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ABSTARCT

This article seeks to explore a speculative design practice that emerges from a modern understanding of animism. Design as it is taught in most universities around the world, perpetuates an Eurocentric view of the world and promotes unsustainability. Faced with the massive changes to earthly habitation brought upon by the Anthropocene, design must be transformed into a practice based on care. The Western construction of the concept of nature that was imposed over others via colonialism can be revised. Other understandings of nature offer interesting possibilities for human habitation and can open a pathway to reframe what it means to be human. Animism is thus presented as a way of thinking from the borderlands and a platform from where design can be transformed.

It is clear that human beings have the ability to reform the global environment in ways that they do not fully understand, and these anthropogenic changes have been happening for a long time. (Jamieson 2008) The drastic reconfiguration of nature by humans has led several experts to propose a new chronological term that defines a geologic epoch in which human activities began having a significant impact in terrestrial ecosystems. In this epoch, the Anthropocene, modern human beings will have to face the consequences of their impacts on nature and create strategies to face a myriad of threats, such as global warming, climate change and mass extinctions, amongst others. It is necessary to recognize that humanity is entering a new period of global habitation, an age of Un-settlement (Fry 2010).

Technological approaches to these issues are always well received because they promise to solve all our environmental woes without changing human values, ways of life and economic systems (Jamieson 2008). Nevertheless, this techno-utopian position seeks to deal with the instrumental reduction of human impacts while carrying on with 'business as usual,' ignoring the negative impacts of a market in constant expansion. This position, in which the problems of the Anthropocene can be solved by technology, arises from application of the logic of capital to direct the future of the planet and the inability to admit that humanity cannot live 'post-naturally.' Additionally, this phenomenon limits human abilities to identify real problems and to produce real solutions to the proper challenges of an age of Un-settlement (Fry 2009, 2010, 2012).

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All human potential must be mobilized to generate the structural changes necessary to face the epoch of instability that approaches. Design has to be part of this transformative process. However, our understanding of design must shift from it being a service provider for the interests of capital production via technologies to a wider practice that is mobilized to serve the establishment and preservation of a harmonious relation between humans and nature. The intention of this text is to provide an opening into thinking animist design as a designing out of the borderland. This speculative practice of design inserted in an animist worldview could be a transformative force for the creation of a future of human habitation in harmony with nature.

The Western worldview, an attachment that kills

Fry (2010) proposes that human beings are not born 'unsustainable,' but that they are rather 'made' unsustainable by the structures, values, traditions and knowledge in which they are inserted while they learn to be-in-the-world. One of the main structural pillars of contemporary unsustainability is the Western worldview. This way of being has been established by a process that seems extensive from a historical perspective, but that has caused practically an instantaneous devastation viewed from a geological timeframe.

The most representative (and most harmful) trait of this worldview is the belief that human beings are exceptional to nature, clearly differentiated and superior to the rest of life. The search for a specific trait that separates humanity from the rest of nature has been an obsession of Westerners; secular philosophies have focused in our capacity for reason, some sciences propose our capacity to use complex language, while Christianity asserts that humans possess an eternal soul. It was from this position of superiority that the capitalist, industrial culture of consumption was established and communicated as the epitome of human progress (Peterson 2001).

The historical processes by which this worldview was established as 'truth' go beyond the limits of this text. Rather, the Western construction of the concept of 'nature' will be briefly outlined: The Abrahamic religions elevate man as superior to nature and establish nature as pure resource at man's service. Plato establishes the concept of ideas as immanent images out of reach, affirming that the perceived world is only populated by defective copies of them. Aristotle conceptualizes the 'big chain of being,' a classification system that divides and ranks nature in accordance with its closeness with divine perfection. This system is used centuries later by the Catholic Church to determine which natural elements are closest to the Christian God. Finally, the project of the Enlightenment establishes nature as a mechanism, an autonomous space subject to study and experimentation, an exploitable object that can be constantly improved (Abram 1997, 2010; Descola 2013; Peterson 2001; Restall-Orr 2012). Through colonialism and globalization, this worldview in which human beings are superior to nature has become hegemonic, an oppressive conceptual framework in which difference is charged with value and leads to designating certain things as inferior (nature, animal, body, woman, black, indigenous, etc.), in this way justifying their subordination. The manner in which the Western view of the world has constructed the concept of nature confirms that there is a structural inability to establish harmonious relations, and demonstrates that repairing just a few flaws in the system cannot provide a wholesome solution to the problems that arise in the Anthropocene (Peterson 2001).

The technocratic approach to design as a producer of technologies that can solve our future environmental challenges also emerges from this worldview. However, structural systemic changes are needed to face the challenges of the Anthropocene; it is not just a matter of reconfiguring industrial systems to resemble natural systems, creating systems that promote human happiness or take 'natural stakeholders' into account in human activities. To ensure the future of our species on the planet, it is necessary to find a solution to one of the fundamental causes from which our current problems emerge: The relationship of humanity with nature.

A major process needed to pivot from the Western worldview and transform human–nature relations is an ontological reconfiguration/redefinition of humanity (Fry 2012; Descola 2013). The 'human thing' is an epistemological construction, a product of the knowledge that humanity has created by assigning attributes to itself (Fry 2010), and as such it can be redefined. This text seeks to begin an exploration of animism as a space from the borderlands in which humanity can be reconfigured ontologically. To start this path, some points must be articulated:

1. It is problematic to establish a hard distinction between what is 'natural' and 'artificial;' we live in a technosphere that is integrated to the natural and is never neutral (Fry 2010; 2012). To Boradkar (2010), people and things configure themselves, while Fry (2009) asserts that we are not just users, but are also used by our tools.
2. The concept of nature as resource, standing reserve, mechanical, inferior and hostile has been constructed by humanity and was the foundation of modernity (Descola 2013). Science has been instrumental in this construction using specialized tools (designed and fabricated by humans) used in structured experiments, measuring brief moments of time to translate perceptions into facts. These manufactured theoretical spaces are interpreted by Moderns as being more real than their perceived reality (Abram 2010). Moderns do not believe that construction and reality are the same. They believe the facts they construct are real, and as a consequence they denounce the realities of Others as naïve beliefs, as fetishes (Latour 2010).
3. Science has not been able to fully explain the phenomenon of consciousness since there is no way to take distance from it (Abram 2010; Restall-Orr, 2012). Faced with this constraint, there are scientists that propose establishing consciousness as a universal constant (Chalmers 2014).

Latour (2010) argues that we can choose from two repertoires. In the first, we choose between construction and truth, while in the second, construction and reality are synonyms. For the purpose of this text, the second repertoire will be selected as a starting point to explore a 'reality' in which humans can potentially achieve harmony with nature. The Western worldview has been exposed as an attachment that defutures and kills. A contemporary animist worldview will be proposed as an attachment that can save.

Animism is usually described as a belief system in which animals, plants and objects possess a spiritual essence. This worldview was discarded by the West, which described it as a product of the ignorance and naïveté of superstitious primitive peoples, or as a simple wordplay in which metaphors were used to describe an imaginary dimension.

To begin the exploration of animism, the four types of ontologies described by Descola (2013) will be used as a framework:

> Faced with another entity, human or non-human, I can assume that: It possesses elements of physicality and interiority identical to mine; that both their interiority and physicality are different from mine; that we have similar interiorities and different physicalities; or…that our interiorities are different and our physicality is similar. I will call to the first combination 'totemism,' the second 'analogism,' The third 'animism' and the fourth 'naturalism.' (Descola 2013, 2,833)

Our modern ontology can be named naturalism, the continuity of the physicality of all worldly entities and the discontinuity of their respective interiorities. This is the discourse of science; matter determines everything while the aptitude to reason or to use complex language separates human beings from primates or plants. In animism, human beings attribute an interiority identical to their own to nonhuman beings. This shared interiority allows worldly things to behave in accordance with social norms and human ethical precepts, establishing relationships between human beings and nonhuman beings.

In animism, animals differ from human beings only in appearance, and are usually described as 'disguised persons.' Humans assign to them a reflective conscience, premeditation, an affective life, and respect for ethical principles, and understand their social configurations as communities with specific cultural features (talents, defects, languages, etc.) (Peterson 2001). In animism, the relations between (human and nonhuman) subjects and communities are dependent on norms that are supposedly shared by all. These 'common rules' lead to an exchange of signs that allow subjects to indicate to each other through their interactions that they are mutually understood. Animism, then, extends the concept of 'culture' to nonhuman beings and establishes humanity as a condition of all worldly entities: Everything is human to certain degree. In an animist worldview, there is no nature, and there is no possibility of an opposition between culture and nature as understood in the West. Nature is a subject in a social relation; in this sense, an appropriation and transformation of natural resources cannot exist, and subsistence is just a form of articulation with other humanized elements of the biosphere (Descola 2013).

Spirit is not something external to these entities; things are not simply spirit 'storage spaces.' The concept of 'spirit' in this worldview can be understood as the denomination of Other/all forms of intelligence/consciousness (including human forms) (Abram 1997) or as the quality that animates, accelerates, quickens or vivifies (Restall-Orr, 2012). In animism, the landscape speaks, nature is mentalized, 'mind' is represented as a ubiquitous and invisible layer of the planet. Our animist ancestors had to speak the language of the land, understand the rules of the local ecosystemic 'culture,' and establish respectful relationships with the multiplicity of subjects that inhabited it; all this of course being critical for their survival (Abram 2010). Understanding the world in this way, there cannot be a clear distinction between subjects and objects (Clodd 1905); some ancestral communities even use kinship terms to refer to animals, elements of the landscape (e.g. mountains) and objects such as woven rugs (Peterson 2001). However, animism goes beyond comprehending elements of the landscape as subjects. There is also a primacy of the relations over the terms related. (Descola 2013; Restall-Orr, 2012).

One of the main features of animism is the ability of things to undergo metamorphosis processes. In an ontology in which all worldly elements possess an identical interiority, these can change their form and get into the skin of others. These metamorphosis processes can also be understood as a relational way of being in which an actor shifts the perspective imposed by its original physicality and makes an effort to connect with the perspective with which he imagines another actor sees the world (Descola 2013).

The animist ontology speaks about a world that is mentalized and creative, populated by interactions between subjects that share the same interiority and shape significant relations with each other. This brief review of the animist worldview is the starting point from which to speculate about the construction of a different form of reality – different from the instrumental naturalism/materialism in which humanity has been inserted for centuries. This speculative exercise must not be a matter of nostalgia that seeks to return to a 'golden age' of human planetary habitation. The intention of the text is to start building a 'reality' piece by piece as a platform that allows a transition to the future from today.

The practice of designing spirits

The conclusion of this text is a speculative exercise in which design practice is explored in an animist setting. It is important to state that these ideas are not written from ancestral animism, but rather from a speculative understanding of animism situated in a Western worldview.

For the purpose of this exercise, the definition of design will be: the act of deliberately moving from an existing situation to a preferable one (Fuad-Luke 2009). In this specific case, the preferable situation will be the establishment of an epoch in which harmony with nature is achieved. For this purpose, design must drift apart from its conception as a provider of services to meet the objectives of capital production, question the subjacent ethos from which it was created as a discipline, and alter current narratives breaking with the present through counter-narratives (Fuad-Luke 2009).

Some important narratives to overcome in modern design are: the use of imagery of contemporary (or near-future) science and technology so that products seem to come from beyond their own time, promoting a vision of a future free of discomfort and anxiety (Forty 1986); design as a tool that produces human happiness (at the service of the system of desires); and the instrumentalism that limits things to 'pure utility' (Fry 2010).

One contemporary definition of design approximates nicely to what a design practice inserted in an animist worldview could be; that of design as recognition of the living world through making things and communication (Hara 2007). However, beyond a specific definition, this text seeks to propose some traits of animist design, which are detailed next.

As a practitioner, the designer of spirits understands the impossibility of perpetual economic growth, denies the instrumental use of symbols at the service of capital production, and marks a clear line between needs and desires. The designer of spirits acts in a critical way towards institutions (s/he is political), and hence is concerned with the designing of different ways of relating and organizing subjects, ways of spreading information, decision making, forms of exchange, etc. The designer admits that nature is wise and looks actively for its advice (biomimicry could be a good referent). S/he embodies a shamanic role in the sense that s/he keeps a clear balance of the energy that s/he is transforming, 'managing' her/his ecosystem; s/he designs from sensory perception, understanding the body as open and indeterminate, taking an active part in the phenomena of nature, cocreating reality with the multiplicity of subjects that populate the world (Abram 1997). S/he understands that relations are prior to that which is related, that everything is always in relation and that every subject is just a moment in this network; (Peterson 2001) that the essence of human beings is absence, that humans are incomplete and that is why they need to be reinvented constantly, the absence of claws or fur establishes the need for design; and that things have

agency, that s/he is of the objects. Finally, s/he comes closer to craft, understanding it as 'care as practice,' to do better things instead of more, to recover pleasure in making and recognition of the construction of being in the act of making (Fry 2010).

To develop spirit designers, design education must be also redirected. Decolonial thinking and southern perspectives must be integrated in curriculums around the world. In addition to a diverse conceptual and reflective component, some key competences should be considered for a designer situated in animism. One of these key abilities would be to speak the language of the land; practitioners should develop a profound understanding of the symbolic exchanges that occur in their territories. This designer must clearly understand her/his position in the system of relations of her/his particular landscape. Additionally, s/he must train to acquire the ability to interpret signs by engaging with her/his surroundings through ecosemiotics. Practitioners must strive to inhabit otherness, be able to empathize with the roles and behaviors that nonhumans have in their network. This activity is anthropogenic – the human practitioner derives from her/his humanness all that is necessary to make it possible for nonhumans to be understood by humans in human terms.

Spirit designers will assign human qualities to nonhumans. The jaguar is actually a human in disguise; hence, we are not assigning attributes to an Other; we are reading how that furry human behaves, we are interpreting how The Spirit manifests/crystalizes in that thing (since all worldly things share the same interiority). Humanness becomes the only tool we have at our disposal to understand our lifeworlds. It is an exercise of observation but also a learning process that can be facilitated by members of ancestral peoples or farmers that are acquainted with diverse aspects of the land. As Descola puts it: '…in order for humans to form a fitting idea of their place and responsibility in synecological interactions, it may be useful for them unpretentiously to imagine the aims and lifestyle of the other components in this superorganism that they help to animate' (Descola 2013). Or, as Aldo Leopold wrote, we have to be able to think like a mountain.

There are some interesting examples of these exercises materialized in the most human of institutions: Law. The Ecuadorian constitution has included a whole chapter on the rights of nature and recently a river in New Zealand was recognized as a legal person. By granting nature the status of *persona ficta* it allows humans to speak for the landscapes in a court of law. Humans may take on the role of animals, microbes or plants and plead a case not just in their name but in their voice. This exercise of becoming Other enables nonhumans to be included in civic life and may be a signal of major changes to come.

Beyond practice and education, spirit design is a manifestation of the creativity that saturates nature. Creations do not belong to designers; they are of the world, of all subjects. The interiority of the creator and the created are the same, there is no distinction between subjects and objects; in this sense, there is no production, only metamorphosis (the creations are not ontologically dissociated from the material from which they come). There is no individualized agent that projects its interiority on indeterminate matter to give it form, bringing into existence an entity for which he is responsible and that can be adopted for its own use and exchange (Descola 2013). It is also participative design, but it goes beyond interdisciplinary designing with experts; it is an articulation of persons actively involved with the creation of counternarratives. The spirit designer worries about creating change communities around the belief in animism; s/he understands that the only means of legitimizing this 'truth' is connecting with others who believe in it/make it true. Finally, it is a haptic and gestural design; the practitioner concerns her-/himself with touch, with recovering the

complexity of the human gestures and movements. S/he understands that: (1) the loss of skill in hand-based making overlaps with the concept of the 'end of man' (Fry 2012) and (2) that the human hand is indispensable in creating reality, images created by man being the closest we get to the truth (Latour 2010).

The idea of animist design is to situate oneself in a different ontological regime. In order to shift the dominant relational modes it has to develop as (a) praxis. How to understand design within animism as prefigurative thought and action remains a question to explore. However, a speculative practice of design inserted in an animist worldview can, through its making, generate spaces in which new ways of being-in-the-world are proposed; it can transform the relations of the Moderns with nature. The objective of design in the Anthropocene (in this new epoch of Un-settlement) should be to facilitate a transition towards the establishment of a harmonious relation between all worldly subjects (human and nonhuman) through the redefinition of human ontology and the designing of an 'eco-centric' world through a practice of metamorphosis that crystallizes spirits.

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