

To be is to sustain the unsustainable. That is not what I'm talking about. What I'm interested in is Sustainment; not sustainability. Sustainability, or, rather, unsustainability, is usually tied only to an environmental crisis related to biophysical phenomena such as climate change. That, however, does not go further enough in addressing the real issue at the core. Namely, “the unknowing actions of our anthropocentric being” (Fry, 2003, p. 289). So whereas all these biophysical tribulations are widely described as empirically fixable under the guise of sustainability, they are, more often than not, the result of human (in)action (Fry, 2003). Sustainment is, thus, meant as a counter-force to the unsustainable discourse of sustainability through both theory and praxis — both of which design plays a role in (Ibid). This is, hence:

A vital intellectual and pragmatic project of discovery marking a vital turn to another kind of earthly habitation and understanding. One that recognises not only the need for a dramatic reduction in damage to the environments and ecologies of our and other

beings, but also that global inequity and conflict are both defuturing forces, and that viable social ecologies are essential to futuring (Fry, 2018, p. 10).

A noteworthy thing on which to remark, though, is that this notion of ‘unknowing’ is not quite the polar opposite of knowing. In this context, ‘unknowing actions’ are the product of unknowing, which describes general incuriosity or ignorance, be it intentional or accidental. In this way, unknowing is not simply erased by the advent of knowledge (Fry, 2003). It is, instead, another thing that should be designed out of existence.

On that note, another interesting thing to point out is that creation is, and always has been, inextricable from destruction. We tear down trees to build our homes, we burn oil to power our computers, we kill animals to eat, and we fertilize lands to plant our crops. These are all normal things. We don't really think about them. Of course we do this! We need a place to sleep, we need to work, and we need to eat. What we fail to consider, however, is what happens after we raze the forests, pollute the air, destabilize the ecosystems, or ruin soils. This is unknowing. And it has been the core of our defuturing actions (Ibid).

What is being proposed, hence, is not an end to destruction. Rather, it is the recognition that destruction has largely not been based upon intent, and that it is a basal aspect of our anthropocentrism; as is the act of creation itself (Ibid). Thus, in order for us to be able to counter the structural paradigm of unsustainability, we, naturally, require constant destruction (Ibid). Without it, there can be no ability to sustain. So, what is being proposed here is, in effect, accountability for what is created and what is destroyed. And that accountability is made possible by inscribing ethics into both theory and practice (Ibid).

One must, therefore, understand this as a tension which may never be resolved. Sustainment is perpetual work, which necessitates that we reject the utopian conception of sustainability (Ibid). It is a process — becoming, not being. We cannot restore what has already been destroyed, but we can destroy the destructive defuturing forces.

Sustainment becomes possible by redesigning its material, immaterial and cultural agents. Indeed, the hope is that, in so doing, sustainable action might become engraved into the very fabric of conception (Ibid). Whatever design is must be embraced as the “[foundation] of cultural traditions able to carry sustainment into realms of unknowing” (Ibid, p. 292).

The progress of Sustainment is, likewise, contingent upon the establishment of a gradual process of thinking and acting, anchored in the epistemologies we now dismiss in favor of Euro- and androcentric priorities (Fry, 2003). In that regard, what unfolds is a foundational redesign of the nature and potential of design itself (Ibid).

That redesign may present in two (and a half) distinct configurations — destruction and unmaking/remaking. I’ve already talked about destruction so now I would like to focus a little bit on unmaking and its companion, remaking.

Unmaking does not only refer simply to the dismantling of an object or structure in search of material for reuse. It also involves the unmaking of traditions, behaviors, values, and knowledge which uphold the unsustainable while hindering our capacity for Sustainment (Fry, 2018). Remaking, on the other hand, is similarly not only about repair or adaptive repurposing. It also describes the process of remaking social ecologies and cultural understandings and traditions of learning so that we may free ourselves from harmful notions which have not served us well in our pasts and presents (Ibid). Both remaking and unmaking are, thus, key aspects to develop and recognize because what they describe is, in their essence, the same revolution that has been called upon (Fry, 2007a; Cash 2020).

3.5 What revolution

So, revolution. Yes, but what is it, exactly — how does one go about enacting it? Well it is, as most important things are, complicated. Let us start with the broad strokes. I’ve talked about how what we assume as knowledge is intrinsically tied with what we

consider to be legitimate epistemologies, which, in turn, is influenced by a set of historical assumptions. The same is true of the divisions of knowledge themselves. Indeed, this partition, which constitutes the basis for most academic and non-academic practices alike, is a product of the “de-relationalisation of knowledge⁸⁴” (Fry, 2018, p. 9).

In recognition of this, a redirective practice is, like the name suggests, one which aims to reconceive the content and bases of one’s own knowledge; to, quite literally, provide new directions to our assumptions (Ibid). Thus, within the context of sustainment, this approach is aimed at counteracting the defuturing nature of many activities which focus on production and product, such as design (Fry, 2007b). Further, on a more fundamental level, it entails an ontological evolution of what it means to be a designer. This is necessary so that we may establish a shared purpose among the various artificially separated practices aiming to advance the notion of sustainment (Fry, 2018).

These artificial divisions are imbued into everything we conceive of, creating binary dissections where they are inappropriate. Within the realm of design alone, there are plenty, but here I would like to focus on the one between the designer and the user. It can be useful, at times; however, as it pertains to this redirective practice, it is a hindrance. Indeed, I would venture to guess that you, the reader, understood that such a practice was intended for the designer alone. That is not the case, but it serves as a demonstration of how powerful these assumptions are, and how spurious.

Redirective practices should be understood to apply also to the user, as an act of cognition towards the expansion of their role from a passive engager to an active one (Fry, 2007b).

Once a user seeks to counter this, and actively engages an object to increase its ability to sustain (whether the object is a product, service, technology or process) they also become redirective practitioners (Ibid, p. 6).

⁸⁴ This division and separation of fields of study was promoted and empowered during the Enlightenment (Porter, 2003) and has endured until today.

In this way, redirective practices are directed at a progressive and transformative agenda which extends both to and beyond design. Namely, one which places its focus on “actions implicit in the perpetual condition of exchange experienced as taking, making and being (re)made” (Ibid), thereby blurring the lines between the designer and the user. Both are themselves and the other; and conversely, both are neither.

That is, precisely, an important part of the ontological transformation design is to undergo. Indeed, the redirective agenda further serves to lay bare the teleological limits of the separation between production and consumption. Production is dependent upon being consumed and consumption is, by its very nature, always productive (Fry, 2007b). Thus, redirective practice is intended to be the catalyst to that transformation in both the agency and the agent of design — to, ultimately, overcome ontologically designed unsustainability in favor of ontologically designed sustainment (Ibid).

To that end:

For design ‘redirective practice’ has three areas of focus: adaptation in face of what has to change to counter the unsustainable; the elimination of what threatens sustainment by designing ‘things’ away; and prefiguration, which is designing in order to redirectively deal with what is coming (Fry, 2007b, p. 5).

So, if we are presently, and quite direly, in crisis, what is coming should constitute a paradigm shift⁸⁵ (Kuhn, 1962).

⁸⁵ A paradigm shift, is a concept introduced by physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962). Though the term was originally employed only in regard to natural sciences, it has since expanded its use to describe a significant shift in a given established model for interpreting assumptions or events (Ibid). This is contrasted with periods of what Kuhn named ‘normal science,’ in which work is done under the established framework for what is understood and legitimized as knowledge (Ibid). Paradigm shifts thus occur whenever the dominant paradigm is made incompatible with new phenomena (Ibid). These turning points are described as periods of crisis; much like how if we do not change our current unsustainable framework into one of sustainment, we may figuratively, and quite literally, die (Fry, 2003).

3.6 Remaking ethics

In striving towards that goal, it should become apparent that, like most established epistemologies, ethics is also in need of redirective practice (Fry, 2004). The current mainstream discourse on the topic is, very clearly, insubstantial and not sufficient. Ethics and ethical principles are often disregarded or dismissed as something which could help us combat the plights we perceive and engage with, either deliberately or ignorantly (Ibid). Ethics is, much like everything else, suffering from unknowing; and, hence, it needs remaking.

Traditional ways of thinking about ethics and ethical behavior across a broad range of design practices have been dominated by two interwoven issues, both of which have been discussed in the present document. One is preoccupied with employer conduct, the other with accountability. The former deals with how employers treat their workers, their clients, the industry, and the public, and, within this frame, ethics is often offered as a guide, in the form of a code of conduct (Ibid; see AIGA, 2009; AFD, 2012; AGDA, 1996; CSD, n.d.; Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011; IDSA, 2020). The latter aims to advocate for legal, social, and environmental restrictions on the practice of design. It is, accordingly, concerned with what the discipline and practice of design may bring into being, and demands that responsibility be taken for the potential consequences.

That responsibility, however, is largely, and inadequately, merely extended to mean professional due diligence or compliance with a certain set of guidelines or regulations (Ibid). Such an expedient relationship to ethics serves a purpose in a professional setting, but is lacking when deciding which design subjects are worthy of being conceived, how they are so and towards what ends, and what their impact may be.

Viewing ethics through this very pragmatic lens does not offer a full picture. It offers only a limited view of responsibility by failing to account for a deeper understanding of what ethics is and why it matters. This unknowing of ethics is part of what constricts design as an “agent for the exercise of responsibility” (Fry, 2004, p. 146). It restricts the extent to which the designer can be held as responsible for negative outcomes because it

reduces it to conformity with a given set of laws or professional codes of conduct (Fry, 2004), the drafting of which the designer was not privy to. These have their place. They are, in effect, reflections of the current framework of values and knowledge assumptions. By serving as guides, the problem arises when they become outdated, inadequate, uninterrogated, and diluted. That is, when they are simply a reflection of unknowing, and nothing else; which, unfortunately, as shown earlier, is most instances.

This is why designers should be held accountable to combat this state of unknowing and promote one of sustainment. As should everyone else. It should be noted, however, that responsibility for one's (in)actions is only possible when there is choice⁸⁶, and, as discussed, designers typically have a lot less of it than their clients. That said, one can and should aspire to intentionality and purpose in one's work. Indeed,

the truly responsible designer will have worked to establish relations between design and (autodidactically) educated ethical judgement (which means s/he will have acquired a critical frame of reference in which to enact judgement and position the to-be-judged) (Ibid, p. 146).

The remaking of ethics is, admittedly, a monumental task with implications to both the metaphysics and ontology of design. And its difficulty is only exacerbated by the plural nature of ethics, and philosophy in general. No ethical framework is universal, as discussed. Some measure of relativism is always present, and even necessary⁸⁷. Distinct cultural nuance is required, especially as a countermeasure to the hegemonic push for homogeneous globalization (Fry, 2004). The same way ethics is plural, so too is culture, and where a different nail⁸⁸ might fix structural problems, elsewhere they may require a sledgehammer.

⁸⁶ See O'Connor, and Franklin, 2018 and Rauscher, 2016.

⁸⁷ See, again, Westacott, n.d..

⁸⁸ If you'll recall, the HurriQuake nail introduced in the first chapter was meant to literally fix foundational structural problems amplified by the advent of hurricanes (Clynes, 2006).

Ethics itself has a history, complete, as always, with a specific set of Eurocentric assumptions and values (Hlabangane, 2019). A universal ethical code is paradoxical — it can never be ethical, especially to those marginalized, who have been and yet continue to be muted (Ibid). These traditions, however, have carried onto our current times, and as contemporary scholars continue to inherit all these unsolved ethical problems, some going back to the genesis of ethics itself, they must also deal with the significant issues forged in the making of the modern world.

Thus, it is made clear that, without engaging with ethics as a collective body of knowledge, design (or, indeed, any field of study or practice) cannot engage with and develop a sustainable ethical forum towards direct action — especially at our current breaking point⁸⁹ (Fry, 2004).

The rise of defuturing forces has made ethics as crucial as ever — it is the bridge between creation and destruction. It must cease to be purely conjectural, and we must give it the weight it not only beckons, but also begets. As Fry writes:

It has to be dragged out of the academy and rescued from its debased 'applied' forms. It has to be divorced from a subordinate relationship (professional practice and ethics) and (re)made as integral to the practice (Ibid, p. 150).

In addition to these more general dilemmas, design is specifically beset by other obstacles. The aforementioned youth of the design studies field and, by extension, that of design philosophy, is particularly deterring to the transformative agency that ontologically designed ethics ought to have. Design, and design studies in particular, is still lacking the conceptual tools to examine ethics (Fry, 2004).

So that design may do just that, it must begin by learning how to make decisions and actually enact that reasoning into its very core; all the while, recognizing and tackling that which is unethical and defuturing in its conception (Ibid). Design must, therefore,

⁸⁹ This is yet another reason why professional codes of conduct are inadequate in the face of our contemporary challenges (Fry, 2004). And again, this is not to say they are useless. They clearly show a preoccupation with ethics in the profession of design. They are, however, ineffective, as discussed previously and bolstered here.

become both an expression and a product of accountability by remaking itself, and, by extent, our cultures, to imagine and work towards affirming futures (Ibid). This does not necessitate a complete overhaul of the practice, though. Indeed, what is being advocated for here is remaking — repurposing. Thus, remaking ethics, especially in the context of design, entails repurposing and building on what is already ethical about it — that which sustains — and unmaking what is not. This, again, is accomplished through futuring efforts such as redirective practices and elimination design (Fry, 2018).

The big question, then, is to figure out what to create and what to destroy, the imperative being the urge for a foundational notion of sustainment. One which, “from ‘the margins’ can articulate the remaking of design ... [towards] the pursuit of an ethical end (and thus a future with a significant degree of assured and enacted responsibility)⁹⁰” (Fry, 2004, p. 153).

Such a transformative effort will necessarily be bold and may appear unfeasible, but it is not. In fact, it is not embracing it that’s unfeasible. Still, it would be foolish to ignore how grand the task before us is, and, as such, it’s important to understand that what it entails is more than a simple revamping of ethics rhetoric; it is an ethics unto itself. To clarify, the project of sustainment is one that must move beyond merely evoking what is ‘good.’ Rather, that which is good must itself be remade by prioritizing futuring values, which escape the narrow andro/Eurocentric assumptions permeating the current defuturing paradigm (Fry, 2004).

For one, the profession of design, and, indeed, any institutionalized structure, has intrinsic ties to what Fry refers to as the “restrictive economy” (Ibid, p. 152). The unethical nature of capitalism casts a large shadow⁹¹, and the institution of design has not yet been able to extricate itself from an uncritical subjugation to the “psycho-material structures of unsustainability” (Ibid).

⁹⁰ This is another of the great political challenges of and for design; one which carries with it transformative ethical implications.

⁹¹ Its shadow is so large, in fact, that capitalism as a system dates all the way back to the 16th century, and antecedents of capitalist institutions already existed in the ancient world and the European Middle Ages (Duignan, 2020).

Ethics is so ingrained in the past — in unsustainable paradigms such as institutionalized academicism and, indeed, capitalism and all its material and epistemological structures — that it now falters when faced with such defuturing forces.

So powerful is the blinding force of unthinking and so packaged (by design) are the phenomenal forms of everyday encounters that the familiar has become a primary locus of concealment (Fry, 2004, p. 154).

Sound familiar? Ethics has become spectacle; so now it must be remade to be impactful if it is to reclaim its impact. Indeed, the dominant currents of western ethics and the paradigm which bred them will not call the curtain on themselves — they hold the stage. They hold power over the form, content, and context in which we think ethics. They uphold the paradigm they created for themselves, and therefore impede the introduction of truly novel ideas (Fry, 2004). Even this urge for sustainment is held in direct opposition to present (and pressing) unsustainability. Thus, this endeavor calls for “the remade old conjoined with the new” (Ibid, p. 155), or, in other words, *détournement*, or the hijacking of the conventional in service of the novel (Debord and Wolman, 1956).

With that in mind, the goal is indeed to reach a new paradigm; and the way that happens, according to Kuhn, is precisely by building upon the old — “the remade old conjoined with the new” (Ibid). Indeed, as Marshall McLuhan proclaimed once in a panel, “[w]e’re just trying to fit the old things into the new form, instead of asking what the new form is going to do to all the assumptions we had before” (McLuhan, 1960). This, as he added, is normal (Ibid), which is also why the Situationists viewed *détournement* as a preferable method of subversion — because it makes use of the familiar to inscribe new, subversive meaning.

That is why the goal here is a new paradigm of sustainment, though not for it to become stagnant. Instead, “[t]he metaphysics of sustainment is proposed as a knowledge of imperatives, which themselves change as Being and beings change” (Ibid, p. 155). It is,

therefore, a contingent effort, which recognizes that perpetuity, like universality, is fallacious. There can be no fixed goal because there can be no certainty regarding the necessities of the future. We do, however, know what we need now, so, at the very least, we have a place to start.

3.7 Beginnings

The rhetoric of futurity is a fixture of the design practice, inextricable, even, from various of its genres (Mazé, 2019). “Designers have directly influenced the actions of individuals and communities, changed attitudes and values, and shaped society in surprisingly fundamental ways” (Buchanan, 1989, p. 93). Design, hence, “involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life” (Buchanan, 1989, p. 94).

This, as political rhetoric, frames design as being inherently preoccupied with molding society in particular, preferred ways (Mazé, 2019). And because there seldom are singular, simple solutions to human problems, design actions necessitate discussion and decisions regarding human relations and social structures. The political dimensions of design are, thus, very plainly laid bare in the (re)production of preferred futures, which revolve around choices as to what kinds of conventions to reproduce, and which to eradicate.

This very heavy responsibility has not been completely lost to the field. Indeed, a number of theoretical and practical approaches have sprung up to address it. One such practice is that of value sensitive design (VSD). It was pioneered by researchers Batya Friedman and Peter Kahn as a theoretically grounded approach to the “design of technology that accounts for human values in a principled and comprehensive manner throughout the design process” (Friedman and Kahn, 2002, p. 1186).

VSD emerged from the fields of information systems design and human-computer interaction (HCI) as a way to tackle design problems concerning those disciplines by centering the ethical principles of what Friedman refers to as “direct and indirect

stakeholders⁹²” (Friedman and Hendry, 2019, p. 65). These terms describe those who interact directly with the technology — the latter — and those who do not interact with it directly but may be affected by it regardless — the former (Friedman and Hendry).

The approach defines itself as principled due to its assertion that certain principles have moral epistemic weight regardless of whether they are held by specific groups or individuals (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). The practice, however, remains cognizant of the fact that the same values may be interpreted very distinctly in different cultural contexts (Ibid).

Thus, VSD aims to express a position of reciprocal action regarding how values become entangled in technological design (Ibid). In that regard, it is particularly abreast of the virtue framework for ethics, while remaining conscious of both the consequentialist and duty frameworks as well⁹³. After all, the field emerged out of a sense of responsibility born out of a preoccupation with tempering the consequences of a given project (Friedman and Hendry, 2019). That is also reflected in the concern for the stakeholder as someone who will experience and be affected by those consequences.

To that effect, VSD is anchored in an iterative design process centered on three distinct kinds of analyses — conceptual, empirical, and technical, in order (Ibid). A conceptual investigation is aimed at developing a thorough understanding of the values of the stakeholders regarding the technological object in question (Ibid). It seeks to determine whether any conflict between values may arise and how best they can incorporate them into the project (Ibid). An empirical analysis is conducted as a qualitative or quantitative design research study, done as a way to inform the designers’ grasp of how the users engage with the object, how their values are present and reflected therein, and whether their needs are being met (Ibid). The third, and final stage of the method, is a technical investigation into the limitations of the technology itself (Ibid). Its purpose is to

⁹² An important distinction to make is that the term ‘stakeholder,’ in this context, is taken literally to mean anyone who has a stake in a given project. It is divorced from the corporate meaning of the word (though it also includes corporate stakeholders as people who are impacted by the endeavor).

⁹³ This is also further evidence of how much these frameworks are entwined and require each other to acquire meaning in any real-life scenario.

evaluate it for how well, or poorly, it supports or constrains the values and design requirements identified in the previous stages (Ibid).

This practice reflects a concern for, as Friedman herself described it, “values that center on human well-being, human dignity, justice, welfare, and human rights” (Friedman and Kahn, 2002, p. 1186), with the clear implication of an impetus aimed toward progress. Indeed, in an effort to delineate a list of “human values with ethical import” (Friedman and Kahn, 2002, p. 1187), they aim to “illustrate how an overarching framework for human values and ethics in design can move one quickly and substantively into new territory” (Ibid) — into a better future.

That same desire is present in other genres of design. Indeed, this motivation to propel better futures is especially relevant to design activity conducted under the conceptual design umbrella. It, after all, “induces desire and (re)produces cultural imaginaries for particular industrial futures” (Mazé, 2019, p. 27). Indeed, practices such as speculative and critical design are very explicitly concerned with futurity. Their purpose is, in its essence, to discuss ways in which design might conceive of, question, and ultimately direct the future (Ibid). Conceptual design’s distinguishing characteristic is, precisely, its ability to use the language of design to ask questions, provoke, and inspire⁹⁴ (Dunne and Raby, 2013).

Speculative and critical are two very intimately connected approaches to design practice (Auger, 2013). *Speculative Everything*, by researchers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, has become the key text to envisage the field of speculative and critical design (SCD), which they define as:

A form of design [which] thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and

⁹⁴ A thing to note, though, is that this posture has become more prevalent in contemporary approaches to design practice. As Dunne and Raby state themselves, this centering of critique is not exclusive to critical design, describing the latter as “more an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a methodology” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 34). As such, the criticality in critical design is a response to affirmative design, which they describe as “design that reinforces the status quo” (Ibid).

debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely. Design speculations can act as a catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 2).

To illustrate the practice, they appropriate physicist Joseph Voros' *Futures Cone*, which maps different types of future scenarios (Dunne and Raby, 2013; Voros, 2003; see Fig 20).

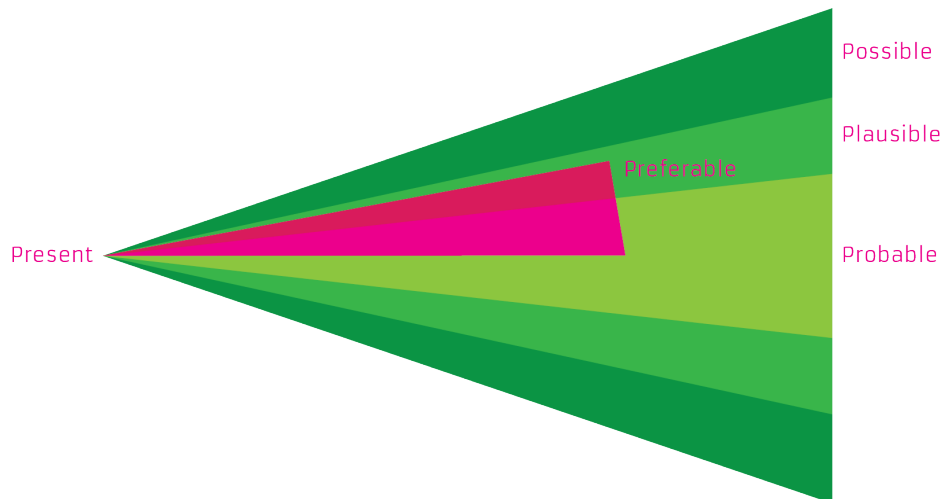


Fig 20: Illustration of Dunne and Raby's taxonomy of futures (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 5).

This is done to ground the speculative scenarios as “probable, plausible, possible or preferable” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 2), given SCD's interest in “designing for how things could be” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 12). Conceptual design in general is able to provide a framework and the freedom to do just that because it is concerned, by its very nature, with that which is not real. (Yet, at least.) It is, in effect, fictionalized conjecture.

Be it through stories, installations, thought experiments, or all three combined, the act of speculating hinges on imagination; as in the literal propensity to envision alternate realities and scenarios (Dunne and Raby, 2013). This, however, is intended as a challenging exercise. “By embodying ideas, ideals, and ethics in speculative proposals design can play a significant role in broadening our conception of what is possible” (Ibid, p. 162). It is, then, a medium through which ideas may be put to test, theories may be rebutted, boundaries may be pushed and implications may be explored.

A relevant example of a speculative exercise is Thomas Thwaites's *The Toaster Project*, in which he challenges himself to build a toaster from scratch (Thwaites, 2011). Surprised by the complexity of the object, Thwaites then spent almost a year tracking down all the raw materials he would need. Going from extracting iron ores for smelting, to traveling all the way to Scotland to find some mica, he eventually made an almost functional toaster (Ibid). This endeavor may seem like an absurd extreme, but the artist was aware that the task would likely be impossible. It was done, however, as part of a speculative thought experiment aimed at shining a light on how reliant we have become on technology while, at the same time, remaining so utterly disconnected from the processes and systems which make that same technology possible and accessible to us on a daily basis (Ibid).

An unknowing of the toaster — indeed, of most technological objects with which we regularly interact — is convenient, yet comes at the expense of knowledge and an understanding of the circumstances in which it was made. It makes us consider, then, how much value we place on convenience, to the detriment of knowledge, and whether it is worth it. It makes us appreciate the expertise and labor that goes into creating and, hopefully, makes us more aware and sensitive to those who hold the knowledge and those who do the work.

Another yet is *Mitigation of Shock*, conceived by design studio Superflux. Its two versions, London and Singapore, are immersive installations, each taking the form of a typical domestic living space set in 2050 (Superflux 2017; Superflux, 2019a; see Fig 21).

They imagine a future world in which economic and political instability, broken supply chains, social segmentation, and food scarcity have become the norm. The permeating narrative is based on predictions based on current climate change data trends (Ibid), and thus asks us to consider the impact of our ongoing negligence by examining how it might affect our daily lives in a rapidly approaching future. (More relevant than ever amidst a global pandemic.)

The installations themselves are very intimate and familiar, but with eerie details spread throughout. It's our kitchen, but the cooking books speak of "alternative protein" for a time of scarcity and teach us about "pets as protein" or how to cook a "wild pepper & roach stir fry" (Ibid; see Fig 21). It's our living room, but the space is completely overrun by homegrown cultures and foraging tools (Ibid). It's all so familiar, yet thoroughly unsettling; perhaps because it is so familiar. We explore the rooms, we look around, we rifle through the books, we look out the window, we listen to the radio. We live it, we see ourselves in that reality. Both because the space itself feels lived-in, and also because we recognize the headlines in those newspapers from 2050 and the radio broadcasts playing in the room. They are almost identical to our own and betray an inconvenient truth — we could have prevented this.



Fig 21: Some photographs from *Mitigation of Shock* London (Superflux 2017) and Singapore (Superflux, 2019a).

The London version includes a video tour of the apartment, accompanied by a voiceover narration of one of its inhabitants. In it, we see the unfolding of that kind of slow progression we often fail to see while we're in the middle of it. He says:

Like the people who thought that the prices in the supermarket were going to come back down again, or who thought the empty shelves would soon be full. The ones who thought the market could fix global famine, like feeding billions on a dying planet with a broken climate was simply a problem of economics. Actual madness. ... I still remember a time when there were people out in the streets; shouting, fighting, smashing stuff up. But slowly we found ways of working together. Now we get together, we build experiments, we see what works. And we look out for each other. If an experiment fails everyone covers the shortfall; and, if it succeeds, we share the knowledge, and it becomes everyone's success (Superflux, 2019b).

And therein lies the core of the piece, at least in my opinion. It's a powerful example because it manages to be hopeful while at the same time reflecting a dire situation that is so viscerally familiar that we cannot help but feel compelled to engage with its message. To me, even though it reflects a harrowing future scenario, it describes a fundamental shift in human society and values that feels optimistic. As the narrator says, “[i]t's been a hard lesson but I think we've all made peace with this now. I just wish we could have learned it a little sooner” (Ibid).

Another example I recently had the privilege of experiencing is Liam Young's *Planet City* (2020). The multimedia project, comprising a short film and a companion book, describes itself as “a fiction shaped like a city” (Ibid, para. 3). The fictional conceit of *Planet City* is that, sometime in a near future, the entire world's population, around ten billion people, voluntarily decided to decolonize the Earth by co-inhabiting a singular hyper-dense metropolis (Young, 2020, see Fig 22). The scenario presented is not one of homogeneity, however. The film depicts a multicultural city which celebrates diversity in a yearlong celebration of all the distinct cultures therein represented (Ibid).

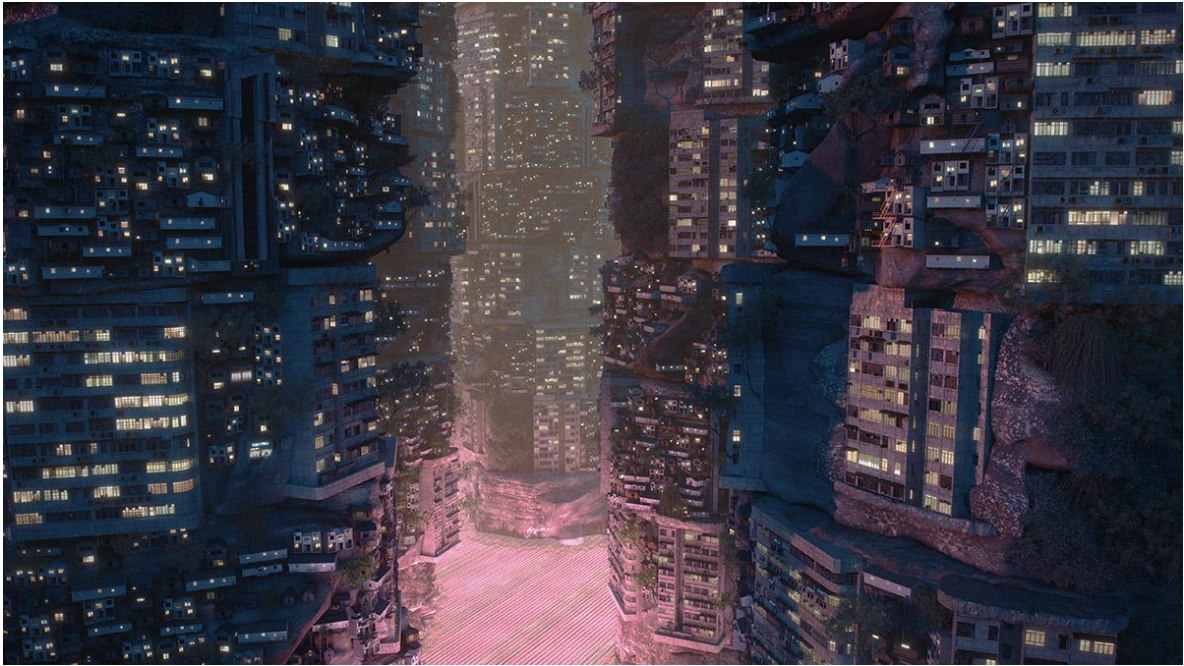


Fig 22:
Still from the *Planet City* film (Young, 2020).

The city operates under a circular economy, being self-sufficient while occupying only 0.02% of the planet's surface area (Ibid). That figure, Young explained in an interview, is the actual percentage of the Earth we would occupy if we reorganized our world at the scale of our densest cities, adding that would roughly amount to the size of an average US State (Fairs, 2021). Furthermore, all the technology present in *Planet City* is real technology that already exists (Ibid).

Beyond its aesthetic merits, which are plentiful, this work caught my attention for its underlying transformative agenda. It understands the urgency of cultural and ideological change as a necessary requisite for a future in which we are not at serious anthropogenic risk — one of sustainment. Indeed, it is refreshingly radical in its reversal of our longstanding colonialist project by proposing a utopian future in which we return stolen lands and leave 99.98% of the Earth for rewilding.

Young's *Planet City*⁹⁵ seems to understand that sustainment requires more than an abstract response to a growing environmental crisis. It also recognizes that global inequality and conflict are defuturing forces, and that viable social ecologies are equally essential for a future in which we exist. It imagines a future ecology that is not only environmental but also social. The voluntary nature of the decision to resettle is, to me, the most meaningful aspect of the evolving narrative. It speaks of a future in which we not only agree that a reprioritization of our values is needed, but also act upon it.

As Dunne and Raby argue with in the words of Stephen Clark, the impetus behind speculation is to “unsettle the present rather than predict the future” (Clark, 2011, p. 17; cited in Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 88). To pose important questions, rather than generating answers. That is, precisely, what these speculative exercises accomplish through their narrative engagement. After all, speculation requires some form of abstract conception. It is, in effect, designed fiction. Through its material grammar, design is able to bring fiction closer to our reality. By virtue of its expressive medium (Dunne and Raby, 2013), especially when coupled with fiction, it is able to deliver powerful critique in subtle and evocative ways (Midal, 2021). Indeed, “designers have continuously appropriated fiction, along with its modes of diffusion (text, manifesto, books, film...) so as to express dimly disguised political and social criticism” (Ibid, para. 8).

An example of this is the television show *Black Mirror* (2012). Its episodes depict speculative scenarios involving a given piece of technology. It accelerates the development of technologies currently in contention as part of its speculative fiction. In so doing, it often depicts a sort of worst-case scenario, which begs us to consider whether we would be comfortable with such a future.

By drawing inspiration from real concepts and objects, the show is designing a familiar reality (Weller, 2018) as a vehicle for effective critique of not just the technological, but

⁹⁵ This work also brings to mind Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao's, *Dome over Midtown Manhattan* (1960). The dome has become an architectural symbol of utopia, a tradition from which Young undoubtedly draws. Indeed, both are “spaces to begin society anew under threats of being rent by conflict and scarcity, and as a means to rescue the planet from bad stewardship, overconsumption, and waste” (Díaz, 2011, p. 94).

also the personal. It's critiquing the nefarious ways in which technology is being used, but it is, necessarily, also criticizing us for using them, and, as a collective, for allowing it to happen in the first place.

Indeed, the relationship between the human and the technological artifacts we create is one of codependence. As discussed, these artifacts are interfaces; such that facilitate and shape the various ways in which humans may interact with their environment while, at the same time, mediating the ways in which that same environment interacts with humans (Colomina and Wigley, 2017). In this way, humans are simultaneously dependent on and challenged by their very own mediums.

The human is inseparable from the artifacts that it produces, with the human body having the extended shape of all the artifacts it has made and each artifact being an intimate part of its biology and brain (Ibid, p. 24).

Thus, as Charlie Brooker, the creator of the show, asserted “[i]t’s not a technology problem we have. It’s a human one” (Brooker, 2014).

In that regard, a show like *Black Mirror* is absolutely designed fiction. Dunne and Raby even cite it in their book on SCD (Dunne and Raby, 2013). It should also be remarked that fiction as a medium unto itself has become increasingly acknowledged by designers, as has the medium of film (Midal, 2021). Indeed, “[f]iction films by designers associate storytelling with objects or products in a way that reshapes a vaster definition and practice of design” (Ibid, para. 17).

Moreover, the relationship between design and fiction can be traced all the way back to its origins. Design describes an act of giving form to something, which has etymological ties to the word fiction (Midal, 2021). “Forms, fictions, hypotheses and imagination mingle in design” (Ibid, para. 18). And this common notion of giving shape is exactly what makes their allyship so affecting. We are able to relate so deeply to a fiction

because we can see it designed and enacted — visualized and concrete. And that matters because it can actually yield transformative outcomes.

As Anab Jain, co-founder and director of Superflux, said in a TED Talk:

We have learned in our work that one of the most powerful means of effecting change is when people can directly, tangibly and emotionally experience some of the future consequences of their actions today (Jain, 2017).

In that same talk, she also tells us the story of when Superflux was invited by the United Arab Emirates' government to assist them in shaping the country's energy policy all the way up to 2050 (which, interestingly, is the same year *Mitigation of Shock* takes place.) When presenting their proposals, she recounts, one of the representatives told her he could not imagine that, in the future, people would stop driving cars and use public transportation instead (Ibid). He couldn't ask his son to stop driving his car, he added. But Superflux was prepared for that too. They had managed to create an approximate sample of what the air in 2030 would be like if we maintain our current behaviors. "Just one whiff," she tells us, "brought home the point that no amount of data can," and the next day the Emirati government announced a billion-dollar investment plan in renewable resources (Ibid).

Designed fiction is a powerful tool for imaginative ideation into a projected future — a kind of world-building, as art historian Nelson Goodman described (Midal, 2021). He argued that worlds were not given, but built — designed — even those we understand to be real (Goodman, 1975; cited in Midal, 2021). "Worldmaking as we know it," he writes, "always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (Ibid, p. 61).

And again, that should sound familiar. It is *détournement*⁹⁶. It is "political and social criticism" (Midal, 2021, para. 8) delivered through the appropriation of the familiar into

⁹⁶ The Situationists even defined it as "[t]he integration of past or present artistic production into a superior environmental construction" (Situationist International, 1958, p. 13).

a designed new. It is SCD. All the works I mentioned here are acts of *détournement*, right down to their intention of shattering the illusions of the spectacle — of the unsustainable. They use familiar objects, familiar technology, familiar spaces, familiar language to bring you in and spit you out onto another world; one which is not real, but instead true. One where it is made clear that the only radical position is inaction, and urgent reprioritization is the only way forward.

3.8 The importance of critique

But is design actually prepared for that? Does it even want to be?

I've already talked about how design's theory and praxis have been and continue to be biased toward andro- and Eurocentric epistemologies and values. That is, after all, a necessary consequence of the existence and pervasiveness of cultural paradigms. Indeed, they permeate every social and economic structure therein, not just design.

The consequences of that, however, are that we must question the theory and practices which are derived from such a paradigm. Otherwise, we will be participating in the unknowing of design, which, as mentioned, is something to overcome, and which itself should be designed out of existence (Fry, 2003).

And here, the importance of the exercise of critique becomes apparent, though the critical itself may appear to be in crisis. According to Francisco Laranjo:

At a time when it is fundamental to be critical, the very term has become ubiquitous, cool and vague. While it is possible to identify overlapping levels of criticality, as suggested by the personal (reflecting on own work), disciplinary (expanding disciplinary issues) and public (addressing societal phenomena), what is meant by critical is open for debate (Laranjo, 2015, para. 3).

Laranjo warns us, here, against the trappings of the ‘post-critical,’ in which a lazy veneer of the critical is presented instead of the affirmative substance of critique (2015) — an ‘aesthetic critique’ over a ‘political critique’ (Martin, 2005; cited in Laranjo, 2015).

This, of course, does not evade design. Indeed, as design curator Andrew Blauvelt has argued, a widespread uncritical mindset has, for some time, permeated the discipline (Blauvelt, 2003). And though he referred specifically to graphic design (Ibid), an argument could be made for a more generalized affectation (Laranjo, 2015). Indeed, as Laranjo argues, the aestheticization of critique “points to a de-politicised manifestation of a new uncritical form of criticality. The lack of ideology is the ideology” (Ibid, para. 9).

This lack of ideology is insidious. It trivializes the attempts of that which has been known to be critical (Laranjo, 2015), granting further allowance for design to participate in a state of unquestioned unknowing (Fry, 2003). This is especially relevant in a context of late capitalism, in which design must deal with its accompanying political and economic limitations in its pursuit for critical autonomy (Laranjo, 2015).

Such pressures, inevitably, lead to the establishment of elitist circles (Twemlow, 2017), which are counterproductive to the reprioritization effort. In Twemlow’s own words:

Design criticism is, by necessity, more self-aware of its proximity to the marketplace, its complicity with commerce and consumerism, than are other critical genres like art or literature. The incipient strain of amateur design criticism, located at the heart of the biggest online marketplace, illuminates and typifies many of the issues that were central to the reshaping of criticism’s status and identity in the early twenty-first century. They included the differences between review and critique, recreation and professionalism, populism and elitism, production and consumption, as well as the role of ethics, consumerism, the nature of work, and time (Ibid, p. 233).

The exercise of critique, however, is not isolated from the environment in which it occurs. Indeed, the social role that criticism takes for itself is one of diagnosis, which implies an inherent and hierarchized distance between the assessor and the assessed — the critic and the public (Twemlow, 2017).

Philosopher Jürgen Habermas spoke of a kind of “public sphere” wherein people behave as engaged citizens, rather than traders of goods or subject to constraints imposed by the state (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). This engaged citizen, as conceptualized by Habermas, would not be a consumer, but a debater — the auditorium separate from the marketplace (Habermas, 1974). This notion, however, according to Twemlow, “has provided much of the impetus for the performance of design criticism” (Twemlow, 2017, p. 6).

Indeed, there seems to be an interest in consuming critique, perhaps for the same reason that there is an interest in consuming ethics (Micheletti, 2003; Townsend, 2018; Southey, 2020). As author Deanya Lattimore states:

There is no pre-existing public. The public is created through deliberate, willful acts: the circulation of texts, discussions and gatherings in physical space, and the maintenance of a related digital commons. These construct a common space of conversation, a public space, which beckons a public into being (Lattimore, 2008; cited in Twemlow, 2017).

So if the public beckons, we must find a way of bringing into being the kind of public the public itself seems to desire to be — one which is aware and ethically engaged. And, perhaps, that begins with critiquing critique itself.

3.9 An exercise in critique

In 1984, Audre Lorde published a seminal essay, entitled *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (Lorde, [1984] 2007). It was an acute critique of feminist academia, which, she argued, was heavily segregated, with feminist studies and black

feminist studies being completely separate, as though feminism did not include black feminism (Ibid). This, she argued, created the impression that feminism was the domain of white feminists, and anything which deviated ought to have its own segregated space (Ibid).

Lorde speaks to the necessity of not only welcoming, but also incorporating marginalized groups within feminist discourses, so that we may nurture more diversity of thought within it (Ibid). Though the white feminist is embroiled within the same system of oppression, not including intersectional⁹⁷ perspectives is only perpetuating that same system. Thus, it is only by exercising an intersectional judgment, through ‘political critique,’ rather than ‘aesthetic critique’ (Martin, 2005) that we may dismantle the Master’s house — by shedding its tools.

Though she presents this idea specifically within the context of feminist thought, this is a larger issue, anchored in hegemonic power dynamics. Indeed, it permeated every system with institutionalized hegemony; which is to say, every system. So, as Lorde highlights, if we’re thinking with the Master’s tools, we are also designing with them. So let us engage in a more comprehensive critique of the design solutions afore proposed.

VSD, for example, was built upon an aforementioned list of ethical values deemed to be cardinal (Friedman and Kahn, 2002). Such a list, as I argued, shows a concern for ethics, but also raises a number of ethical questions. Namely, whether VSD should single out certain values as particularly worthy of contemplation (Borning and Muller, 2012), who should choose them and how (Ibid), and whose values are even considered (Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley, 2011).

Indeed, as Le Dantec et al. have argued, formulating a list of implicated values incurs the risk of ignoring other important values which could arise from a given empirical

⁹⁷ The term ‘intersectionality’ was first coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, amidst the Black Feminist movement, and began as a dissection of the systematic oppression of black women (Crenshaw, 1989). As stressed by author and feminist scholar bell hooks, the advent of intersectionality “challenged the notion that ‘gender’ was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate.” (hooks, 2000, xi) Today, however, it has evolved to address the experiences of people who are subjected to a plurality of forms of oppression (McCall, 2005).

case by assuming a set of predetermined values (Le Dantec, Poole and Wyche, 2009). Another of Le Dantec et al.'s concerns lies in the prescribed order in which the investigations, which provide the basis for the methodology of VSD, should occur, arguing that they should not be fixed, but malleable and contingent (Ibid).

Though I concur with this criticism, it should be remarked that VSD's methodology has not been interpreted as rigid, as there are a number of investigations published under the field VSD which begin with each of the three types of investigation (Borning and Muller, 2012). Moreover, it's also important to note that VSD's position has evolved over time into a heuristic approach for suggesting values which ought to be considered (Friedman, Kahn and Borning, 2006), and that the list itself was never meant to be comprehensive (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

There is, nonetheless, a significant issue of context (or lack thereof) which should be addressed. The theoretical basis for VSD, starting with the original list of values, was founded upon a framework of liberal and relatively privileged Western perspective, but that was never provided as the context in which it was developed (Borning and Muller, 2012). The lack of contextualization implies a universal quality to the work, which is not accurate (Ibid; Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley, 2011). Further driving the point, the lists of values offered as suggestions were written in English, employing English phrases and concepts. This, of course, may result in some imprecise or inaccurate translations, which may give rise to issues of its own (Friedman et al., 2008).

In that regard, there is an added challenge to VSD practices applied to ethnography. Specifically, how to narrow down all the relevant epistemologies and philosophies which should inform the analyses, and, following in Le Dantec et al.'s preoccupation with a fixed methodology, when in the design process should they be engaged with (Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley, 2011).

An interesting ethical dilemma is still inherent to this discussion, however. On one hand, a hard-lined list may be harmful, as it will inevitably influence the researcher or designer by carrying a certain set of biases favoring hegemonic assumptions which may

not always apply (Le Dantec, Poole and Wyche, 2009). On the other, value heuristics, by their very nature, lack a prior moral commitment (Reijers and Gordijn, 2019). A definitive answer is not possible, but there might be a benefit to providing a space for both heuristics and list cues to help secure an ethical commitment from the designers (Borning and Muller, 2012). They should, however, be properly contextualized, and relevant information such as who wrote the brief, what method was employed and the purpose of the investigation must be disclosed (Ibid).

Another key distinction to make is that between stakeholder values and explicitly supported values — those which are deliberately inserted into the design (Borning, Friedman, Davis and Lin, 2005). Though it's not always easy to assess whether any specific values have been deliberately designed towards or not, it should be observed that those need not be the values the designers themselves hold (Ibid).

This is a matter deserving of attention because, as discussed, values are often imbued and embodied by technology (Friedman and Kahn, 2002) and, if left unexamined, the designers' values become explicitly supported values (Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley, 2011). Further, values held by the designers and those held by stakeholders may differ and conflict. This is why it's so important to disclose the contexts in which one operates by, for example, resorting to methods such as ethnography in an effort to highlight these tensions and adjust accordingly (Ibid). The question of whose values VSD should design for thus becomes especially relevant.

In attempting to answer it, we should employ non-hegemonic epistemologies to inform our decisions (Ibid; Borning and Muller, 2012).

VSD can learn from feminist research methods in the sciences in general, and in social science and HCI in particular, to include diverse voices, to examine the edge cases around a values-question, and to interrogate its own VSD practices with questions such as who is recognized as an analyst of values? (Borning and Muller, 2012, p. 8)

Research being conducted on post-colonial human-computer interaction (HCI) may also provide relevant critique and insight (Irani et al., 2010). Being primarily concerned with power, post-colonial theory, when coupled with HCI, might help inform the power relation between the designers/researchers and the users (Ibid). Thus, when concurrent with participatory design and feminist theory, post-colonialism could aid VSD in asking questions such as “who is allowed to speak about whom,” or “how are values-based decisions made and enacted when their impact is felt by people who are not recognized as design-makers or analysts” (Borning and Muller, 2012, p. 8).

All of this feeds a status quo which will inevitably reproduce neoliberal⁹⁸ conceptions of the future, a trend which current SCD projects certainly do not evade (Yin, 2016). Indeed, in the words of philosopher Álvaro Vieira Pinto, “[s]ticking to reminiscences of the past and predictions about the future, every futurology assumes the shape of a social ideology” (Vieira Pinto 2005, p. 90). This, though, can either disenfranchise or liberate, depending upon “the collective intentions that make it relevant for society” (Gonzatto, van Amstel, Merkle and Hartmann, 2013, p. 44).

SCD, as a practice specifically oriented towards the future, is focused on questions and scenarios which function both as proposals of the alternative and vehicles of critique. Dunne and Raby even tell us:

We find the most thought-provoking and entertaining stories extrapolate today's free market capitalist system to an extreme, weaving the narrative around hypercommodified human relations, interactions, dreams, and aspirations (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 73).

And though they seem keen on the possibility, they have been criticized largely for “falling just short of radical” (Yin, 2016, p. 3). Design scholar Cameron Tonkinwise, in

⁹⁸ Neoliberalism broadly refers to a 20th-century resurgence of 19th-century thought currents associated with economic liberalism and free-market capitalism (Springer, Birch and MacLeavy, 2016). The general use of the term typically references the new political, economic, and social arrangements arising within society which emphasize market relations and individual responsibility (Ibid). In that regard, most scholars agree that neoliberalism can be defined as an extension of competitive markets into every aspect of our lives (Ibid). Thus, neoliberalism views competition as the defining feature of human interaction and relationships, ultimately recasting citizens as consumers (Ibid).

a review of *Speculative Everything*, describes SCD as a “speculative recuperation of critique, a significant investment in returning criticism of market-based futures back into a source of just more market-based futures” (Tonkinwise, 2015, p. 184).

Indeed, Dunne and Raby do advocate for design to “step away from industrial production and the marketplace” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 11) as a way of freeing it from market pressures and making it available to explore issues and concepts that were otherwise constricted. One of those concepts, however, is listed as “alternatives to our current model of capitalism” (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 12), which betrays an inability to think beyond that framework.

That same paradigm is also one which reproduces andro- and Eurocentric epistemologies, which does indeed bleed into Dunne and Raby’s descriptions of SCD. Indeed, as scholars Rodrigo Gonzatto, Frederick van Amstel, Luiz Ernesto Merkle, and Timo Hartmann argue, “[w]hen design fiction is problematised and taken in a cultural perspective, it is possible to observe an interplay between domination and resistance” (Gonzatto, van Amstel, Merkle and Hartmann, 2013, p 44), and SCD still maintains the tradition of domesticating the future (Gonzatto, van Amstel, Merkle and Hartmann, 2013).

Following that, a big focus of critique of Dunne and Raby’s SCD is a tendency for homogenization, as well a more general lack of diversity and blindness to difference (Yin, 2016; Prado de O. Martins, 2014), which only helps reinforce an oppressive hegemony. In the terms of philosopher Paulo Freire, naive consciousness favors the oppressor (Freire, 1974). To that end, under the filter of HCI, Pierce et. al. call for transparency in design practice — beginning with the divulgence of the contexts in which it is conducted — and advocates for diverse and messier⁹⁹ epistemologies for producing critique through design (Pierce et. al., 2015).

⁹⁹ See, again, Martha Scotford’s description of messy history (Scotford, 1994).

As scholars Luiza Prado de O. Martins and Shaowen Bardzell have argued, a possible pathway to reframing SCD outside the framework of neoliberalism is, precisely, through feminist epistemologies (Prado de O. Martins, 2014; Bardzell, 2010).

Bardzell argues that gender, because it holds sway through its expression in identities and relationships, does indeed influence how the user might interact with technology¹⁰⁰, adding that gender could, in turn, also be shaped by technology (Bardzell, 2010). She is, thus, proposing a model by which feminism may rise above theoretical afterthought and instead assume an active role in the design process (Ibid).

Further, Bardzell contends that design should heed not only philosophies of gender, but also of social class, sexuality, race, emotion, or desire (Ibid). She does this as a way of avoiding prevailing assumptions in design that there is a universal or ideal user (Ibid). By focusing on feminist theory, though, she seeks to present the idea of a “marginal user” (Ibid, p. 1302) as a counterargument to the notion that there even is a universal one at all (Bardzell, 2010). As she asserts:

A key feminist strategy is to denaturalize normative conventions, both exposing their constructedness as human discourses situated in sociopolitical institutions and exploring alternative approaches (Ibid, p. 1305).

Bardzell also describes two distinct approaches to how feminism might be incorporated into design. The first, critique-based, is predicated upon analysis. It seeks to identify the vulnerabilities of a design or design process through a feminist lens, in order to reveal what unintended consequences may therein arise (Bardzell, 2010). The second, generative, is aimed at utilizing feminist approaches to decision-making and the design process (Ibid). This is done with the intention of generating new insights regarding the practice, thereby influencing the design process in concrete ways (Ibid). In so doing,

¹⁰⁰ This, as you’ll recall, is a reflection of the exogenous position, as discussed in part 1, and which states that it is a person’s social context — be it race, class, gender, politics, etc. — that will dictate how a given object will be interacted with (Friedman and Kahn, 2002).

design may gain awareness of neglected contexts and be better informed about user needs and technological affordances¹⁰¹ (Ibid).

Prado, building on Bardzell's work and drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal work (Crenshaw, 1989), argues for a framework for feminist speculative design as a necessarily intersectional process (Prado de O. Martins, 2014). This, she argues, is intended to challenge the current model for SCD as one which reproduces gender oppression through technological objects¹⁰² (Ibid).

She advocates for a "tangible, non-theoretical" (Ibid, p. 7) approach, anchored in material artifacts as a way of "[provoking] reflection on the privileges that give undue advantage to one part of the population while oppressing another¹⁰³" (Ibid). This is presented as an active vehicle for critique of the ways in which both feminist and design theory can often be inaccessible by favoring a process anchored in effecting the theoretical into concrete practice (Prado de O. Martins, 2014).

This sentiment is also echoed by Keshavarz, who suggests that we examine the "design-politics nexus" through the examination of an artifact, whereby "the thickness of politics is skillfully reduced and thinned by design practices" (Keshavarz, 2016, p. 93). The selected artifact would, in this way, not only confirm the inextricability of the two disciplines, but also inform us as to how exactly they uphold each other by the effects they conduce upon one's life or community (Keshavarz, 2016). Further, the material nature of such an artifact, by converting the theoretical into political praxis, would also "[affirm] the material fabrication of political practices, revealing their power relations as well as affirming the potentiality of rearticulating them in other directions and orientations" (Ibid, p. 93).

¹⁰¹ See Norman, 2013.

¹⁰² This viewpoint, again, seems to favor the exogenous position of how values become embedded in design. See Friedman and Kahn, 2002.

¹⁰³ This is important because, as scholar Gill Kirkup argues, in designing for exclusion and discrimination, even if unwittingly, "[t]he systems and artifacts produced by technoscience [provide] the material foundations for gender inequality" (Kirkup, Janes and Woodward, 2000, xiii).

Moreover, Prado, like Bardzell, also mentions a number of feminist issues that design ought to incorporate, but she centers the issue of privilege in her discussion. She proposes that we incorporate marginalized epistemologies by “[challenging] observers to question their own roles in maintaining social injustice” and utilize the “already dystopian nature of the present for minorities, and ask how their futures would be like” (Prado de O. Martins, 2014, p. 8).

In that regard, she faults SCD for being “hindered by the issues of privilege” (Prado de O. Martins, 2014, p. 6), as a “discipline theorized within the safe confines of developed, European countries and practiced largely by a privileged and mostly white, male, middle class crowd” (Prado de O. Martins, 2014, p. 4) — a larger problem which is, as discussed, shared within the broader design space (Scotford, 1994). And this, she argues, is not exclusive to SCD, given that design is the product of a “patriarchal, classist and racist society” (Prado de O. Martins, 2014, p. 5).

Furthermore, Prado is also interested in interrogating issues of presentation and representation. Namely, what sorts of environments will these artifacts inhabit, and who might be seen engaging with them (Prado de O. Martins, 2014). This, she argues, matters because, as she asserts in an example, “if a video or a photo series on a future scenario only depicts white, European, middle class people, what does that say about the future of minorities?” (Ibid, p. 8).

To that point, scholar Nicci Yin adds that, while representation is undoubtedly important, “there are limits to visibility that can slide easily into merely envisioning another type of consumer without reenvisioning alternative behaviors, relations, or structures” (Yin, 2016, p. 10). In other words, we must be mindful of not incurring the risk of sliding right back into designed neoliberal reproductions which fetishize — to borrow from Bardzell’s “marginal user” (Bardzell, 2010, p. 1302) — a marginal consumer as the commodity¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰⁴ This would, indeed, be another example of commodity fetishism (Gartman, 1986). See also Canli, 2020.

Moreover, though Bardzell and Prado provide us with valuable insight into how design grows to be more inclusive and well informed — less ‘unknowinged’ — they stop just short of effectivizing what a feminist conception of the future might be. Indeed,

[i]t would be awfully restrictive (even not feminist) to consider that there is a ‘right’ way to be a feminist and only one correct, feminist way to think about the future ... but these conceptions of futurity are still necessary to at least have a starting blueprint for the ways in which SCD can envision something other than neoliberal visions (Yin, 2016, p. 10).

3.10 Suggestions

In an attempt to suggest what this might look like, Yin proposed that we turn to the work of José Muñoz, especially the book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). In it, Muñoz focuses on intersectional queer futurity as a political project by emphasizing the importance of hope (Ibid). This, Yin argues, is particularly productive “because an analysis of gender only through marginality or oppression is not enough” (Yin, 2016, p. 10).

To him, hope is “both a critical affect and a methodology” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 4). This contention of hope as affect — as both aspirational and inspirational — contrasts, as Yin asserts, from SCD’s penchant for less optimistic narratives, often the ones encouraged by neoliberalism (Yin, 2016). “While the abject can also be a powerful affect, hope can enable more intentionality in the kinds of people SCD is for and what types of worlds it intends to build” (Ibid, p. 12).

The hope Muñoz speaks to, however, is not ingenuous. If with hope also comes disappointment (Muñoz, 2009), one must then wonder how may designers employ hope as part of design’s theory and praxis. To that, Yin proposes that it is Muñoz’s emphasis on a conception of futurity which prizes relationality and collectivity that makes his queer futurity such a powerful agent against neoliberal defuturing forces (Yin, 2016).

This focus on collectivity and relationality is the backbone of the intersectionality which also permeates relevant feminist epistemologies, making them good complements to help fill in the gaps (Yin, 2016). Indeed, Muñoz evokes projects imagined by queer people of color, such as the Third World Gay Revolution¹⁰⁵ and the black radical tradition — of which the Black Panthers were apart — as a concrete way of driving the importance of the collective (Muñoz, 2009). “The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (Ibid, p. 91).

This, Yin argues, is especially relevant to the manner in which harnessing the power of a collective force would directly oppose the individualistic logic of neoliberalism¹⁰⁶ (Yin, 2016).

By holding the collective and relationality as priorities in this approach to the future, queerness’ conception of futurity can work against the designer-centric, consumer-centric, and individual-centric work that has driven so much of humanitarian, social, and speculative design (Ibid, p. 13).

A similar idea is present in Augusto Boal’s concept of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979). Boal, a believer in theater as a means through which to change one’s reality, devised this as a series of dramatic techniques, in which spectator would become actor — an active agent — within the performed situation with the intent to exposing systemic othering and oppression.

¹⁰⁵ The Third World Gay Revolution group was an organization that grew out of the larger Gay Liberation Front in 1970 (Muñoz, 2009). As the Chicago Gay Liberation gained cultural exposure, there was still tension between lesbians and gay men, and between Black and white homosexuals (Ibid). As such, a Women’s Caucus — which became The Chicago Lesbian Liberation — and a Black Caucus — The Third World Gay Revolution — were formed to address the specific concerns of lesbians and Black gay men. As Muñoz adds, the usage of the term ‘Third World’ relates to a deep identification with the global phenomenon of decolonization, especially as most of the group’s members were people of color (Ibid). It should be noted, however, that this term carries negative connotations, which is specifically why it was used in this context. It is a relic of a derogatory and wholly inadequate system based solely around the Gross National Product as a way of classifying the development of nations (Wolf-Phillips, 1987). Thus, it is no coincidence that most of the lower-ranking nations belong to the global south or have otherwise suffered the effects of colonization — it’s a system designed to uphold Eurocentric hegemony.

¹⁰⁶ As discussed in Debord and Marx’s works (Debord, [1967] 2004; Briziarelli and Armano, 2017).

Through Theatre of the Oppressed, people can better understand themselves, their communities, and their world by deconstructing and analyzing societal structures of power and oppression (Macchia et al., 2016).

Thus, through both fiction (Midal, 2021) and performance, this medium and its techniques might provide an interesting exploration into possible methodologies for design to better grasp the “roles, needs, and resources” of those marginalized and translate them “into effective design practices” (Macchia et al., 2016, p. 126).

A concern with these political power dynamics is, thus, inherent to design, as has been argued throughout this dissertation, and hence also to its potential counter-measures. In a lecture entitled *Monsterizing¹⁰⁷ the Master’s Tools*, a title which directly and intentionally references Audre Lorde’s aforementioned essay, scholar Ece Canlı presents us with ways of identifying these “Master’s tools,” and suggests some others as subversive acts of resistance and reclamation, applicable to all manners in which design permeates our lives (Canlı, 2020).

The first thing to do, however, is to identify the Master’s¹⁰⁸ tools, and how they work, which she does (Ibid) and I will briefly detail in the same spirit, as they share many of the same points I have attempted to make. They are:

¹⁰⁷ The use of the monster symbol in this title is very intentional. As one of the master’s tools, to monsterize is to subjugate (Canlı, 2020). This can be traced back to colonial times, and has been used as a common metaphor in othering rhetoric such as sexist, racist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic discourses (Ibid). In this way, reclaiming the figure of the monster is an act of resistance in itself, as it makes use of the same symbol with an opposing intent. Reclaiming the agency of the monster is also to embrace and wield one’s threat to the master — that is, to the system of oppression itself (Ibid).

¹⁰⁸ As described above, this Master is not any specific master. It speaks to systems of oppression, not identities (Lorde, [1984] 2007; Canlı, 2020).

- ▶ Monsterizing — The Master monsterizes the other¹⁰⁹ as an act of subjugation¹¹⁰ (Ibid).
- ▶ Taxonomizing — The categorization of the other, based on binary hierarchies which define what is “normal” and what is “deviant,” is a way of establishing hegemony (Ibid).
- ▶ Ignoring — denying one’s existence, knowledge and dignity through exclusion or erasure¹¹¹ (Ibid).
- ▶ Taming — because the Master is the systemic, the Master’s tools can be internalized as a way of upholding the established hegemony (Ibid).
- ▶ Appropriating — the trivialization and removal from context of the other’s culture as a way of rendering it innocuous (Ibid).
- ▶ Double-othering — because one’s oppression is not linear¹¹², the othered is not always, nor necessarily, a victim, as they might also participate in the oppression of other others¹¹³ (Ibid).
- ▶ Pity — though often well-intentioned, pity is anchored in a very well delineated power dynamic; those who suffer are the other, not the helper (Ibid).

Now, in having nominated the Master’s tools, we may list those of the monster. These include:

- ▶ Embracing the Monster’s tools — as a way of reclaiming agency; one anchored in the values of the margins (Ibid).

¹⁰⁹ This notion of the other is centered upon an imposed otherness through an act of othering (Canli, 2020). It speaks not of some innate dissimilarity between bodies; rather, it implies a form of socially constructed disparity constructed by a group intent on dominating, subjugating, and disenfranchising those deemed not to belong (Ibid).

¹¹⁰ Examples of this include slavery and the accompanying, and yet enduring, colonial imagery or transphobic representations of trans women as perverse men with “enormous, knuckly, hairy be-ringed [paws]” (Monro, 2001, p. 174) — language which calls on the grotesque to induce repulsion (Monro, 2001).

¹¹¹ This harkens back to Scotford’s messy history vs neat history (Scotford, 1994), or to Gunnarsson-Östling’s study into feminist conceptions of futures within academia (2011).

¹¹² See Crenshaw, 1989.

¹¹³ An example might be Audre Lorde’s description of the white feminist (Lorde, [1984] 2007).

- ▶ Exposing the Master’s tools — deconstructing them by laying them bare makes them transparent, and thus harder to ignore (Ibid).
- ▶ Counter-memorizing — contesting history, from the viewpoint of the other, by rewriting it¹¹⁴ and begin documenting it henceforth as a way of recuperating suppressed epistemologies (Ibid).
- ▶ Boundary-blurring — a conscious effort to move beyond the institutionalized hegemonic binary thinking as a way of formulating possible alternatives (Ibid).
- ▶ Haunting — enforcing change through violence. This violence is not necessarily physical, but rather an impositional act of resistance, in defiance¹¹⁵ (Ibid).
- ▶ Othering the self — as a way of seeing beyond one’s own privilege and search for new solutions (Ibid).
- ▶ Surviving — both literally and metaphorically, while, of course, not impeding the survival of anyone else (Ibid).

This last point, as Canlı argues, implies a personal interpretation; everyone survives in whatever way they may prefer (Ibid). She, however, suggests that we establish bonds of affinity and create collective spaces in the pursuit of methods of collaboration and sharing. This is, in my opinion, the most radical and effective measure we have, especially if the project herein described is one which hopes to defy the individualistic tendencies of neoliberal capitalism.

It is on that feeling of hope, then, the same one from which Muñoz draws (Muñoz, 2009), that I would like to leave this. Such exercises of critique and ideation are necessary not only so that we may point out the flaws of a framework, but also so that we may improve upon it. The neoliberal visions design currently tends to reproduce will not be halted by a different approach, by ‘soft politics’ (Canlı, 2020). Indeed, as Prado points out, design alone will not be capable of resolving anything (Prado de O. Martins, 2014). But, hopefully, by embodying the politics of philosophies such as critical,

¹¹⁴ See, again, Scotford’s messy history (Scotford, 1994).

¹¹⁵ As Canlı argues, design suffers from the problem of “milding the wilding,” often electing to resolve issues in a passive, agreeable manner (Canlı, 2020). These ‘safe politics’ are inadequate when faced with the inherent violence present in the hegemonic politics design embodies and reproduces (Ibid).

intersectional feminism or queer futurity, designers may conceptualize the types of futures Bardzell and Prado and Boal and Muñoz and Canlı advocate for — ones which thrive in plurality instead of reproducing oppression, yet are also anchored in the collective, as well as hopeful.

3.11 Shortcomings and future work

The way we do that, as I hope by now I have argued convincingly, is through a concerted effort to reprioritize our values and legitimize marginalized epistemologies — to, in effect, reclaim ethics as an ethics unto itself. The only problem with this is that it's hard. Actually, it's really hard. As Fry states, we know what the cause of our “wounded world” (Fry, 2007a, p. 88) is.

It is us: we are the problem. We both inflict wounds on 'the world' and are numbered among the wounded. More specifically it is our being (in-the-world) that needs to be healed for the sake of the being-of-being. Human centeredness — anthropocentrism — is thus at the core of the problem (Ibid).

That is, assuredly, not an easy fix. What we need is a new cultural paradigm, yet are only capable of producing small incremental change. What is required to produce those shifts, however, will not look the same to everyone, nor everywhere. This is something of which this type of discourse is aware. Indeed, it asserts the importance of it being contingent and rejects the universal (Fry, 2003; Fry, 2004; Le Dantec, Poole and Wyche, 2009; Borning and Muller, 2012; Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley, 2011). It is “contingent rather than foundational” (Fry, 2004, p. 155) for good reason. After all, “there can be no fixed nature as a reference point, nor any certainty about what the imperatives of the future will be” (Ibid).

This does, however, pose a few implicit limitations to the following praxis. In most cases, futures of sustainment are left just short of being named or effectivized, remaining only idealized necessities. Indeed, both Bardzell and Prado stop short of just

that, as does Fry. “Thinking, talking, planning, acting — it is all there to do” (Fry, 2004, p. 156).

I believe this to be due twofold. For one, as Yin expressed just earlier, there is no “‘right’ way to be a feminist” (2016, p. 10), and the same is true of any relevant philosophy. This makes it very difficult to concretize this type of discourse, as it’s necessarily rooted in contingency by its very nature and thus displays no clear path forward. On the other hand, as Fry describes it:

[A] paradigmatic shift in our ‘being-in-the-world’ — proffers a condition of limitation that (dialectically) provides an almost unlimited scope of action over an unlimited expanse of time (Fry, 2003, p. 295).

In other words, the vast array of possibilities is too overwhelming to begin narrowing down.

Another flaw in the present discourse is, precisely, the critique Prado levels at academia (Prado de O. Martins, 2014), rooted in the same elitism of which Twemlow speaks (Twemlow, 2017). For how critical it is, a critical stance is not always easy to produce, nor to reproduce. Theory, as Prado argues, is often inaccessible (2014), which, ineluctably, contributes to it being less understood, interpreted, and ultimately even sought out. Thus, less praxis will, inevitably, follow because it’s difficult to enact. This, in tandem with the contingency inherent to it, also implies a necessary space for plurality, which suggests a singular concrete method or application could be both counterintuitive and counter effective.

Furthermore, in dealing with heretofore marginalized epistemologies, there is an inherent deficit in visibility, incontrovertibly followed by a higher level of scrutiny. If something fails, the temptation to say it would never have worked will be much higher. And because there is such underwhelming representation, much more accountability will be demanded. In effect, one has to not just try, but also do it perfectly. That, of

course, places an undue burden on ideation and subsequent creation, which will also contribute to there being less of it.

Unfortunately, we end up backing ourselves into a corner a little bit. This is a very understandable, even necessary problem; but that also means it's very hard to overcome. But that tension is also one which may never be resolved. It is what will keep us from reversing the progress we've made, and what will help us strive for ever better.

Making the first move toward remaking one's self to become a 'being-in-the-world toward-sustainment' requires an initial exercise of embracing the 'dialectic of sustainment' at a personal level of elimination and remaking of thought and action, with the aim of becoming a more clear(ed) thinking, response-able and critical actor. Essential to this exercise is the rejection of a utopian view of 'sustainability' and recognising the creation of the epoch of sustainment as an enduring work, without an endpoint, but just process (the process of being sustainable) (Fry, 2003, p. 295).

Future work will have to do just that. It will have to build the net onto which we can take the leap. Indeed, following Brian Massumi's conception of ethics, the latter itself becomes a means of becoming (Grosz, 1999) — becoming towards what he describes as affect¹¹⁶, and shaped by change itself (Massumi, 2015). As he expounds:

Ethics is completely situational. ... [It] happens between people, in the social gaps. ... The ethical value of an action is what is bring out in the situation, for its transformation, how it breaks sociality open. Ethics is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together. ... Basically the 'good' is affectively defined as what brings maximum potential and connection to the situation. It's defined in terms of becoming (Ibid, p. 11).

¹¹⁶ Massumi distinguishes between emotion and affect, which, like did Baruch Spinoza, he defines as “the capacity to affect or be affected” (Massumi, 2015, p. 93). In so doing, however, Massumi places the affect in external and interpersonal interactions within a society, rather than on one's internal psyche (Massumi, 2015).

To Massumi, though, ethics is more than merely living in ambiguity. It is also about the acts of gauging this “potential” within a given sociocultural environment, and contemplating their ascribed implications (Massumi, 2015). This notion of potentiality is, thus, a key feature of his thinking, as it refers to the awareness one need have so as to be able to assess not only what is indeterminately unfolding, but also how things may differ from their current form (Ibid). In this way, Massumi’s ethics places emphasis on attentiveness to affect, as a part within the larger societal collective. Heeding the potentiality found in affect, even if it cannot immediately be understood, thereby implies a means of conceptualizing change — of becoming (Grosz, 1999) — and, by extension, a potential way through which to reconsider ethics (Massumi, 2015).

This affective ethics demands simply that we be aware that something is to occur, and that that may call on us for reciprocation. In this way, the potentiality Massumi describes, through attentive affective recognition of the social happenings within a given context, is itself something that could make tangible the intangible, and possible the uncertain.

This I find very valuable in the face of such a project. Sustainment entails a thorough and transformative reprioritization of our values and assumptions; and feminist, queer, and post-colonial alternatives must be given a space to be adequately explored as critical to that cultural remaking, even if that means failure. Indeed, perhaps especially if that means failure, particularly of the queer kind¹¹⁷; if not only because, in Massumi’s view, we can use such trying uncertainty as the very thing to mold from (2015).

Because all these blueprints exist, we can now take from them all the best parts and eliminate or transform those that are inadequate. These methods are valuable, though incomplete. The caution of VSD and SCD’s ability to viscerally visualize and repudiate

¹¹⁷ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, scholar Jack Halberstam advocates for the embrace of queer failure, as an act of antinormative, anticapitalist, and antidisciplinary resistance (Halberstam, 2011). Through this work, the author aims to deconstruct the traditional view of success, accounting for the possibility to fail well by not winning — that is, by disrupting conventional boundaries and not contributing to a capitalist culture which views success as the accumulation of material goods (Ibid). In so doing, Halberstam hopes to bring our attention to an entire body of non-traditional, non-normative work that ought to be taken seriously, though seldom is (Ibid).

bad futures are great bases upon which to build. The consequentialist, duty, and virtue frameworks for ethical decision-making are great places to start, especially when coupled with Massumi's conception of ethics. We just need to strive for substance, not settle for its aesthetic. To, in Massumi's terms, tentatively, be affectively aware of the potential for how things could be, rather than as they presently are (Massumi, 2015).

Design alone might not be "capable of changing society" (Prado de O. Martins, 2014, p. 8). Indeed, a new cultural paradigm requires fundamental cultural and epistemological shifts in, well, everything it permeates. "Nonetheless, as both a product and a producer of societal values it could trigger visible cultural shifts when approached with an interdisciplinary and critical stance¹¹⁸" (Ibid, p. 8).

Design absolutely can help, we just need to care. But the kind of caring that is required here is not one based simply on empathy¹¹⁹, or pity, which, as argued, can be one of the Master's Tools. And this is so because that kind of care is anchored in a power dynamic which places the self above the collective¹²⁰. What is required, then, is a collective sense of care, care of and for resistance — a radical care¹²¹. That is how we incorporate ethics into the design practice — how we achieve "a convergence of meaning and method whereby 'Good Design' and 'embodied ethics' become the same thing" (Fry, 2007a, p. 91). It must become integral to the way we think about design's theory and praxis. And not just because it is, but also because it is the only way forth to sustainment.

¹¹⁸ Indeed, in this regard, the recent developments in the discipline of transition design might help facilitate the kind of societal and cultural shifts required (Irwin, 2015).

¹¹⁹ According to scholar Paul Bloom, though often well-intentioned, empathy is, ultimately, a bad guide for ethical judgment (Bloom, 2016). Further, he argues that ethical decision-making on the basis of empathy — a type of caring which is focused, rather than dispersed — can render one hyper-focused on individual struggles and insensitive to the plight of the collective (Ibid).

¹²⁰ To be clear, I am not deriding acts of self-care; merely, the power dynamic inherent to a type of care which focuses on one's privilege. Indeed, in the words of Audre Lorde: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde, [1988] 2017, p. 130).

¹²¹ See Hobart and Kneese, 2020.

I do not, however, wish to lose the hope that was so dear to Muñoz's conception of queer futurity in this exercise of critique. Critique is necessary, but complacency is not sustainable.

All of these things already exist as they are, and, as such, they can only be improved upon.

Conclusion

As argued throughout, whether implicit or explicit, ethics is an inescapable facet of the design process. They are impossible to separate, and thus their relationship is simply unavoidable. Ethics is always there, even if we don't think about it. Indeed, perhaps especially if we don't.

I began by posing the question of whether ethics could help shape the ever-expanding field of design. Now, at the end, we see that not only can it, but it must. Ethical implications abound in the design choices we decide to make. The problem, however, is that we are largely not considering them when it matters — before the damage is done.

Failing to consider ethics, and thereby failing to act as ethical agents, makes us complicit in a design which perpetuates and communicates oppression. This is why an approach that centers ethics as an integral and explicit part of the design process is so important. Design mediates our interactions with the world, others, and even ourselves. So including ethics as a basal and a priori step within its process is essential so that we may design futures that are inclusive, rather than exclusionary — a paradigm built on a holistic notion of sustainment.

There are, however, some limitations inherent to an investigation such as this. Namely, the confines of a traditional academic setting and a significant contextual bias. The fact that is an inquiry informed largely by Eurocentric research methods — with their accompanying epistemological and ethical priorities — for a Eurocentric institution conducted in an Anglophone language, though it doesn't invalidate the work itself, should also not be ignored. Language in particular shapes a lot of what one finds when engaging in research projects. English being my principal language inevitably eschewed search results which favored literature and methodologies already valued within the Eurocentric hegemony herein described, and also which exclude any contributions made in a language I am not familiar with.

Moreover, my own privilege as someone with access to higher education and the economic means as well as the time to conduct this type of research is, likewise, something that should not go unnoticed.

This is something that, hopefully, might be improved by future work that breaks epistemological ground. Given the nature of what is being discussed, though, what this work will look like is impossible to define in fine strokes. Contingent solutions must be found in each specific context, which makes it abound in possibility. Literature on marginal topics is increasing in circulation, which means that future work — especially if considering Massumi’s conception of an ethics anchored in potential or Muñoz’s transformative power of queer hope — is not just promising, but also exciting.

Practical solutions are also crucial in bridging the gap between often inaccessible academic theory and concrete implementation. Additionally, an ethics which centers marginal priorities must be foregrounded if we are to envision and ultimately suggest what these designed futures might look like. As such, spaces for unencumbered and unmarred experimentation are important to iterate potentials in a manner that does not sustain or reproduce harmful epistemologies.

Design alone may not be capable of such transformative agency, but it certainly informs as much as it is informed by socially codified values and priorities. Further, given design’s yet short and unstable history, what we choose to do now will carry significant sway in molding the discipline into one which is capable of producing and upholding sustainable values. We are, quite literally, shaping this history, and what it will look like is up to us.

Faced with all this, we can now take these insights and strive for ethical work — better and more inclusive — that challenges rather than acquiesces. Or we can ignore them and keep on producing work that is dismissive, exclusionary, and which merely reproduces that which is already assumed to be known and valuable — thus making it stale, stagnant, and, above all, unethical.

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Appendix A

Each topic covered in the texts by category in every document (AIGA, 2009; AFD, 2012; AGDA, 1996; CSD, n.d.; ESD, Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011; IDSA, 2020):

Categories	Topics	AIGA	AFD	AGDA	CSD	ESD	GDC	ICoD	IDSA
Social Responsibilities	Environment	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	Follow the law				•		•		•
	Improve society		•				•	•	
	Protect human rights	•					•		•
	Responsibility for public safety and well-being	•				•			•
	Respect for the audience	•				•	•	•	
	Do not harm	•					•		
	Accessibility						•		•
Social and Personal Responsibilities	Commit time to doing good						•		
	Responsibility for the endorsement of the client and the product	•				•			
	Responsibility for preventable consequences					•			
	Support free speech and freedom of assembly	•							
Personal Responsibilities	Virtuosity		•			•			
	Contingency					•			
	If you must accept unethical work, compensate for it in some way					•			
Personal and Professional Responsibilities	Uphold the integrity of the profession	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Be qualified and keep improving knowledge and skills	•	•				•		•
Professional Responsibilities	Conflicts of interest	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
	Responsibility to the client	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Plagiarism/copyright/licensing	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
	Do not hinder other designer's work		•	•	•	•	•	•	•

	Professional minutia	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Honesty and transparency	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
	Wage fairness	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Responsibilities to designers	Responsibilities of employers					•	•		
	Responsibilities of educators					•			•
Responsibilities to the Code	Follow the code/do not violate the code	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Encourage others to follow the code				•				•
	Follow local codes when practising overseas where there is no conflict (stressing the importance of following a code)			•			•	•	

Appendix B

Graph of the frequency by topic for all documents (AIGA, 2009; AFD, 2012; AGDA, 1996; CSD, n.d.; ESD, Goh, 2012; GDC, 2019; ICoD, 2011; IDSA, 2020):

Topic frequency

