DESIGN, INTERACTIVITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

DERRICK DE KERCKHOVE

At the dawn of Western civilization, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* revealed the West's deepest secret. Nobody heard it, but it is still there in the archives of the world. The invention of letters made technology the basis of the western cultures: *Syntheseis ton grammaton, mousometor*, the assembly of letters, mother of the muses, mother of invention. The alphabetic code was like the genetic code, a system available for recombination and engineering. It was the source of all blueprints and all inventions in the west; it was also the most powerful model for digitization. The alphabet would one day lead to digitization as the natural consequence of dividing reality in meaningless but extremely modular bits.

Today, thanks precisely to digitization, design takes over. The binary code can translate anything into anything else: forms, textures, sounds, feelings, even smell, and why not taste soon. Design is the essence of simulation and representation, hence its ominous responsibility to simulate properly and represent usefully.

Governments are beginning to grant design a renewed attention because many people sense that design bridges technology and psychology and that the economy will depend on design as an interpreter of technology and as an inspiration for technological development in a software environment.

When governments take an interest in design, however, it is time to watch out. When it is abused rather than just used, design can and has served some rather questionable political functions, such as propaganda (seventy years of communism amounting to naught, five years of raging war in Europe, over forty million dead both at the front and in the background.)

Advertising, a minor form of propaganda and a major component of design, is partly responsible for the tacit war waged on the environment by accelerated consumption and the creation and support of artificial needs. Even social engineering can be the downside of design: as in the urban wastelands its modernist ambitions generated.

Now we hear from Stefano Marzano, Ezio Manzini and others that the design industry should become political. It always has been, so it is refreshing that now it will become self-consciously so. However, if that is the case, then we ought to be as informed as possible about the relationship between design, technology and the social construction and production of meaning.

In the old days, before design became necessary, technology was tame and obedient, and life was evenly paced. There was a real world out there

called "objective", and there was a real person right here called "subjective," and there were a lot of printed words to bring order to their relationships. Things were simple, at least in the industrial countries founded on alphabetic literacy, because there was a human and environment polarity, within which one pole was constantly evolving and adapting while the other remained stable. Or at least appeared so. This was the blessed time of non-interactivity: time and space were fixed, and minds and bodies were free to roam without losing their bearings.

But then, with the unstoppable ingenuous innovations of engineering, the pace began to quicken. The telegraph helped create remote-control markets (with their attending accelerated need for production and distribution of goods), and colonies. The radio generated mass audiences, economies of scale and the early stirrings of an advertising industry supported by the press. And then television provided a post-war delivery system for accelerated war-time production, which meant a massive increase in the numbers of the buying public. Among other demographic developments, women entered into the work force and began to appear in the political, economic and public life, even as their images were being sold on TV. Nothing, however, apart from the evident speeding of society, seemed to have changed; that is because none of the above media was interactive.

Surely it was a fast world, but still the same polarity prevailed: from mobile human to stable - if accelerated - environment. The Gulf War was perhaps the last time television was given full range, albeit under the tightest control ever practiced by design, for the one-way production of meaning. In the words of Augustin Berque: "If the world said OK to the crusade against Sadam (Hussein) it is not only because the world drinks Coca Cola. It is because, to a large extent, the meaning of today's world finds it source, its creation and its distribution in the USA." But the era of television, of a mass creation of meaning, is over. The time has come for the interactive creation of meaning and that is the fundamental paradigmatic shift in social discourse.

By 1991, personal computers had already stolen the attention of a full generation from the seduction of the TV screen. By 1991, computers were already celebrating what has become known as "convergence," the greatest technological marriage of all times, with the telephone (the most powerful of the unsung technologies of communication). The fundamental polarity had changed. Humans were mobile, active, changing — but so was the increasingly intelligent environment that machines were creating. The old comfortable relationship between subjects and objects was challenged. Strange new breeds of consciousness had begun to flourish with interactive systems: real-time self adjusting databases; rapid updating of

political statements via polling and spin-doctoring; intermediate, anonymous, asynchronous, mind collectives on nets, usenets, newsnets, eathernets and internets; distributed parallel processing; self-adjusting learning expert systems with neural networks.

And, to make matters even more complicated, both time and space are now being trashed in "real-time" technologies and "virtual reality" machines. With Virtual Reality, interactivity brings renewed considerations about time in space. We are loosing ground: not content to argue with our screens, after decades of passive acceptance of their dictatorship, we now feel the need to penetrate them, to plunge into them as so many Ulysses beckoned by the siren calls in an ocean of electrons.

From now on, between the subject and the object is the traject, the pattern of transmission or travel. Now that we share our privacy with world distributed databanks, we have to add another mental being to the construction of our own private mind, the interjective. We are both statistics and persons all at once. Our prized psychological legacy, our personal "point-of-view," the greatest gift of the greatest designers, the painters and architects of the Renaissance and after, is now being challenged by a much deeper, much larger, much more intimate and intense, and perhaps intimidating, perception — that of our "point-of-being." The deepest thought of Marshall McLuhan, in my opinion, was not the "The medium is the message." It is the lesser known, equally succinct, more enigmatic statement: "In the electronic age, we wear all mankind as our skin."

Indeed, the world is not "out there" anymore, it is right here, under my skin. The other fundamental paradigmatic shift accompanying interactivity is the shift from the visual to the tactile sensory processing. While the printing press generated strings of data affecting our visual processing strategies and bringing on perspective as the distantiated, objective spatial arrangement for our personal information processing, electronic media are bringing the world and what we still call reality right into our bodies as extensions of our central nervous system. Interactivity is a technical term for the extensions of our proprioceptive and tactile relationships to the environment.

The result of all this is that we are all — including designers — frightfully confused. The creation of meaning is not homogenous anymore, ideologies have been thoroughly trashed along with the Berlin Wall, and TV is henceforth too decentralized to pretend to the status of a "public mind" anymore and in some way, which does indeed recall the heyday of the first Renaissance, when people began to make up their own minds with the rapid spread of books, we cannot let other people or institutions do our thinking for us; we are under the responsibility of creating meaning ourselves in our much mediated dialogue with the world.

❖ ❖ ❖

Is all this leading to a political platform for the design industry? Perhaps not directly, but it is to artists and designers that more and more people will turn to ask for an intelligible and livable technological environment; it is to designers and artists that they will look for a comprehensive approach to reality; it is from designers and artists that we could expect a new civism, one addressing the global as well as the local needs. After all, if cities managed to reduce social anarchy to civic order, it was not just the military or the police action, it was largely because architects, planners, restaurateurs, painters, poets, novelists, dramatists and musicians provided from within and did not imposed from without, the need and the urge for a social reality that was truly satisfying, if only for short periods of time. The responsibility of design is to make this world livable, not just for those who have the means, but for all. This is not wishful thinking, not rhetorical, it is the expression of a very strong feeling that, if they are supported by enlightened design with the greater good and the larger reach of people and the greatest respect of differing cultures in mind, the contents of our newly developing global psychology will be thrilling and worth living for.