

Ecological and anthropological feedback between tools and their users Ethics in Industrial Design?

born in 1920 in Prague, Czechoslovakia;

lives in Robion, France; full professor for

the Theory of Communications at the

Faculty for Communications and

Humanities, FAAP, Sao Paulo, Brasilia; in

Europe since 1972; writer of numerous

essays published in European, American

and Brazilian magazines and newspapers;

participant in numerous international

meetings on communication and related

subjects, and in the organisation of

numerous art events and exhibitions;

most important book publications: *Lingua*

e *Realidade*, Herder S. Paulo 1963;

Historia do Diabo, Martins, S. Paulo

1965; *Da Religiosidade*, State Cultural

Commission, S. Paulo 1967; *La Force du*

Quotidien, Mame, Paris 1972; *Natural:*

Mente, Duas Cidades, S. Paulo 1979;

Pos-Historia, Duas Cidades, S. Paulo

1982; *Für eine Philosophie der*

Fotografie, European Photography,

Göttingen 1983; *Ins Universum der*

technischen Bilder, European

Photography, Göttingen 1985; *Die*

Not so long ago, this would be a mute question. To design was to permit the production of useful objects. For instance:

knives were to be designed so that they might cut well, among other things throats of enemies. It was found out that for a design to be useful, it also had to be true (in the sense of: according to scientific knowledge), and to be beautiful (in the sense of providing an experience for its user). The ideal of the designer was pragmatic (functional), and ethical (political) considerations were not his business.

Ethical norms were provided by the public space, either by a superhuman authority, or by consensus, or both, and the designer just as much as the user of the product were subject to those norms under the threat of punishment in this or in the other world. But the question about ethics in industrial design, about the moral and political responsibility of the designer, has become valid (and even urgent) in the present situation. For at least three different sets of reasons:

(1) There is no longer any public space for it to provide norms. Though there are still authorities about (religious, political and moral ones), their norms are no longer trusted, and their competence with regard to industrial production is doubted. Authorities are no longer trusted, because the communications revolution has done away with the public space of tradition. And their competence is doubted, because industrial production has become very complex, and authoritarian norms of what ever type tend to misunderstand it. By thus being incompetent, public ethics tends to hinder or deform industrial progress instead of providing it with a guide line. The only authority still left more or less intact is science, but it claims to be value-free, and thus provides no ethical norms.

(2) Industrial production, including design,

has become a complex matter. The amount of information at the disposal of the producer far exceeds the capacity of individual memories, and even if artificial memories are used, the problem is how to select the information to be processed. It has therefore become necessary to act in teams composed of human and artificial agents, and the final result cannot be ascribed to any single author. For this reason, no one single person is responsible for the product. Even if there were authorities to provide norms, nobody would feel bound by them personally. Now this moral irresponsibility built in the production process must result in ethically pernicious products, unless some kind of ethics in industrial design be elaborated.

(3) In the past it was tacitly believed that the moral responsibility for a product lies with its user. If somebody kills his enemy with a knife, the responsibility is his and not that of the knife designer. Thus to design knives was somehow a pre-ethical, value-free action. This is no longer the case, however. Many industrial products are used by automated apparatus, and it is absurd to hold robots responsible for the use of products. The division of labor has as a result the impossibility to assign responsibility to any one of the people involved in the process.

If a robot kills, who shall be held responsible: the designer of the robot, of the knife, or the man who has calculated the robot program? Is it not possible to ascribe ethical responsibility to some error in design, in programming, or in production? And what about assigning the ethical responsibility to the industry that produced the robot, or the whole industrial complex, or finally to the whole system of which that complex is part and parcel? In short: unless some kind of ethics in industrial design be elaborated, total ethical

Schrift, Immatrix Publications, Göttingen
 1987; Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis,
 Immatrix, Göttingen 1987; Krise der
 Linearität, Benteli, Bern 1988;
 Angenommen, Immatrix Publication,
 Göttingen 1989; (some of these books
 have been translated in various
 languages).

*irresponsibility will follow. Now of course
 this is no new problem. It rose its terrible
 head in 1945, when the question was
 asked: who is responsible for the crimes
 committed by the Nazis against mankind?
 At the occasion of the Nurnberg trials a
 letter written by a German industrialist to a
 Nazi functionary was found, wherein the
 industrialist meekly asked to be forgiven for
 the fact that his gas ovens were badly
 designed: instead of killing thousands of
 people at one stroke, it only killed hundreds.
 The Nurnberg trials, and the Eichmann trial
 somewhat later, showed clearly that (a)
 there are no longer any norms to be applied
 to industrial production; (b) there is no
 single author to any crime; and (c) that
 responsibility is so widely diluted that in
 effect we are in a situation of total
 irresponsibility for the acts committed by
 industrial production*

*The recent Irak war shows the problem
 even more clearly, but less absurdly
 bestially than in the case of the Nazis. The
 killing rate there was 1 allied soldier to
 1000 Irakian persons. This rate was
 achieved through excellent industrial
 design, which was functional, scientifically
 true and no doubt esthetically impressive, is
 there any ethical or moral (let alone
 political) responsibility involved here?*

*Consider the image of a pilot leaving his
 helicopter after a raid and addressing a TV
 reporter. His helmet was still on, and as he
 turned to the reporter the guns of the
 vehicle turned in the same direction. His
 helmet was synchronized with the guns,
 and his eyes commanded the firing. Who is
 responsible for this post-industrial
 helicopter-pilot complex, and for the
 behavior resulting from this interwoven
 relation? Is there any instance capable of
 judging such a behavior, be that instance a
 judge, a priest, a national or international
 parliament, a commission of engineers or of
 specialists in the analysis of complex
 systems?*

*We are assembled here to discuss this
 question. What is our competence to do so?
 Still, this is not the time to abdicate from
 responsibility in a sort of impotent despair.
 The fact that our symposium is taking place
 in the face of this problem is in itself a sign
 that we are becoming aware of it, if we do
 not find at least an avenue of approach to
 the solution of the problem of ethics in
 industrial design. Nazism, the Irak war and
 similar events will be only the initial stages
 toward destruction and self-destruction.
 The very fact that we are becoming aware
 of it is reasons for some hope in the future.*

