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A NEW THIN RED LINE WORLD? MULTIVOCALITY AND DESIGN::

CLIVE DILNOT

I. The Question of Humanism

"Nine days before his death Immanuel Kant was visited by his physician. Old, ill, and nearly blind, he rose from his chair and stood trembling with weakness and muttering unintelligible words. Finally his faithful companion realized that he would not sit down again until the visitor had taken a seat. This he did, and Kant then permitted himself to be helped to his chair and, after regaining some of his strength, said … 'The sense of humanity has not yet left me.' The two men were moved almost to tears. For though the word Humanitat had come … to mean little more than politeness and civility, it had, for Kant, a much deeper significance, which the circumstances of the moment seemed to emphasize: man's proud and tragic consciousness of self-approved and self-imposed principles, contrasting with his utter subjection to illness, decay and all that is implied in the word 'mortality.'" (<150)

There are a number of reasons to begin my talk with this quotation, which comes, as some of you, may recognize, from the opening paragraph of Erwin Panofsky's 1940 Princeton lecture, 'The History of Art as a Humanist Discipline.' Though the rest of Panofsky's talk does not, I think, live up to the aspirations of the title, this paragraph has always moved me, above all because of the poignancy of Kant's gesture. Kant's insistence, despite, or perhaps because of, his frailty, on enacting the values felt closest to him holds, I think, a significant lesson for design, and one that I'll come back to at the end of the talk. (>300)

But let's begin from this concept of humanitat, and why I might want to put it on the table today. It is of course difficult, today, for us to simply identify with Panofsky's proposition. Humanism is a concept that—rightly —has become deeply problematic for us. No one who looks at the appalling European-led history of the last century can look with equanimity on its genteel rhetoric. Behind the failure to sufficiently ground, institutionalize and embed its ideals in society—such that the barbarism we have lived through (and are continuing to witness) could not happen—lies a catastrophe of terrifying proportions. Adorno's famous proposition was that Auschwitz introduces a new demand into the world—that we should work to ensure that it, or what is like it, should not be repeated. In that respect we have failed. 'Night and more night' is the underlying legacy that we offer—it is what our civilization, outside of its magical moments of escape, has come down to. And this is perhaps the catastrophe—meaning, as George Steiner put it thirty-five years ago, that the catastrophe is not only that barbarism flourishes, but that we internalize it as the natural state of affairs within which we live. He goes on: 'Today … we find ourselves in a culture in which the methodical use of torture towards political ends is widely established. We come immediately after a stage in history in which

millions of men, women and children were made to ash. Currently, in different parts of the earth, communities are again being incinerated, tortured, deported. There is hardly a methodology of abjection and of pain which is not being applied somewhere, at this moment, to individuals and groups of human beings. Asked why he was seeking to arouse the whole of Europe over the judicial torture of one man, Voltaire answered, in March 1762, c'est que je suis homme.' By that token, he would today, be in constant and vain cry. That this should be the case is catastrophic. The wide-scale reversion to torture and mass-murder, the ubiquitous use of hunger and imprisonment as political means, mark not only a crisis of culture but, quite conceivably, an abandonment of the rational order of man.' (>700)

There has to be a reason then, and a very good reason, to run the risk of humanism. For humanism in its empty form—'little more than politeness and civility' as Panofsky puts it—is the shadow of the barbarity that continues to disfigure our attempts to pretend to a civilized life.

But the risk of humanism in its strong form—the attempt to enact, or better to realize, a conception of dignity (no other word will do) based—here is Panofsky again—on 'both the insistence on human values (rationality and freedom) and the acceptance of human limitations (fallibility and frailty)' from which in turn result the postulates of responsibility and tolerance—is also the necessary risk that any serious human project much run—including that of design. (>800)

The reason why I have chose to open with this proposition is that today I think circumstances both within and without design, are forcing us to abandon what I will call the "neutrality," the 'repressive tolerance,' the blandness of design discourse. Today, I think, we are in a new time, with new problems and new opportunities—though optimism is the least of virtues at this moment. Those new problems (and even opportunities) concern the changing position of design, but they concern also the context from which we began—the appalling contrast between the felt poignancy of Kant's gesture (with all that, as hope, is embedded in it) and what our civilization has come too in terms of market forces and gratuitous public violence, —the latter aimed consistently today note, not principally at other armed forces but at civilian populations. (If any of wish to doubt our slide into barbarity, consider this, that WWI, with 10m dead was the last major war in which military casualties outnumbered those of civilians. In every major war since that I have looked at the reverse is true—with the dubious honor of the most extreme or obscene ratio of civilian to military deaths being perhaps the recent "civil" wars in the Congo, where the ratio, according to the New York Times, reached 1:62). (>1000)

Traditionally, we have held facts such as this one that I just mentioned, at a distance form design. What, one may ask, does design have to do with war? Surely these are incommensurables. But, are they? We can't, or we shouldn't—though dammit we try—to write a history of twentieth century design without World Wars One and Two. But how could we, when so much of what makes design in the decades following each grows out of these wars? (But then notice how few books there are on design in the 1940s, as compared to the 1930s or the 1950s).

What is lost, for us, is the "golden age," of design autonomy and design innocence.

Multivocality refers to condition in which the idea of a single, un-linear and progressively unfolding history of design as an autonomous history, as the history of a practice that need not, at extreme, refer to history per se at all (as the famous history of dress that I once read which declared WWII, quote, 'an inconvenience' for the French fashion industry) is over. Multivocality is the kind of transition zone between the history (and theory of design) that grew up around autonomy and notion of fixed and determinate spheres of professional expertise and cultural value, and the histories and theories that I think will emerge in this century, which will be based on a quite other view of design and the relations that it subtends to the culture of which, by necessity is it is a part. (<1200)

II. Design Today

Of course design, if pressed, would always want to be aligned with the humanist project. In a sense it always presumes this alliance, proclaiming itself as operating on behalf of the subject. But in practice we can align it only with humanitat in its weaker form. Perhaps precisely because design presupposes its humanist affiliations (which allows on occasion to flaunt the reverse) it fails to fully articulate them, even though we know that implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, this was the very question that was at stake in practice, even when disguised by other more visible concerns (I am thinking here particularly of some aspects of early modern design).

One of the differences we face today is that this difficulty with dealing with the subject of and for design—which is what this older attitude amounted to—is falling away. Already to speak about the multivocality of design studies means for me asking about the meaning, for us, today and in the future, of design.

To ask about the meaning of design for us is a subtly different question to asking about the meaning of design per se. The latter, which is the usual way we have asked this question over the last hundred years or so, gives back the answer that the meaning of design is to be found within design. Modern design is essentially the exploration of what this answer might mean. Design history and design studies as we receive them today are essentially formed in relation to this premise and are indeed the articulation of it.

Today, however, we are in a different place. The concept of post-modernity, an absurdity on one level (in that it is clear that the global modernizing project is very far from over) has a meaning for us in so far as we can think of it as marking the point where the question of the meaning of design for us, takes over from the question of the meaning of design per se. (>1300)

This is not a trivial shift. To take only one example, familiar to all of us, we can agree I think that interaction provides a key metaphor for design today. But not only does interaction necessarily bring the subject to the fore (for it brings forward questions of what it means to be the subject who interacts) interaction is also a metaphor for how, in general, we are as subjects today. In other words in thinking interaction (in regard to design) we cannot but also think of conditions of subjective life as a whole; the congruence between a condition and design and how we find ourselves and the possibilities of being open to us (or closed to us) is direct.

This in itself, if we take it seriously, portends a revolution in design thinking. But we can go further. That interaction is a ruling metaphor for design in our time, also tells us that the mediation it offers, between subjective life and the systems through which today we are enabled to operate in the ways now demanded of us, comes as a consequence of the fact that the artificial has now become the effective horizon and medium of our existence.

This shift, which I date as occurring roughly between 1945 and 1985—so that we are already two decades into what some geologists have recently labeled the Anthropocene age—is both momentous and unprecedented. If human life has always been dependent on artifice; if it is a definition of the human in my view that we are effectively unable to survive as humans without a minimum of conscious artifice, the artificial has never previously constituted the effective entirety of the horizon and medium of human life — such, that most notably, nature today becomes, in effect, a consequence of artifice.

It would be foolish to think that in this new context design 'stays the same.'
It does not. In this context, the question of design is no longer that of 'the thing itself,' design is not "about" autonomy, instead, it concerns how we chart the relationships between subjects, world and artifice. Neither all encompassing nor negligible, both the role and subject matter of design change.

On the one hand, as we've just seen, today the question of design and the question of what the subject can be now (of what and how we can be) no longer inhabit different realms. This means that to ask about the "meaning of design" today is effectively also to ask about the nature and character of our being under artifice. But then, as the mediation of subjects and objects—or subjects and artifice—design is also today directly a reflection upon and an agent of discovery concerning what it is that the artificial can be, for if the artificial now constitutes the horizon of our worlds, what it is that the artificial can be, in relation to us, is only in the infancy of exploration.

It is indeed quite possible to see the history of design over the last 250 years, i.e., since the onset of early industrialization, as the pre-history of now—the present therefore being the moment of the first maturation of artifice as horizon of the work and the beginning—the infancy—of the epoch in which we struggles with what this means. In this context the question with which we have to deal, the question that faces us collectively, as subjects today is that of how, in regard artifice and artificial, we are able to place the human.

This is a practical, and necessarily futures-orientated question but it is also an intellectual one. Given that the artificial is the horizon and medium of our existence, how do we interpose the human? Or, to put this the other way around, how can we begin to conceive of an adequate relationship between the world of artifice and the artificial and the biological, but crucially also the more than biological, conditions of human life?
And what, in relation to all this, is the potential role of design? (1000)

III. Design Studies, Again

Whatever answer we give to this question has a form different than we have tended to think of design in the past. For much of the last century, as I've said, design has apparently constituted its own meaning. Today, this premise still effective constitutes the character of design studies. But this is not without problems intellectually, for we receive from this model a highly ambiguous tradition of how we think concerning design.

Take for example, the relationship, verging on indifference, between design and its "others." The result could scarcely be more unfortunate. As Tony Fry has put it, in a lapidary phrase that I have quoted before, design today is distinguished by the indifference shown it by other disciplines as by the indifference, in turn, it shows to other intellectual fields. Like all summaries this one caricatures the truth. But it nonetheless describes the general situation—which gets a slightly different articulation in a formulation by Ken Friedman where he speaks of the limitations of how design research is prepared to consider what might constitute the literature in its field. What both Fry and Friedman, if differently, are getting at here is what Panofsky, in 1940, was equally keen to refute—the idea that the specificity of the field of concern could be a reason to refuse the wider intellectual engagement that was implied by its subject matter.

But what also differentiates the History of Art as Panofsky saw it and design as we have thought it until today is the status of the field. If the History of Art is a relatively recent field in Universities, nonetheless, particularly in Germany it had already acquired a significant status well before the end of the C19th. Panofsky, in arguing for the History of Art as a humanistic discipline—and therefore as central discipline in the humanities— was, to a degree, pushing at open door. By 1940, all the essentials for agreement with his proposition were in place. The situation of design is, as none of you need telling, is much more ambiguous, and this is not only a matter of the universities and their assessment of the significance of design as both practice and field of study, it is the product of a much more general cognitive marginalization of design. (>400)

It is needless to say that this marginalization is internalized in the psyche of design studies, which somewhat schizophrenically lives this disdain while also been aware of its converse.

What characterizes our time however—it is one of the opportunities presented to us—is that the conditions which, historically, have marginalized design, are today breaking down. We find ourselves moving beyond

the epoch of design in the industrial sphere (and thus "the designer") to a much more complex model of development and transformation in which design is both more present but more diffused; in which what we can recognize as "autonomy" still exists, but in modes that are changing, fundamentally, its character.

Even technology is now falling by the wayside as a factor that is marginalizing design. Just as production ceased to be a real issue after WWI—and even more WWII—had proved it possible to obtain levels of production and to develop levels of productive capacity previously only hinted at, so today, given current levels of technological innovation, technology per se ceases to be itself significant. The crucial questions today, and for the foreseeable future, does not resolve around questions of technology per se, rather they concern the relations we can establish between the systems of artificiality as a whole and the conditions of human existence. Indeed, we can say that for the first time the crucial questions that we now face as human beings are configurational not technical.

Attention shifts therefore, from technology towards the more intellectually (and economically, politically, culturally, scientifically) complex questions of configuring a world that is genuinely self-sustaining over the long run. This question now takes on a complexity and a seriousness that also belies the universities' (continuing) assumption (and the presuppositions of many in design) that issues concerning configuration are of null intellectual interest or consequence. The question of how we are—how we can be—human in a world of artifice, of what conditions of existence we require to be adequately human in this context, is in fact the central questions for the liberal university in the coming century.

All this changes the position of design—and therefore how we might think of design studies.

In earlier circumstances design could play at being marginal and in that playing, and in the interest of play, could refute its responsibilities—economic, ethical, intellectual. But irresponsibility is not possible today because of the situation that we face.

Here I come back for a moment to Panofsky and both the thesis he advances and the context he advances it in.

Panofsky's talk has continuing force because in it he attempts to explicitly link the study of the visual field to the wider human and intellectual landscape. To be sure, he did not, in my view, articulate fully the nature of this link. But he did sufficient to leave no doubt as to the relationship that was demanded here.

But Panofsky also gives this argument another twist, one that we also need to pay attention to. He is speaking, remember, at a time—1940—when, under the hammer blows of fascism the (European) humanist world of which he is a singular example is going up in flames. In its own way the assertion of humanism is a statement of resistance to Nazism.
Take one step back and its hard not to feel that the sense of incipient crisis of the late 1930s eerily parallels our own sense of living on the edge of dark times.

Neither design nor its scholarship can be immune to this condition. Naïve optimism or mere avoidance notwithstanding (endemic characteristics of both design practice and its scholarship) the new structural position that design inhabits in a world now given over to artifice—with all the crises, actual and incipient that are involved in this condition— belies the naivety with which, so often, it is practiced. The key for understanding what is involved here—and therefore what is involved in the "multivocality" of design studies—lies in grasping, in further and deeper ways, the nature of the objective changes in the situation and context of design today, and in understanding what flows from this, practically and intellectually.

It is to this task I'll now turn. (<1000)

IV. Where we are

I have said elsewhere that, in my view, we entered, post-1945, a new world—meaning this in the deepest sense of the term. It is then that we open into a different historical epoch, one for which the proceeding two hundred years (which almost exactly mark the period of the first and second industrial revolutions) are in effect the preparation.

In saying this I am not proposing a teleology or even a movement of history in any law-like manner. The observation of a decisive break with the previous logic or structure of history concerns only the point (which can be almost quantifiably measured) at which the increasing artificiality of the world begins to replace nature as the ultimate horizon of our existence. 1945 marks this point in part because the intense militarization of the world over the proceeding decade —a matter of production, logistics and organization as much as sheer artifice—in effect breaks, finally, with proceeding centuries in which incipient industrialization had still competed with pre-industrial modes of living—in other words, after 1945, we are physically prepared for the world-as-artifice; but 1945 also marks the point at which, for the first time, mankind (I use the term deliberately) is capable of setting-off its own destruction. (<4500)

This fact introduces a new discontinuity into history. Whatever ravages war had made in preceding times, and despite whatever genocides have been perpetuated to wipe individual groups of humans from the face of the earth (the Tasmanian aboriginal population for example) human society as a whole, in some form, was a guaranteed fact. The repetition of history, and more precisely the flow of past, present and future was assured at the largest scale.

After 1945 this is no longer necessarily true. The level of potential destruction of the human habitat following a large-scale nuclear exchange introduces a threat of effective annihilation of tolerable conditions of human life—nor should the apparent relative amelioration of the this threat after 1989 delude us into thinking that we have a return to the status-quo. The threats that now face us—which I've characterized elsewhere as the four new horseman of the apocalypse—inequality, or greed; unsustainability, or waste; barbarism, or the inability to respond to suffering; and destructiveness, or the inability to contend with what we have made—are more long-term, they may yet be just a severe.

In all of this design has an organically different role. We saw earlier that the question of design and the question of what and how we can be as subjects no longer inhabit different realms. We may say that, to a degree, this has always, in fact, been the case. This is true in so far as artifice is a perpetual mediator of what it is to be human. But today this relationship is unavoidable. It constitutes us. And the task of both practice and thinking is to explore the nature of what now arises as possibilities for us (which means also dangers) in this situation.

We can see, I think, two elements. The first is based on crisis and what flows from that; the second from opportunity. Let me briefly outline both.

The crises of survivability that I listed above (my "four new horseman of the apocalypse" introduce a condition in which we are broken from assured continuity, a condition which the present becomes the point of a constant negotiation between past and future as well as the place in which we must struggle to deal with the deep antitheses of the context in which we now live. In this setting, the key question for us concerns how we mediate artifice, vis-à-vis ourselves, as subjects, and vis-à-vis the conditions of our existence— natural, social, psychological, and above all, in the longer run, economic. I make this last emphasis because I think the underlying project of our time has to be how we can create an-other economy, for without a transformation away from the dominance of pure market forces and towards a more co-operative model of economic relations, the chances of ameliorating ecological and social disaster are in my view nil. But one particular characteristic of our times with which we must deal is that such a transformation cannot only be regarded as a project for the future. For the insight that we live in a moment where there is no continuity with

either past or future means not only that the relation with the past must be re-thought each time in the present (i.e., must be made as such) but that there can be no defrayal of problems into the future because in a certain sense, the future is not. The bridge to the future—even the possibility of the future—must be established now.

This also means, and this is crucial, that the present is now understood as the site where we have to seek to resolve, on almost daily basis, the tensions between the forces, creative and especially destructive, which are molding our societies. To contend with what we have made, and to face, adequately, the capacities for destructiveness embodied even in day-to-day economic and technological practices, are two of the principal intellectual requirements of our time. They are what we have no choice but to deal with if we are to leave our children with anything but a destroyed world. To put this in a slightly different way, the destructiveness implicit in what is—which is only balanced by the extreme creative potential also wrapped into artificiality—calls for a quite different mentality or intellectual and practical framework if we are to engage adequately with these questions.
(<1000)

V. The future, retrospectively: (I) "Multivocality"

It is from these perspectives regarding the current and future requirements of being human in an epoch of artifice that, in my view, we can derive the intellectual criteria of what it means to study design in a "multi-vocal" world. In fact, as I want to show in the remainder of the talk, there are really two agendas here, one addressing multivocality per se—to some extent already a historical question, the second addressing the kind of emerging issues which are not so much "beyond" multivocality as its next stage.

Let me begin with multivocality. For me this term in fact evokes what I will call the period of transition between the onset of the possibility of the world as artifice around1945, and its effective assured realization—let us say, for sake of argument, in the decade between1985/1995—these dates being used as marking the onset of personal computing on a mass-scale, the development of the internet and the setting into place of the structure of global market forces that have their victory in simultaneous dissolution of the Soviet empire and the opening up of China (and India) to large-scale capitalist investment.

I take multivocality here to represent, in design terms, the design equivalent to the transformations in global politics engendered by WWI and II. The former had given rise to the Soviet Union and to the US as an incipient, though not yet actual, world power. WWII confirmed the world status of both, while the economic and human costs of the two wars, and, in terms of the empires, the sweeping defeat of the imperial powers by Japan in 1942, had together combined to weaken and marginalize Europe—in effect, after 1945, Europe no longer has any kind of leadership role in the modern world, neither economically, technically, culturally or morally. Thus whereas Pevsner, writing in the 1930s but in many aspects (unsurprisingly) taking up the assumptions of an earlier generation, has presupposed the centrality of Europe—moving, in Pioneers of Modern Design, with almost Marxist alacrity from the sites of the first (Britain) to the second (Germany, Austria, Italy, Russia) industrial revolutions, after 1945 this assumption of European centrality, and with it the assumption of a singular linear developmental history definitively breaks down. (>6000)

To be sure, as we know, it took some time for the older imperial powers (as well as for the citizenary of Europe, intellectual or no) to accept their new role—the debacle of Suez, 50 years ago, is the key image here, but more significant, in a way, is that Suez followed the year after the Bandung conference of non-aligned nations (1955), an event which marks the real escape from European tutelage of the African and Asian nations. Similarly, the mentalities of centrality, and the narratives of singular process, were hard to let go of.

I can give you one, almost comic, yet rather pathetic, even embarrassing, example of the presuppositions of the older Europe, in the case of a famous series of television program produced in Britain when I was a child. Kenneth Clark, who was then director of the National Gallery in London, fronted a 13-week examination of Civilization. Naturally focused on Western Europe there was a moment in the first program where he explained what was included and excluded from the series. People might be surprised he said at the almost complete absence of Spain from these programs. Where this a program on the history of art he said, then naturally Spain—with Velasquez, Goya, et al—would have to be included, but, he insisted, this is a series about Civilization and [quote] Spain has contributed little or nothing to the rise of Western civilization ….. I need not go on. That this could be said as late as 1964 speaks horribly both to British insularity and the survival of what one can only call archaic mentalities.

The objective proof of the changed situations that I am talking about in the fact that although histories of the modern movement, pre-1939, have proved relatively easy to write—even in their diversity—the same cannot be said for histories of the period post-1945, almost all of which are incoherent, not in their details, but in the underlying structure of the account. Unable to make a convincing singular narrative—the field is too large, too diverse, too complex, too endemically multi-vocal—and given the lack of any alternate model what we find today is the impossibility of a history of design post-1945 and thus the consequent fragmentation —by no means a wholly negative development—of the field.

But this multiplicity of voices and stories does not add back up to a convincing whole in the sense of a singular narrative. If one could be done it would probably have to be done in Marxist terms, i.e., aligned to the dominant global economic structures of the period—but even then one would be faced with overlapping economic cycles and a degree of the inter-lacing of multiple circumstances that would give the lie to any idea of a simple, singular and certainly developmental narrative. (>6500)

The gains and losses in this process are fairly clear I think.

The unilinear scheme of the developmental model of design gave us clarity.

"Pioneers" (i.e. Pevsner's Pioneers of Modern Design) is written from exactly this point of view. To be sure, even here the church of design is broader and more catholic than one might think—and catholic also in this particular sense is Pevsner's careful linking of design with painting on one side, and architecture on the other. While Reyner Banham amongst others was to poke fun at the first of these connections—asking derisively what symbolism in painting in 1890 had to do with emerging modern architecture (the answer was more than Banham supposed—even while Banham significantly extended the range of what was brought into the history of the modern period)—Pevsner's great contribution was to allow a catholic sense of the modern to co-exist with the predominant sense of a unilinear progressive ideal—witness for example the two volumes of essays edited by Dennis Sharp, but in part conjunction with Pevsner (and J M Richards), on the "Rationalists" and the "Anti-Rationalists" in the early modern movement.

By contrast, the situation of contemporary multi-vocality is at the opposite end of the spectrum. The loss of narrative coherence and a unilinear model of historical development both expresses and reflects the loss of modernity in its classic sense. This loss of modernity as a singular narrative is however balanced by the coming into view of other histories and versions of the modern. As European core centrality falls away it becomes possible to value differently the emergent or once seemingly marginal 'modernisms' of the so-called peripheral countries—be they European (aspects of Scandinavian design; design in Spain and Portugal, today, the Baltic countries or eastern Europe) or global (one thinks of the recovery of modernist art, architecture and design in Mexico or Brazil for example). At best, in the work of someone like Kenneth Frampton in architecture, these moments are woven into what is probably the single most coherent historical narrative of a design form that we possess—a narrative that manages also to weave together an effectively autonomous history of architecture with a relation to those wider circumstances, social, technological, economic, with which it is necessarily engaged.

Frampton's narrative steers just clear of the alternate temptation which besets histories of this period, which is to write of the "golden age" of design autonomy. The problem here is that if these histories are to have a critical perspective then one cannot write about autonomy naively; i.e., one cannot take it as a natural given, one must rather see it (and the professionalism that accompanies it) as itself a product, which means a social product, of modernity. Autonomy is not therefore somehow god-given, nor is it in any way the "natural condition" by which design action might be organized. Autonomy in fact might rather better be seen as both a-typical (what are the peculiar conditions by which a design practice becomes thought of as autonomous) and deeply ideological, as much a product of economic interests and the division of labor characteristic of advanced modern production and demand management as of any characteristics within design itself.

What the ideology of autonomy eschews is an understanding of the third way in which multi-vocality issues into history post 1945, and that is through the parallel rise of media and communications and of multiple voices, political, cultural, ethnic, who gradually become (politically) enabled in this period, in part through, quite literally, finding their voice within the burgeoning world of media possibilities. This complex play, in which the centralizing tendencies of the "culture industry" as Adorno and Horkheimer sketched them in their path-breaking work are both developed and mediated in diverse ways by the rise of sometimes counter-cultural voices, puts multi-vocality, and diversity into play in a literal sense. What is perhaps most significant here—the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo provides the most useful and accessible overview of this process that I know—is the way in which under the impact of multiple voices—and through the explosion of what Arjun Appadurai has called the social imagination, i.e., the capacity of peoples in the last decades to begin to imagine, at least to a degree, other ways of life than those previously presented as cultural facts—artifice becomes an agent of re-imaging what the self can be, both individually and, to a degree, politically. (<7200)

To be sure, this process has its limits—and more perhaps than either Vattimo or Appadurai would like to acknowledge. The social imagination is today usually little more than the consumptive imagination writ large, so that the rise in the range of possibilities of being that artifice in some ways supplies —the "extreme makeover" of oneself, even physically, that is today possible— are negated by a totalizing economic matrix that confines the imagination to a repetition of consumption; thus one makes oneself over simply to consume the same things, though now with a different face to the world.

Especially in its affirmative moments, these movements are familiar ground for historians of contemporary culture. Recent history is frequently, and not without justification, the conservatory affirmation and celebration of these possibilities, which often find a good part of their expression in the exuberance of design possibility. It is not difficult to defend this work—in that one can argue, as I did a few minutes ago, that one function of design is to explore possibility in terms of what things can be and how things can be with persons.

Yet there is also often a naivety here that belies what is at stake, both ontologically and politically. Gianni Vattimo, in the long paragraph that ends his essay 'From Utopia to Heterotopia'—itself almost a manifesto of multivocality as the condition of our times—is insistent, as he concludes his reflections on the aesthetic multivocality that defines our times, that it is only with a reference to ontology, i.e., to the question of being as we receive it today, that the question of 'aesthetic experience as heterotopia, as the proliferation of ornament, as unfounding of the world … [can] acquire meaning. Without this reference … any attempt to read the transformations in aesthetic experience of the last . . . decades . . . would appear to be a mere historical whimsy, a concession to fashion. The wager on heterotopia . . . will escape being merely frivolous [only] if it can link the transformed aesthetic experience of mass society with … an experience of being that is (at last) non-metaphysical … only then can we find a way amidst the explosion of the ornamental and heterotopian character of today's aesthetic.' (73-74) (<7600)

That ontology is the necessary counterweight to multivocality places us more succinctly than any other formulation.

VI. Emerging Conditions

I suggested in the last section that multivocality is in many ways the historical product of the world that has emerged since 1945. These conditions are still dominant in our time, which is why we are still working them through, particularly in a discipline which has itself only come to visibility really in the last half of this period. This perhaps also partly explains why they arrive for us as almost a confusion of voices, a confusion by no means necessarily should be deplored. But it might be useful as I move towards the end of the talk to look also at what is emerging 'beyond' multivocality, at what emerges, if you like, from the developments of the past twenty years, and particularly from tendencies that today seem only just underway. Some of these have already been noted. The most obscene—and there is no other word for it—is the acceleration of those tendencies towards barbarism that George Steiner noted back in 1971. The 'new world order' that emerged in the wake of the momentous developments of 1989/1990 was remarkably short-lived. Political incapacity to actually instantiate a new and potential better system of organization of the international management of the globe after 1989 (and here the political leadership in the core countries must take prime responsibility) has ensured, after 9/11, an un-productive (this is under-statement) descent into a 'clash of civilizations' 9desired by fundamentalists on both sides) which is likely to poison international relations for several generations. At the same time, the intensification of globalization—which really means no more and no less than the universalization of market relations and the legitimacy of extreme greed has led both to un-precendented levels of disposable wealth for a minority of the world's population combined with a likely future of poverty, resource shortages, the politics of spoil and eventual demographic disaster on a large-scale for most of the rest of the world. This has been compounded, in the affluent west (and east) by the exclusive focus on consumption which in turn has driven out or acutely marginalized almost all other models of social, cultural or economic arrangements between persons—to the point that today our entire being is mediated first by artifice but second, and inextricably by market relations. The right to (pursue) a profit has become the only inalienable right.

Where, in this context, is design?

And what are the implications of all this for how we should study design?

One implication is that, as I said earlier, innocence has vanished. Since the 1980s it has been effectively impossible to maintain that design somehow stood outside of the economy. Oddly, with the demise of political Marxism that has been a disappearance of the critique of commodity aesthetics as it used to be called. This is odd because our period has seen a massive intensification of design's economic function, to the point where, in a sense, so taken for granted is it that perhaps, in a way, we discount it, seeing this as a given that need not itself be thought about. Although one part of this is sheer evasion of a reality that seems almost vulgar to address, another way of seeing this—a more optimistic reading—would be to see it as a concern to articulate what, in design, is not of the market. This may be a too optimistic reading but if we pursue these last thoughts, two directions for future thinking might suggest themselves.

The first would be the return to critique—scarcely, yet, a return to Marx, yet most definitely the return, even the Ruskinian return, to the attempt to think design in relation to another possible economy; to think design outside the market in a fuller and more critical—more engaged—sense than has been the case for a long time. Such a return to political economy has the benefit of coming both a realism to what-is with the possibility of seeing-beyond.

The second, and by no means converse, possibility is to take seriously the idea that there is a content in design that can be rescued from the market and to seek to identify, and to articulate, what that content might be. This is significant on two levels. First, because design studies has so far been poor at articulating what design achieves, within or without the market (the presupposition of achievement has blocked perception as to what, actually, is achieved in design configuration); second, beciase it is becoming clear, as we move beyond the illusions of autonomy and design-for-design's sake, that design has a content, a series of subject

matters which it addresses. One of those subject matters is capacity, or capacities. This is significant in social terms. We might well say that, in terms of the crises we face, one major aspect of which is the cultural incapacity of our societies to contend, adequately, with what we have made, then the development of capacities to act well in relation to artifice, is of the utmost importance.

Now, design enacts and embodies capacities. It is itself the model of a capacity—to design. It is that, after all, that we seek to teach. But this capacity is not empty, nor can it be simply identified with design—thought this is how we have tended to think of it in the last century. Rather, capacity has content. To put it more specifically design is both the exploration and the enactment of capacities to schematize, or plan; to intervene and to transform (situations); to negotiate incommensurability and to mediate (above all, subjects and objects—and to realize these negotiations and mediations in the form of configurations disposed to enact what has been achieved); and finally to originate, which means to discover concerning these relations, but also, through poetics (Heidegger) to offer a way of gauging and presenting possibilities of being.

This listing of capacities is schematic and incomplete. Yet it illustrates a potentiality for thought. One of design's capacities is that it reflects upon artifice: that it is a way of exploring what artifice might be, especially relationally—i.e., what is artifice in relation to being; how can artifice be configured in relation to nature and the subject? These thoughts are not absent from aspects of contemporary practice, this suggests, in the light of what I've just be saying that we have here perhaps the basis of a way of productively thinking design. To put this another way, does the formulation that design has content beyond design suggest the scope of what I'll call the next generation of design studies?

VII: Towards a future?

I'd like to end, finally, and this has been a long talk, with a return to Kant. I began with this image of frailty, nine days before his death, yet in this frailty Kant enacts, through himself note, a gesture that is more than a word. Of course, he makes his gesture with a word or we might put it, he translates it—theorizes it; he indicates what his act means. But it is the act that enacts the values. Meaning, in Kant's view, has to be enacted. The word alone will not suffice. To be real, it has to be realized. The lesson here for design is precisely this. It is two-fold; first that meaning is not after all, semantic, but embodied. What matters is not how we say how things are (humanism as a word) but how they are (conditions of suffering). Traditionally supposed to be weak because it lacked words—even, at extreme, lacked the capacity to be articulated, Kant's gesture might make us think about this assumption. At its best, does design act like Kant's gesture in that it enacts a proposition—that it embodies it, gives it an actuality and in the process transforms it, makes of it something more than the word, by itself, can touch?

This seems a reasonable proposition. The more so that we know that design's embody propositions concerning artifice; that configurations embody and enact propositions that cannot (yet) be formulated in language. Does this mean that the translation of such propositions by thought is a way of extending our potential understanding of artifice? We know to that design's embody and enact capacities—the kinds of capacities that of increasing relevance to us as subjects as we struggle today with the destructive, as well as the creative, implications of how we live in and with the artificial. I believe strongly that the conception of design that we have traditionally held to has contained some of this understanding, but weakly, without force, without the capacity or drive to bring this understanding to any kind of fruition. But in the situation we find ourselves this implies that we do discover the means to think and articulate design in these ways—which means to think it and translate it both critically and affirmatively, in terms of what it means for us not as "design" (an ambiguous value at best) but as that practice which embodies and enacts these capacities.

In saying this I don't want to valorize design. Design is not all. But it is not negligible, it is not trivial; it is not, simply, neutral. The agency of design is operative—destrictively and creatively. In that sense it seems to me that we have been too genteel concerning design; too tolerant of its sins, too nervous of its implications to

articulate adequately its virtues. Self-evidence, a certain desire to remain safe, to remain beyond or outside of criticism, have all helped flatten discourse.

What I've tried to suggest this morning is that, in different ways, and increasingly as the context of our conditions of living moves closer to the artificial, design—its articulation, its criticism, its affirmation—might matter. I wanted to articulate a picture of design which grown-up people might concern themselves with—even, or especially, when the world they'd like to bequeath to their children totters on the edge of long-term disaster.

I do think, to end this, that this incipient possibility of catastrophe, which is realized daily in the barbarism we naturalize, has got to be the starting point of re-thinking design for this century (if we are not to repeat the last). This does not mean renouncing scholarship or research—but it does mean an expansion of the contexts in which we think design. It might well require us to re-think our audience; it might ask us to think harder about what we discover though design thinking and what previously as it were is discovered in practice (that requires thought to bring it to visibility). We might think harder to about learning: what doe we learn? What lessons does phenomena hold for us. Above all, holding one last time also to Kant's gesture, it might ask us to think harder about configurative enactment, it is what we deal with; in the end it's all we have to have to work with.

End.