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## On some narrations in the (post)industrial design field

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Załącznik Kulturoznawczy 1, 116-126

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2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Załącznik Kulturoznawczy 1/2014

Załącznik

KULTURA W ZBLIŻENIACH I PRZEKRTOJACH

## ON SOME NARRATIONS IN THE (POST)INDUSTRIAL DESIGN FIELD

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, design is an autonomic social and cultural field<sup>1</sup> created by various social practices, institutions (such as schools, festivals, awards, journals, portals, internet societies, etc.), narrations or games of power between designers groups. The design area was a part of the artistic and industrial field in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet in the second half of the century the process of autonomization of a designer profession and emancipation of cultural meanings in the design area began. Undeniably, the process of emancipation was connected with the development of eastern consumer societies. Finally, design became an autonomic social and cultural field at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Design is a huge and dynamic area, therefore, it is impossible to create an 'essential definition'. The 'design' term is used so frequently that a single definition, adequate to every type and aspect of this cultural phenomenon, cannot be created. The only remaining possibility is to define design from the institutional perspective of the institutions that create this area.

This paper is based on the background of the interpretive sociology. My research interests reside at the intersection of a syncretic view similar to

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Bourdieu, L.J.D. Wacquant, *Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej*, transl. Anna Sawisz, Warszawa 2001, p. 76-9, P. Bourdieu, *Dystynkcja. Społeczna krytyka władzy sądzienia*, transl. P. Biłos, Warszawa 2005.

‘blurred genres’ of Clifford Geertz<sup>2</sup>, humanistic sociology derived from Max Weber, constructivism of Pierre Bourdieu and Baudrillard’s post-structuralism. I will use the concepts of sociology of postmodernity and consumer society (Ritzer, Bauman).

The key issues in my text are central narrations of contemporary design (the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century). Books, articles and interviews with design world leaders, which – in my opinion – reflect the problem the most accurately, will be the research material in my text. Before I explore design narrations, I should define the category of postindustrialism first

## 2. Postindustrialism as self-conscious industrialism

The key basis of the modern society perspective is the concept of rationality, considering plan to be the main instrument of implementation of this idea. The reality in the modern world should be designed, while society should be changing into the ‘machine civilization’ (Le Corbusier). Undeniably, the machine was an ideal model to construct a society, an individual, human body and mind, and architecture of cities.

Nowadays, these dreams are gone, nobody believes anymore that rationalism is the one, ideal way of social and individual life. At the time of the Re-enchantment of the world, as we know, we gained the second part of life: irrationality, emotions, imagination, sensibility<sup>3</sup>. The machine is no longer a model of explaining everything. It is known that the original plan of modernity is unfeasible and this belief is based on the idea of postmodernity.

<sup>2</sup> C. Geertz, *O gatunkach zmąconych (Nowe konfiguracje myśli społecznej)*. Transl. Z. Łapiński, [w:] Nycz R. (red.), *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*. Kraków 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Z. Bauman, *Wieloznaczność nowoczesna, nowoczesność wieloznaczna*. transl, J. Bauman. Warszawa 1995, p. 138.

Zygmunt Bauman states that postmodernity is the self-conscious modernity, modern social practices are valid, but the naive beliefs in the dreams of European Enlightenment are gone<sup>4</sup>. Humans know the new world of consumption, experience multiplication and ecstasy of communication<sup>5</sup>.

It must, therefore, be recognised what the definition of postindustrialism is. Bauman concludes that industrialism and industrial practices are still valid and factory works properly. However, as we know, factory is not the ideal model of the world – we have simultaneously created the postindustrial social consciousness and practices, among others: the network and information society<sup>6</sup>, creative economy<sup>7</sup>, hyperreality of culture code<sup>8</sup>.

In the social field of design, two related trends are present: the industrial one – connected with old factory production and the postindustrial one – related to postmodern life. Both types of contemporary design are currently creating different narrations. The following part of the article is an attempt to address the issue of main narrations of postindustrial design.

### 3. Main postindustrial narrations of design

In the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the critical consciousness of the consumption-oriented corporate design as a way of life started to rise. Many designers focused on writing articles and books on ‘responsible design’. Thus, the following study is an attempt to address the characteristics of the main types of this trend.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Transl. B. Schütze, C. Schütze. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford 1996.

<sup>7</sup> R. Florida, *Narodziny klasy kreatywnej oraz jej wpływ na przeobrażenia w charakterze pracy, społeczeństwa i życia codziennego*. Transl. T. Krzyżanowski, M. Penkala. Warszawa 2010.

<sup>8</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacje*. Transl. S. Królak. Warszawa 2005.

### 3. 1 Do It Yourself

Usual daily activities such as DIY, sewing, cooking, crocheting, etc. are a part of the design field. The new form of these practices became known as ‘DIY Design’. Victor Papanek, one of the leaders of the design field, stated in his famous book that ‘every man is a designer’. John Thackara, in his significantly titled book *Design After Modernism: Beyond the Object*, arrived at a similar conclusion, saying: ‘We are all designers now’<sup>9</sup>.

Almost everything we do is connected with design. Designing is an ‘elementary factor of existence’, a process of designing is a part of planning and forming every human action<sup>10</sup>. In Tim Brown’s opinion, contemporary design should be based on participation. He believes that design thinking is ‘oriented for human’ and ‘in itself and of itself is something deeply human’<sup>11</sup>.

Papanek, Thackara, Brown and other designers continue the foregoing discussion proposed by artists, who said: ‘everything can be an art’. Furthermore, in the 70s, Joseph Beyus announced: ‘every man is an artist’. Design – in Papanek’s, Thackara’s, Brown’s ideas – has had a profound influence on the whole social and individual everyday life.

The DIY Design develops very dynamically. This extensive social field and discourse is formed by books, magazines, portals, blogs, etc. Various mass media provide instructions on how to construct objects from waste, sew bedspreads from scraps of clothes, create toy containers from boxes of fruits covered by newspapers, cups for pencils from tin cans, jewellery from forks, various elements for flat design, etc.

<sup>9</sup> J. Thackara, *Design After Modernism: Beyond the Object*, New York 1988.

<sup>10</sup> See V. Papanek, *Dizajn dla realnego świata. Środowisko człowieka i zmiana społeczna*, transl. J. Holzman, Łódź 2012, p. 23; T. Brown, *Zmiana przez design: jak design thinking zmienia organizacje i pobudza innowacyjność*, transl. M. Höffner. Wrocław 2013.

<sup>11</sup> T. Brown, *Zmiana przez design: jak design thinking zmienia organizacje i pobudza innowacyjność*, transl. M. Höffner. Wrocław 2013, p. 15-16.

### 3.2 Eco/social design

After World War II, the consciousness of consumption mechanisms was growing in western societies. In the 50s, a few leaders of designers community showed the negative role of design companies in the development of hyperproduction and the creation of human dependence on products. Moreover, design changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as Tim Brown says in his famous book – ‘from chasing after digits into serving people’<sup>12</sup>. One of the main design narrations is focused on problems connected with relations between nature and civilization. Some leaders of the design field wrote very critical theories on hyperproduction in the consumer society and the negative role of design in this process. Victor Papanek was one of the main leaders considering the critical point of view of consumption design. In his very famous book *The Design for Real World*, Papanek considered consumption design harmful to nature. He wrote on his famous project of Radio for the Third World in the 50s. He constructed a radio from junks (e.g. a can of soft drinks) and cable. These pieces did not require the ordinary source of electricity because energy was provided from burning wax. If wax reserves were empty, people could burn cow droppings and sticks. The cost of the radio was few cents. In his book, Papanek also wrote about the Drop City by Steve Baer<sup>13</sup>. There were houses constructed from parts of cars and buildings – from connected modules. Papanek described the project as ‘the postindustrial case of folk buildings’.

These two eco design projects were focused on life in natural space, pollution of environment and nature protection. This trend, also connected with social problems, was called ‘social design’. Papanek and Baer were also included in the group of social designers.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> V. Papanek, op. cit., p. 31.

Social Design is oriented on the exploration of social problems as the effects of hyperproduction, hyperconsumption, colonisation and the areas excluded from the mainstream culture and everyday life such as illness, senility and poverty.

One of these social design constructions is an architectural project by a Polish architect Hugon Kowalski, titled *Let's Talk About Garbage*<sup>14</sup>. The vision of the Dharavi district in Bombay is very controversial for European people as Kowalski proposed to locate slums on a scrapheap. Kowalski confronts with the question of gentrification. Dharavi was placed in the area behind the main districts of Bombay but as the city expanded over the years, Dharavi – the district of slums – became attractive for the city authorities and developers. There are projects to build housing estates for the middle class as in the western model. Some people will be thrown behind the borders of Bombay and others will be moved to the western-style houses. Design of new buildings is completely different from the old ones – incoherent with the traditional culture and not taking the inhabitants' economic situation into account. This new western-fashioned houses will not have separate areas for community and for work (old buildings have a space for living, working and sorting garbage).

Hugon Kowalski's proposition focuses on the houses connected with traditional life and culture (e.g. buildings with space for the community) and considers people's economic needs. The construction of the above-mentioned buildings is changeable depending on each family's needs of the space for living, working or sorting trashes. According to the author, the whole slums housing estates should be placed on the scrapheap, in the area used for earning money by the Dharavi people.

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<sup>14</sup> See *Porozmawiajmy o śmieciach – Hugon Kowalski*, <http://archinea.pl/porozmawiajmy-o-smieciach-hugon-kowalski/>

### 3.3 Design for all senses

In the narration of design, the designer is not a creator of material objects. The chief representative of this trend was Richard Neutra. In Tom Holert's interpretation, 'Neutra's »organic« conception of design aims at »life« and the promotion and preservation of »life-processes« and this understanding embraces growth, ageing, fatigue, recreation, habits, etc. as factors relevant to design'<sup>15</sup>. Designers 'would need to take the infinite number of receptors found by psychological research into account' and this way designer in the postindustrial world should become 'an expert of the neural'<sup>16</sup>. 'Designing is a nervous procedure par excellence' – wrote Neutra<sup>17</sup>. Holert introduces even the psychotherapeutic aspect when he writes: 'the interaction between designer and client, between producer and consumer takes on therapeutic features'<sup>18</sup>. Brown mentions 'designing of life'<sup>19</sup>.

As it can be seen, postindustrial design is a social field of manipulation of receptors in the human body as well as a specific form of psychotherapy.

### 3.4 Design thinking, design for experience

Tim Brown, a guru of design thinking argues that the contemporary world needs the design focused not on object but on experience. 'Design has the power of enriching our life by engaging our emotions through the image, form, text, colour, sound and smell'<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> T. Holert, *Design and Nervousness*, [in:] *Nerwowa drzemka. O poszerzaniu pola w Projektowaniu. A Nervous Nap. On expanding the Field in Design*, Warszawa 2009, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 100-101.

<sup>17</sup> R. Neutra, *Survival Through Design*. New York 1954, p. 299.

<sup>18</sup> T. Holert, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> T. Brown, op. cit., p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.



The aim of design is to ‘provide a satisfactory experience’ and ‘in design thinking it comes to creating a multipolar experience, in which everyone has the chance to participate in the conversation’<sup>21</sup>. In this concept, the world of design transforms itself ‘from consumption to participation’<sup>22</sup>. Despite the social background of his opinion, in his book *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*, Brown uses the category of ‘brands focused on experience’ and devotes a lot of attention to the description of his work for companies<sup>23</sup>. A design thinker should not break the consumption social practice and capitalistic system. Instead, he should connect ‘business, society and life’<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. Sociological Perspective: Design of Immateriality

Jean Baudrillard showed in his books that signs are the matter of consumption. We live in the time of hyperreality, in the period of ‘violence of the code’<sup>25</sup>; the sign managed our individual and social life. The sign is a real commodity in the late capitalism. Signs give us social values, status and roles. They create our world and personal identity. George Ritzer elaborates on Baudrillard’s vision. In his view, consumption economy becomes immaterial and the aim of consumption is an immaterial commodity. ‘We buy experiences’ – Ritzer says in his book *Enchanting a Disenchanted World. Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*<sup>26</sup>. To buy new experiences is to create lifestyle, allow unlimited constructions of the self and provide a

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Wymiana symboliczna i śmierć*, transl. S. Królak, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>26</sup> G. Ritzer, *Enchanting a disenchanted world: revolutionizing the means of consumption*. New York 2005.

membership in neo-tribes. The pursuit of new experiences<sup>27</sup> is the main mechanism of consumption in postindustriality.

At this point, we should recall conceptual categories belonging to various contexts: commodity, sign, identity and experience. Designers shape material objects, make them look, appeal to cultural contexts and, finally, the already designed commodities are offered for sale and given the existence of signs<sup>28</sup>. Objects – commodities – signs evoke a variety of experiences in consumers (e.g. body sensations). Signs and experiences shape the identity of the goods holder – a social identity (social status and roles) as well as an individual one (ideas about oneself). This process and interdependence may be seen as the string:

object – commodity – sign – experience – identity

In this conceptualization, advertising should be taken into account – one should remember that TV spots, graphic design and other forms of advertising are created by designers. We may consider switching the parts of this string: one's purchase decisions arise from one's identity, which was shaped by advertising; one's experiences arise from one's identity, etc. Interestingly enough, the visualization of this dynamic variability and the interdependence of all cells may lead to the conclusion that each of them depends on the other as well as on the whole string at the same time.

Designers have adapted themselves to the conditions of immaterial consumption economy very well. The designer becomes a 'facilitator of a system

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<sup>27</sup> See Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Warszawa 2000; G. Ritzer, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Spoleczeństwo konsumpcyjne. Jego mity i struktury*, transl. S. Królak, Warszawa 2006.

of value co-production'<sup>29</sup>. 'Madness of production'<sup>30</sup> has shifted to the virtual space, which is the 'real' world of empty signs – simulacra (Baudrillard wrote about simulacra before the creation of the net). Many types of net simulacra were designed as immaterial commodities. What I have in mind is computer applications, e.g.: games, avatars, e-learning, information portals, cyber-sex, clouds, network museums, network shopping, etc. The success of network commodities depends on software and hardware, interface and design. The designer is then the 'catalyst in a network system'<sup>31</sup>.

Paradoxically, on the one hand, 'alternative' designers fit well into the (hyper)reality of postindustrial consumer society because they are focused on the creation of immaterial values, which are being changed into new commodities without any problems. On the other hand, the designer should be focused on society as material of design. The designer does not design consumption objects but creates social processes and manages them – his works become 'actions', 'interventions', 'service of humanity' and 'support for the processes of life'. Next, these ideas are changed into new styles of life and new neo-tribes, and, finally, new target group of new immaterial goods are created. Thus, the alternative way to the corporations design supplies the power of 'cognitive capitalism'<sup>32</sup>, based on the energy of new ideas of people.

Design turns out to be 'the new social contract'<sup>33</sup> and 'it now seems to bear an inherent diagnostic and political promise in view of this expression'<sup>34</sup>, but, in fact, it is a part of new, postindustrial capitalism. In general, design influences the reproduction of social-culture system. 'The culture of opti-

<sup>29</sup> N. Morelli, *Social Innovation and New Industrial Contexts: Can Designers "Industrialize" Socially Responsible Solutions?*, "Design Issues", vol. 23, no. 4. 2007, p. 18; T. Holert, op. cit., p.98-99.

<sup>30</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Symulakry i symulacje*, transl. S. Królak. Warszawa 2005.

<sup>31</sup> N. Morelli, op. cit., p. 18; T. Holert, op. cit., p.98-99.

<sup>32</sup> M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford 1996.

<sup>33</sup> T. Brown, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> T. Holert, op. cit., p. 93.

mism', the base of design, is connected deeply with the capitalistic ideology of success. Designers and marketers are the major experts in inducing the consumer ecstasy of postindustrial consumption focused on immateriality in the 'society of the spectacle'<sup>35</sup>.

### **On Some Narrations in the (Post)Industrial Design Field**

This text examines main narrations of the socio-cultural design field in the postindustrial period. The author starts from the creation of the definition of postindustriality. Next he explores main trends of contemporary design (DIY; eco/social design; design for all senses; design thinking, design for experience). Finally he tries to apply for the interpretation of this topic sociological categories of Jean Baudrillard and George Ritzer, eg.: 'madness of production', 'immaterial consumption', 'hiperreality', 'simulacra'.

**Keywords:** design, narrations of design, postindustriality, consumption, hiperreality.

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<sup>35</sup> G. Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, transl. D. Nicholson-Smith, New York 1995.