Myths: Representation of Design in the New-Age of Communication

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Cet article étudie le rôle du designer dans la culture matérielle et visuelle et comment les designers sont devenus des créateurs de mythes sur la scène culturelle contemporaine. Dans un monde saturé d’objets de design, les designers ne traitent pas seulement la forme et la fonctionnalité, mais le marché exige qu’ils injectent du sens et de l’expérience dans leurs dispositifs. Ce texte propose des analyses sémantiques qui s’appliquent à des séances photos de magazine de design ou à installations ou objets de design récents, et montre le changement de rôle du designer. Dans la première partie, je présente la situation actuelle dans la culture visuelle avec de solides références et je continue avec des exemples actuels, avant d’analyser l’industrie du design d’un point de vue sémantique. Enfin, je parle du changement dans l’industrie et la politique des objets faits à la main, du vide causé par les représentations et de la façon dont les designers remplissent ce vide à l’aide de significations et de récits, à travers les exemples de deux dispositifs du designer français Philippe Starck.

Mots-clés : Design, Identité, Sémantique, Communication, Représentation

This paper investigates the role of designer in material and visual culture and how designers became myth-makers in todays culture scene. In a saturated world of objects of design that is present, designers do not deal with only form and functionality but market asks for meaning and experience factor at their makings. This text showcases semantic readings from design magazine photo-shootings to recent actual design objects and installations and how the shift in designer’s role brought up. In the first part I introduce the current setting in visual culture with strong references and continue with actual samples of work and investigate the design industry from the perspective of semantics. Finally I talk about the shift in the industry and politics of the manmade objects, the void caused by the representations and how designers fill this void in the object via meaning and stories, through references and semantic readings of two designs by French designer Philippe Starck.

Keywords : Design, Identity, Semantics, Communication, Representation

1. Doganberk Demir is a designer based in Istanbul co-founder of DAY Studio working on product, interior and graphic design projects and PhD student at Ozyegin University, Department of Design, Technology and Society working focused on identity in design and culture studies following his MA in Product Design at Ecole Cantonale d’Art Lausanne.
In this paper, I would like to discuss the changing role of the designer, the new ways of expressing design in different platforms and how the very phenomena effects design itself. Physical objects and their makers do evolve today where we use multi–media constantly in making, visualizing and viewing physical objects. Designers, today carry the burden of creating stories around object, taking the role of myth–maker and creating easily communicative, visually appealing objects. To sell a product being true to the material and creating a functional object is not enough. For a brand, creating a memorable and exciting experience that will be discussed throughout and beyond design exhibitions is the point; the designs themselves are secondary as Debord puts appearing above having. I argue that there is a new approach in showcasing design products on a cross platform where designers create sceneries representing brand values, artists commissioning imitative installations of that years’ creations where the value used to be at the design objects itself and the physical displays and today we see a use of trans media and concepts in order to showcase design. These exhibitions merely visualize rather big ideas but do these representations really transmit the brands and give their products a visibility? How does this trend affect the process of design and how designers reflect on the visual culture social media and such communication brings? I would like to discuss these issues through a semantic reading of exhibitions, images and products -simply all representations related to the world of design objects trying to point out and understand the current setting and changing trends.

The situation can be read through Debord’s statement of just as early industrial capitalism moved the focus of existence from being to having, post–industrial culture has moved that focus from having to appearing. In The Society of the Spectacle Guy Debord criticizes modern consumer society and the life it produces as “mere representation”, rather than life authentically lived. The market is full of representations today. Each brand and artifact survives through communicating with the end user, each object needs to create a connection and offer something to the consumer in order to differentiate. A trip to Milan’s famous Salone del Mobile design fair would actually substances the above hypothesis. Every year even more so companies present their pieces in the form of an idea, an experience rather than showing material qualities of them. In 2015 Caeserstone, a producer of marble and stone slabs commissioned the designer Philippe Malouin for an installation of their makings in the form of an interactive swing. The idea derived from presenting the strength of their new product made of stone dust and pieces. The exhibition was set in a glorious palazzo in the center of Milan representing companies’ history and so on. Although the swing installation was not the point they make it became what all ended up talking by creating a fun experience. Also Airbnb, the online home rental company felt the need of visualizing their services by collaborating with Fabrica, the creative agency of Benetton Group by taking
over another Italian palazzo for their Housewarming exhibition where the designers presented their interoperations the concept of hospitality which is the main theme for the company Airbnb. Airbnb chooses a curated conceptual exhibition over conventional advertisement methods. Both companies focus on creating an experience and concept rather communicating their messages subliminally.

Ronald Barthes investigated the myth concept today through semiotic methodology in several essays on images, films and objects and argued that and image is not what it seems to be at the first sight but existed and surrounded with the myth-stories, content and its context. He states that today we fill the emptied materiality with these man-made myths; we can argue that actually design is becoming more and more a profession of myth making. This direct association with image and meaning pushes designers to create artifacts inspired or based on some fabricated story; simply a chair is never just a chair. Above certain qualities of the object such as its materiality and function there are the inspiration and story by the creator. Every piece carries a hidden signature of its author. Furthermore, today not only images are communicated through media but also design objects are presented through images. This creates a problem of communicating a 3D data to 2D in videos, user manuals, catalogues, advertisements, photographs and so on. Therefore design objects or better yet objects in general are a big chunk of the visual culture and imagery. In contemporary scope of industrial design there is a push of making look-worthy, story-telling, pleasant objects that would look good in pictures and functionality becomes a secondary feature to the object. I would argue that especially in furniture and tabletop accessories sectors, automotive and even consumer electronics designs are under these circumstances, which bring designers and design brands at a mythmaker status over the world of artifacts.

A close theme has been going on for a while in the media as well; there has been a move on styling in order to create a story of objects at the pages of magazines Wallpaper®, Monocle, Kinfolk, Cereal and as such. And a rise in the number of independent design stylists working with media and designers curate a beautiful selection of objects every month and each season. The photography of these curated items curiously resemble the still-life paintings where the whole meaning or look comes before each item and artifacts installed within the painting in order to mean something. The desire of story telling through organizing object extends into the new-age media with the styled design items in these magazines. Styling has been an ongoing movement in fashion before design yet this concept of curating is rather new to the design world with the rise of the myth of object. These images are not a mere publications but a documentary of a certain lifestyle or a disposable piece of art. Berger argues that the contrast between the news or feature photographs and the publicity images have a great distinction caused by
‘Publicity is essentially eventless, . . . situated in a future continually deferred.’

The styling images differ from publicity of an object at that point where they have an event inside just as the difference of displaying an object and displaying a concept in a fair discussed earlier. Berger states that capitalism replaces events with tangibility, and everything is publicized, waiting to be purchased. The consumer is exposed to a vague but suggestive pledge that would realize by commodity of the item or brand publicized. Today we can argue that concept is still valid and the focus has shift from the single object or the object to a more thoroughly experience promised to the consumer. The focus is on the mythical qualities of brands and objects that communicate with the user.

I see the shift of object to concept and experience in communication of design is very much inline with the rising trends in capitalist society where being and appearing replaced commodity. Companies and brands feel the need to associate concepts, promise an utterly experience with whatever item they try to market and sell: May that be cars, flooring materials, chairs or services. Deleuze sums up this shift of capitalist motto, with the technological advancements capitalism is no longer involved with production or product and hand it down to the Third World countries. But what it wants to sell is services and what it wants to buy is stocks. Deleuze argues that there is no capitalism for the production and the product but to market and sell. Capitalism has lost its connection with the nineteenth century’s materiality and heading towards to an immaterial phase at the digital age. Therefore what one sells or what one produces is not a matter anymore, it is the ideas and integrity that capitalism involved with. Deleuze at Societies of Control talks about the position of art today too and points out that art has left the ‘spaces of enclosure’ and exist now at the lobbies of hotels and open circuits of banks. The similar displacement of art and installations show itself at design exhibitions organized by the companies discussed earlier. Brands and corporations –capitalism– try to relate themselves to the higher values –in other words its mythical position if it still exists– of art and design and the conception they may offer. The communicative object culture of design and the design brands’ urge of communication through concepts instead of their products might be an extension of the new capitalist understanding of commodity.

Walter Benjamin argued at his Work of Art that new technologies obsolete the aura of the piece of art. Mechanical reproductions specifically made the originality an obscure concept according to Benjamin, he argues even a perfect representation is missing an important element its presence in time and space. While Benjamin problematize the reproduction as discussed Barthes took up Benjamin’s words beyond and argued that the object does not have any meaning anymore and it is being refilled by capitalism with myths and fabricated concepts for the sake of commodity in general. He cynically glorifies the semantic meanings hidden in
movies, advertisements and objects and draws an emphasis on the capitalist rush of injecting meanings into its makings. Similar to Benjamin a designer, socialist and an entrepreneur William Morris in late 19th century was not satisfied with the manufacturing setting capitalism was to offer and rebelled against with the Arts and Crafts Movement where he placed human labor instead of the machine in order to protect the aura and the quality of the artifact. He too believed that mechanical production did not fulfill the requirement he seeks from an artifact, does not provide the originality and also from a makers point of view did not find the new techniques of manufacturing satisfying in terms of quality. He has searched for the medieval crafts and textile patterns in the name of rediscovering the lost essence of the artifact. Both argue modernity obscured the sincerity of the object and voided it. Today the lost meaning of the object is filled with style and concepts.

This void mentioned above through texts of Barthes, Benjamin and Morris is particularly filled with representations of concepts and romanticism of a time where objects were authentic. Today designers with several movements such as designer-maker, neo-craft discourses, democratic design and social design activism try to fill the emptied word of design. A particularly good example would be two of designs of Philippe Starck, Louis Ghost Chair and Juicy Salif. Both object deliberately and desperately trying to say something and communicate with the consumer. Louis Ghost chair for Kartell is originally derived from an 18th century French wooden chair -almost identical in lines in fact replicated version of it in plastic is makes it a curious object to look at. It is the edges of the plastic, which defines the all-transparent body and makes the silhouette of the 200 years old ancestor visible. Louis Ghost has been perceived as a sculpture almost over a decade since it has been designed. It becomes much more than a chair by becoming a narrator, a speech. Its transparency and name is a reference of being a ghost of the chair it derived from makes its statement of nostalgia in a romanticist way even more underlined. It is funny how human replicates it self even with a completely different and advanced technology at hand. We could think that continuing with an already defined and known form in different methods would be a bigger statement than making something completely different with the new knowledge at hand. Design at the end of the day as I discuss is a way of speech too and it might be that it is just easier to communicate through known images by everyone. Starck is a designer with the ideology of democratic design; he worked for companies such as Target in the name of bringing design everyone. Louis Ghost also in a way brings what has been for royals, a throne for common people in plastic. Another curious object by Starck is the Juicy Salif for Alessi, which is an object, rather looks good more than it works well. Even though it splashes juice once you try to use, it has been one of the best selling, iconic designs of the era. This time Starck takes a common object, a lemon squeezer, and blesses it with
a sculptural quality. An everyday kitchen utility turns into a statement piece of design, and makes it on the bookshelf rather than kitchen counter. Further examples can be given from a variety of designers and designs; in fact all are inspired from something and carry a burden of stories fabricated on them to create a connection with the consumer. It is again a way that concept and style infusion into the object. A chair is never a chair anymore nor a juice squeezer a mere juice squeezer.

Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* states that we cannot talk about concepts as real or original as everything is voided and left meaningless and that there is no distinction left between the original and representation. He historically investigates the simulacra concept where in pre-modern period uniqueness of the artifact was depending on its irreproducibility which renders it as real. Following the Industrial Revolution, which broke the distinctions between real and representation by the new manufacturing setting it introduced. Mass production ended the uniqueness of the object, turned it into a product as we understand it now – an item of trade of many – by also separating the human-made from natural distinctly. Furthermore with the postmodernity concept of originality becomes a totally empty concept as the focus on the single item too shifted. Baudrillard argues that the copy same as the original thoroughly masked the original and its aura and created hyper-reality. Design today is dealing with simulations and representations; the object is not there anymore, voided, and exists as a narrative of commodity. In this paper I have semantically went through objects, design shows and the visual world around objects that represent the facts stated above and placed them within a context of debate on commodity, meanings of objects and shifting material culture and problematized the identity and signature within the world of objects. This phenomena urges at an interesting era where we all communicate and consume instantly and at a very saturated market today. Designers at this verge, act as deliberate myth-makers due to the need of creating communicative objects that create connection with the consumer and more importantly the fact that they need to be look-worthy enough to make it in magazine paper which are fashioned with stories of colorful objects of many forms. Brands in order to exist in the market strongly instead of showing their makings in an attractive environment in the fairs and design shows they showcase the concepts that brand stands upon and their vision in interactive forms of experiences and installations replacing the voided artifact with tangibility.
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