



## ETHICS IN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT DESIGN (GOOD, GOODS AND GODS)

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### 1. Prologue

The lack of ethical side and its possible reasons in our professional designer lives is the main theme of this presentation. For the basic principle is *good* for ethical existence, we usually avoid asking ethical questions in our professional design activities. We prefer principles of professionalism or codes of conduct. Though the whole design culture of past, present and future have been and will be abstractions of human mind, yet we find ethics too abstract for design practice. We seem to prefer designing for the sake of design's own sake and never asking ethical questions like "is it good?" Of course there comes a time for all of us to ask ethical questions and it usually happens when the going gets tough. When somebody reproduces a sheep genetically, when a couple of designer-scientists get close to apply human DNA into computer processors, when we start watching planes crashing into towers just like a movie or a war just like a computer software, or when we see our children getting more violent in front of actual or fictional terror in our designed environment, then we start asking ethical questions as it is nowadays.

I have always been fascinated by the fact that the term "good" has been used for also utilitarian products. Though I could have preferred many of the designed objects never gone into production there was a spiritual side in calling things not only as things or objects, or products but also as "goods". May the reason be lying in our ever forgotten design consciousness that designing means bringing good things to life? Rather than introducing it as an ethical principal I would like to present the word good as a practical term in relation to design profession and its special kind of outcomes called as "goods".

The most distinctive characteristics of goods are their anonymous design facilities. When we say goods we mean anonymous, almost illegal, nameless, faceless design entities. We never name Starck designs or an Alesi kettle, or a Colani device as goods. Goods generally signify a negative category in our professional, or academical, or artistical design terminology. None of ourselves want to be known as designing "goods". We want to be product designers or a brand on products if we can. We do not care about goods. They appear as non-qualified objects that we use in our non-conscious (or at least semi-conscious) everyday life.

Giving birth to a baby and designing in industrial (or psychologically we may prefer post-industrial in this new millennium) context are too much alike. Whilst only two are enough for the former action, a crowded mass of people participate in the latter one. Only two people (of different sexes of course) can start a life which seems to be the most miraculous event in the known limits of the universe. On the other hand for realizing a product, a group of authorized and qualified experts in their fields come together where it is not easy to distinguish who is doing what and to who. Engineers, planners, designers, medical experts, psychologists, sociologists, ecologists, technicians, administrators, market researchers, pr experts, and not only individuals but also institutions and associations join the design and production orgy, users and clients are no exception. This overintercourse ends with a baby called

product and designers seem to be the most insistent group of people that they are the real parents of the baby and they have the right to give it a name. Usually designers do not have any clear idea about themselves whether they're the "fathers" or "mothers". In fact it is not possible to predict the nature of either the baby or the product from the way it has been created. Bad seeds may come out of love marriages, and fine characters may come out of prostitution in whatever the century is. And design is a significant and unique concept that we can analyze the quality of our culture for its cooperative character. I always tell my students that our designs reflect the character of our cooperative consciousness and mind. If anything goes wrong with our designs there must be a problem in our minds.

Two important trends under different names seem to be shaping the world of today and tomorrow which also bring out new concepts like "co-designing" to an ideal state of our practice. One is "globalization" while the other is "specialization". Though I have definitely a positive approach to a multi-disciplinary design comprehension I do not share the same optimism for these two concepts and I remember a post-it sticker "trend is not destiny".

## 2. Ethics of Globalization

One of the popular terms of our day is globalization. My personal belief is that if a word is being pronounced too often there must be something wrong with it. Take AIDS for example. If we had a cure for it we could have never talked about it that much. An AIDS with no cure creates a self-maintaining system of its own and a cure appears to be a threat for this existence, just like lack of enemy makes military useless and meaningless. Though it means different things to different people the term globalization is a little bit like AIDS I think. It is not a cure but a kind of disease for what it represents.

Globalization does create two different designer characteristics depending on two different understanding of globalization. According to Victor Margolin the term globalization represents an equilibrium model of the world to some people while an expansion model to the majority of its actors. The expansion model of the world under the term globalization moves designers work for markets rather than people. Designers see themselves as strategic businessmen. The designed objects forget to be goods and turn out to be "tokens of economic exchange" [Margolin 1998]. A brand car designed in Italy gets assembled in Turkey while the components arrive from the rest of the world. The word co-designing finds a practical area of use in this model and design becomes a manipulative term of economic cost/benefit arguments and the concept of design management overshadows design as a result. According to John Heskett, rather than designing goods, designers function as follows in this global business:

- generating new product concepts
- customer focus
- speed to market
- ease of manufacture
- reducing product costs
- reducing process costs
- differentiating products
- adding value to products
- extending product life-cycles
- innovation – opening new markets [Heskett 1998]

The equilibrium model of the world in globalization discourse appears as a counter ideal opposing the basic dilemma in expansion model. In fact this paradoxical dilemma has been depicted in different formats against industrial capitalism. The survival of industrial or global capitalism depends on continuous and ever increasing production and consumption without any limits which sounds like the expansion model we have discussed. But as it has been expressed in many formats, "resources" are not limitless in human reach. Equilibrium model depicts a world order which depends on the balance of limited factors: resources, needs, population, environment, etc.. The equilibrium model represents the awakening of subconscious conscience under serious threats. Widening gaps between economical

and social parties, destruction of nature, increasing social and psychological disabilities really threatens the whole system in the world. But the equilibrium model does not have the courage to spell the underlying truth that it is the expansion model that creates the threats as well as the increasing wealth and status of designers under its wings. Designers trying hard to find solutions under terms like sustainability, or sustainable product development are the victims of equilibrium state of mind under expansion and limitless economy. It is like fighting for peace, making love for virginity.

One of the apparent effects of globalism on design profession can be observed in the unification of big companies, that I call re-creation of gods. This unification can be in the form of happy marriages or one company devouring another. Bosses, strategies, target markets, design understandings, brand characters change suddenly. A Scandinavian Volvo turns out to be a Ford-ian Volvo, a post-Volkswagen Skoda (*e.g.*, Octavia model) is never the Skoda we have known for decades. Basic evolutionary principles of wild nature gets applied to the whole world: Those who are fit survives and evolves, those who are not become extinct (not virtually, but actually). The same rule applies not only to companies but also even to countries and even geographies. It reminds me of a softer racism in disguise. "If you are poor, crowded and technologically underdeveloped, then die. Because I will never use my wealth and technology to solve your problem, rather I will see you as a problem for me to get wealthier, and technologically much more developed.." [Özcan 1997]. Even the standards being imposed to design profession (ISO, ASA, DIN *etc.*) in the majority of the world do not improve design ability but put an end to available and sufficient productivity and industrial design life. Designers are being forced to become not good designers but powerfully equipped strong competitors as if in a wild jungle where a slight misjudgement turns out to be tragedy in chain reaction where measure of everything is numerical. What about the design objects *i.e.*, the goods?.. Who cares?...Production/Consumption Rates and Purchase Figures tell it all. We have stopped thinking about quality since the end of history [Fukuyama 1989].

Robert Maynard Pirsig has spent most of his life thinking about quality without reducing it into quantitative figures. He ends up explaining the evolution chain without quantitative terms. Inorganic quality, biological quality, social quality and intellectual quality are his terms to define the evolutionary process which can only be explained as development [Pirsig 1991]. But the last stage of the evolution, the intellect, is now threatening its pro-stages it can only exist on, *i.e.*, the nature, the biological human being and the society. In a personal letter, he has told me his appreciation that I've been using his books in design courses. What he mentioned in that letter was also the fact that *...many people who talk about quality in Industrial Design define quality in terms of "serving an intended purpose", but of course that says nothing about the quality of the purpose or whether there is quality to be found outside the purpose.* Goodness is a purpose and how can you figure out good in numbers, statistics, unless you do not have that basic sense of quality, unless you do not see the world as hardware and globalization as the software running on numerical codes but can only work well by the sacrifice of abstract, spiritual, ethical, aesthetic, logical, active and alive side of human side *i.e.*, the source of designing goods as well?

### **3. Ethics of Specialization**

R. Buckminster Fuller warns us by giving two independent studies one from biology on the extinction of species and one from anthropology on the extinction of human tribes, concluding that specialization is a way to extinction, and our society is thus organized [Papanek 1972]. As the world situation continues to inbreed specialization as it is now, general adaptability which is the basic advantage of human beings will be lost.

Human being refers to a general natural entity, a biological term and we rarely use this term for ourselves. In social context we call ourselves as citizens, people, community, humanity, society, culture... For us the designers, we are classified as specialists in this world scale mechanism of interactions: producers, consumers, users, *etc.* The era we are living in can also be described as the era of not professions but also specialists. "Who are you?", "I am a digital interface designer I am a theatre architect... I am a gynecologist... I am a divorce attorney". They all also mean that I am a designer designing for you and it's my way of existence not everybody's or anybody's to design the goods you use for your own sake, or, I am an architect who has taken the licence and knowledge of

building your own living spaces out of your hands and mind, or, I am the doctor and you do not know what to do when something happens in your body, or, I am the one who can defend you and your rights better than you, and we all need another specialist to change the taps in our bathrooms. This era, in contradiction with the fact that over-specialization leads to extinction and generalization is the advantage of human beings, shows specialization as the only way of existence, but it starts to create its contradictions. For everybody is a specialist in something, it becomes impossible to realize the whole as in the case of designing products, especially when everything is bound in global scale with written and non-written rules.

I will always ask the question if being a designer is a professional status or more or less a humane ability.

It's no surprise that the Rolling Stones song *Satisfaction* has been awarded by the authorities as the song of the last century. The lyrics "I can't get no satisfaction" not only defines the beat of our life styles, but also motive the designers to fulfill this sense of dissatisfaction while keeping and expanding it. If we loose the perception of our lives as a whole we can get no satisfaction out of it, but try to substitute it with a consumerism out of control. My people in Turkey can not help changing their mobile phones frequently, a five years old car is an old car, last year's model is out of trend, and the song of the century says " I can't get no, satisfaction!". Satisfaction of a need with a design should bring material satisfaction along with spiritual satisfaction. But any satisfaction appears as a threat for the system being executed all over the world.

It's been a couple of years that I've been studying bicycles as a professional designer. Though the main design features of a bicycle have slightly changed for about 150 years It's getting harder and harder for bicycle manufacturers and designers each year to design another model for it's turning out to be an iron bound business and inevitable dependance on experts of any detailing on more than 300 years old bicycle. This company has been specialized on front fork systems while that company is an expert on rear suspension. You find the best chain wheels and cranks in Taiwan while the fittest saddles have been designed in Italy. You find the same brand on the majority of bicycle gear components and I can count not more than five professional manufacturers for wheels. It would be possible to be a bicycle designer twenty years ago, but you can only be a saddle designer and a bicycle co-designer nowadays.

Now think about the satisfaction of an independent designer who is witnessing the realization of his design turning into a physical entity under total control on every detailing, and think about the other one feeling like a compulsory contributor into an inevitable out of control activity. What's good for a designer?.. Freedom or dependance? I am sure that a bicycle getting assembled at the garage is much more satisfactory than depending on international trade and production unions. Same for the users: It's being estimated that there will be just a few companies producing automobiles for the whole. It means that there will be less designers and design activity for more and more consumers in the near future. And for designing will be a professional activity, one of the main features of human brain, designing through abstraction will no longer be a basic and general humane activity.

#### **4. Epilogue**

As Victor Papanek puts it as the first sentences of its first chapter of his first book, all men are designers and all we do almost all the time is design, for design is basic to all human activity [Papanek 1972]. Victor Margolin classifies the *active* engagement of human beings with design in four basic ways [Margolin 1995]:

1. they design products for others
2. they design products for themselves
3. they use products designed by others; and
4. they use products they design for themselves

Years have been passed since this classification and it's still but a diminishing hope to consider design activity as a practice of human beings. Globalization and specialization hand in hand are trying hard to conquer and take it away this basic human ability from inside, with the help of professional designers. The basic principle for ethical abstraction lies in the term "good". If we do not have a sense of what is good and what is not then it means that we've lost our ethical abstraction ability. You can not replace

the qualitative answer for good and not good with quantitative factors. Ethical human existence can not get satisfied with quantitative answers. We must have a basic ethical abstraction for our design practices. We must ask ourselves if it is good to depend on nuclear energy, and must find an answer apart from quantitative reasoning. We need ethical answers for questions like "is it good that the technology I create can make a majority suffer in favour of a minority's wealth?" or "is it good that the technology I am creating is making a lot of human being useless, or just giving them a sense of uselessness? or, "is it good that I lost all my communication with my neighbour but I can communicate with the other side of the world through my computer?", or "is it good that while my kitchen is getting technologically well equipped my food is getting tasteless, and I am getting fatter?" I always think that semi-god Prometheus was a designer and the fire he brought to humans was design ability. Now he is embarrassed and bringing the fire back to gods with a job application in his hands. By sacrificing the human side he thinks that he will be accepted among gods. Can I be considered to be pessimistic about design activity today. No. I enjoy practicing and teaching industrial design.

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