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REVIEW

Designing Philosophically

Review of Vilém Flusser
*The Shape of Things:
A Philosophy of Design*

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This essay presents a review of *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design* by Vilém Flusser (translated by Anthony Mathews, London: Reaktion, 1999, 126 pages).

Whilst the subtitle, *A Philosophy of Design*, is a publisher's addition and not the author's, the publication of English translations of some of Vilém Flusser's writings about design under the title *The Shape of Things* is a useful intervention into the issue of 'the philosophy of design' at a number of levels.

By 'the issue' of the philosophy of design, I mean the minor debate about what the philosophy of design is. There have been several efforts, such as by Terence Love,¹ to force the maturation of discourses of design theory through totalising prescriptions. Flusser's writings prevent, and in so doing reveal the undesirability of, such attempts at definitive unifications. They resist Love's

“meta-theoretical hierarchy” and reveal what else the ‘philosophy of design’ can be, and what else it can do. This ‘else’ is what I understand to be part of the project of *Design Philosophy Papers*, and to this extent Flusser’s writings, in a different register, are instructive additions to that project.

If the noun *design* is defined as a “representation or plan” and the verb *design* as “the activity leading to the production of [such specifications]”,² then ‘the philosophy of design’ is constrained to introspective accounts of those activities. If the noun *design* is allowed, as it does in much usage, to refer also to the artefacts or processes made possible by those activities, and the verb *design* to the influential relations between users, use-contexts and those artefacts and processes, then ‘the philosophy of design’ is opened to more exoteric accounts of the nature of modern societies. Such a ‘design philosophy’ takes design as the key to understanding how we live and might live in other ways (in the same way as an ‘existential philosophy’ or a ‘biocentric philosophy’).

Flusser’s work is of this second sort. This does not remove it from pressing urgency to everyday practice of designing. Importantly, his writings suggest that the activity of designing happens, or perhaps happens best, with a view to this wider sense of design and the designing (influence) that designs (artefacts and processes) go on doing long after the production of plans has finished. And further, Flusser demonstrates that this wider-view activity can and should itself be characterised as a type of philosophising. In other words, Flusser reveals that the phrase ‘the philosophy of design’ is also a subjective genitive, as in ‘the philosophising that is of, or done as part of, the design process (at its best).’

Partly marginalised from the English-speaking world by a multi-cultural geography – a Jewish Czech who fled from the Nazis to Sao Paulo, where he lived for over thirty years, writing mostly in German and Portuguese – Flusser is best known in English as a media theorist, primarily through his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, originally translated in 1984 and recently reprinted by Reaktion books.³ Attentive reading of his philosophising about communication (now more extensively available in the more recent *Writings*⁴) indicates that Flusser has always understood information verbally, i.e., as a designing of the world, not a mere representation of knowledge about the world. In this context, *The Shape of Things*⁵ is an important corrective:

What is at issue is the concept of in-formation. In other words, imposing forms on materials... In the past, it was a question of distinguishing between true and false information. True information was when the forms were discoveries, and false information was when forms were fictions. The distinction is becoming pointless since we have started to see forms neither as discoveries (*aletheia*) nor as fictions, but as models... The

criteria for criticising information is now more like the following questions: To what extent are the forms being imposed here capable of being filled with material? To what extent are they capable of being realised? To what extent is the information practical or productive? (28)

With this very materialist notion of information, we are in fact quickly at the heart of Flusser's philosophy of design. What differentiates design from philosophy for Flusser – and increasingly sees design replace philosophy (20) – is that design moves beyond plans and representations, from what he calls in an essay toward the end of the collection 'hollow pots' (100), to 'stuff' (22). Designing is essentially materialist, forming matter.

Nevertheless, Flusser always insists that designing-as-formatting is still philosophical. Whilst designing is a making-materially-manifest, what it makes are ideas and how it makes is ineluctably idealistic. Flusser's philosophy of design is profoundly Platonic: designing is a process of seeing the eternal in nature, and then devising ways of tricking 'nature' into different, artificial, eternal forms:

The possibility of looking through time into eternity and of representing what can be perceived in the process has only become relevant since the third millennium. It was in those days that people stood on the hills of Mesopotamia looking up river and foresaw floods and droughts and marked lines on clay tablets indicating canals that were to be dug in the future. At the time, these people were thought of as prophets, but we would call them designers instead ... This second way of seeing sees eternity, not the future. Not the future course of the Euphrates but the form of all watercourses ... (39–40)

... This is the designer's way of seeing: He has a sort of pineal eye (partitioning just like a computer in fact) that enables him to perceive and control eternities. And he can give order to a robot to translate into the here and now that which is perceived and manipulated in the eternal (for example, to dig canals or build rockets). In Mesopotamia, he was called a prophet. He is more deserving of the name of God. But thank God he is unaware of this and sees himself as a technician or artist. May God preserve him in this belief. (42)

What is particularly important about this strongly dialectical way of thinking – more on this below – is that Flusser always takes it through a number of iterations, beyond the first instance of the production of some thing (idea > formed matter) and onto what that thing designs when in use in the world (formed matter > idea). For example, Flusser demonstrates that when the ideal that the designer is materialising is information, humans are reduced to their finger tips; they give up their ability to grasp things by the

hand (and so by the mind) in the name of the false freedom of choosing between one pre-programmed option and another:

The robot only does what the human being wants, but the human being can only want what the robot can do ... The human being is a functionary of robots that functions as a function of him." (48)

The old lever is striking back at us: We have been moving our arms as though they were levers since we have had levers. We simulate that which we have simulated ... Consequently, the fact that the lever is striking back will have to be taken into account in the future construction of machines. It is not enough simply to take the economy and ecology into consideration in the construction of machines. We will have to think about the ways in which such machines may strike back at us. (53)

Perhaps the most significant of the iterations of this idealistic materialisation that designing sets in train, is one that Flusser ends up at in many of the essays: waste. All information needs to be 'stuffed' to exist, to be tangibly handlable; but because what matters to us, what we consume and are consumed by, is increasingly the immaterial aspects of things, physical remainders begin to accumulate. In an argument that Flusser builds on from his friend Abraham Moles,⁶ and one that has most recently been furthered by Ezio Manzini,⁷ virtual reality and the digital economy are revealed to be dangerously material-intensive and physically polluting:

In the past it was a matter of formalising a world taken for granted, but now it is a matter of realising the forms designed to produce alternative worlds. That means an 'immaterial culture', though it should actually be called a 'materialising culture'. (28)

We are less and less concerned by possessing things and more and more concerned with consuming information... Things start to recede into the background of our area of concern... Junk proves the demise of things. What is happening is that we feed information into machines so that they spew out such junk in huge quantities and for next to no cost. This throw-away material, all those lighters, razors, pens, plastic bottles, are not true things; one cannot hold on to them. And just as we get better and better at learning how to feed information into machines, all things will be transformed into the same kind of junk, even houses and pictures. All things will lose their value and all values will be transformed into information. (87–8)

The human being is not surrounded by two worlds then, but three: of nature, of culture and of waste."(90)

Design is responsible for this devaluation – the style and function of so many designed things get used up long before their materiality. In an argument paralleled by Tony Fry's suggestion that designers must take heed of the ethical dialectic of creation and destruction that is designing,⁸ Flusser demonstrates that whilst design aims to remove physical obstacles to living well, it does so by making more things, things that in turn become further obstacles:

An 'object of use' is an object which one uses and needs to get other objects out of the way ... This contradiction is what is called the 'internal dialectic of culture' (if by 'culture' we mean the totality of all objects of use) ... I come across obstacles in my path (come across the objective, substantial, problematic world); I overturn some of these obstacles (transform them into objects of use, into culture) in order to continue, and the objects thus overturned prove to be obstacles themselves. The more I continue, the more I am obstructed by objects of use... When it comes to creating things, one is faced with the question of responsibility (and thus with freedom) ... Whoever projects designs for objects of use (whoever produces culture) throws obstacles in other people's way, and nothing can be done about this ... Responsibility is the decision to answer for things to other people. (58–9)

With this sort of conclusion, Flusser is indicating the extent to which his philosophising is not merely a matter of understanding designing; in arriving at plans for what needs to be designed and how, he is designing; if designing is a sort of philosophising, then this sort of philosophising is also a designing. It is a type of foreseeing that predicts the practical limits of the dream of dematerialisation and the service and information economies, and then briefs the designing that works in acknowledgement of this materialistic finitude:

We are beginning to become conscious of the temporal nature of all forms (and thus all creation). Since entropy is beginning to obstruct us at least as much as objects of use are... It may be that consciousness of the temporality of all creation (even that of immaterial designs) will contribute to a future situation in which things will be designed a bit more responsibly, resulting in a culture with less and less room for objects of use to act as obstacles and more and more room for them to serve as vehicles for interpersonal contact. A culture with a bit more freedom. (61)

Flusser's thinking even extends to discipline-specific design challenges: after pointing out that the essence of a dwelling is its walls, he observes the extent to which the walls of today have been

compromised, like swiss cheese, by a plethora of perforations for communication technologies:

Home-as-one's-castle has become a ruin with the wind of communication blowing through the cracks in the walls. It is a shoddy patchwork job. What is needed is a new type of architecture, a new design... A creative house as the nucleus of an interpersonal network.

[Though] such a method of building a house using cable links is full of dangers... In such a worst-case scenario, houses would be cornerstones of an unimaginable totalitarianism.

[But] if we do not embark on the adventure [of designing with an awareness of these dangers], we are, for the foreseeable future, damned to huddle between four walls under a roof full of holes in front of our television screens or to drive around in our cars, experiencing nothing." (83–4)

This sort of creative, yet consequence-conscious, design proposal is demonstrative of the power of a philosophy of design that opens itself to, and actually has its origins in, all that lies beyond the design process as currently professionally practiced, but that nonetheless takes design in the broadest sense as its touch-stone.

There is an important final way in which Flusser's philosophising is designerly. Flusser's text comprises 22 short essays, most around 1500 words. This constrained form is not unusual in design thinking: compare for example the work of Gui Bonsiepe⁹ and Otl Aicher.¹⁰ This could be seen as an indicator of the immaturity of the discourse,¹¹ where in philosophy, such modes of presentation are an indicator of maturity.¹² This way of designing his writings means that Flusser thinks in a starkly evident way. The design of his dialectic (or the rules of his particular game-plan for philosophising¹³) is exemplarily manifest: start with an etymology,¹⁴ find an opposition, reverse the conventional understanding several times and identify the consequences whilst reflecting on the inadequacy of this particular way of working.

This method does, however, prevent Flusser from engaging with many other thinkers, past and contemporary: almost none are mentioned in *The Shape of Things*, and there are only passing references, no citations, to figures like Husserl, Sartre, Buber and Wittgenstein in *Writings*, even though Flusser's work seems heavily dependent upon Heidegger's philosophy of 'the thing'¹⁵ and his conclusions about the dangers of design's fundamental idealism replicate Baudrillard's.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the brevity and clarity of these texts mean that they are very useful for teaching designers and design students the philosophising that they are doing without knowing it. And more significantly, Flusser's refusal to systematise

his thinking into ‘coherent meta-theory’ means that the work of understanding how these short pieces fit together, or do not, remains to be done by the now activated reader.

Flusser’s work is designed to be redesigned; one needs to design with it to understand it – just as should be the ambition of a design philosophy.

Notes

1. For example ‘Philosophy of Design: A Meta-Theoretical Structure for Design Theory’ *Design Studies* vol 21 no 3, May 2000; and ‘Constructing a Coherent Cross-Disciplinary Body of Theory about Designing and Designs: Some Philosophical Issues’ *Design Studies* vol 23 no 3, May 2002.
2. Terrence Love ‘Constructing a Coherent Cross-Disciplinary Body of Theory’ 356–7.
3. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* trans Anthony Mathews, London: Reaktion, 2000.
4. *Writings* ed. Andreas Ströhl, trans Erik Eisel, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Publication details indicate that his text would not have been published without the subsidy of a grant.
5. The publication is mostly a translation of Flusser’s 1993 *Vom Stand der Dinge*. This phrase normally means something like ‘on the state of things’ or ‘on the way things stand.’ Stand could perhaps mean ‘shape’ but only in the sense of a profitable business or a tidy house being in good shape. It certainly does not mean form.
6. See Abraham Moles ‘Design and Immateriality: What of it in a Post Industrial Society’ *Design Issues* vol 4 no 1–2, 1988 and ‘The Comprehensive Guarantee: A New Consumer Value’ *Design Issues* vol 2 no 1, 1985. Andreas Ströhl mentions Flusser’s friendship with Moles in his Introduction to Flusser’s Writings, xxiv.
7. Manzini most recently discussed “the desertification of common goods” in ‘Scenarios of Sustainable Well-Being’ *Design Philosophy Papers* no 1, 2003, but with particular reference to the erroneous dreams of digital dematerialisation, see ‘Prometheus of the Everyday: The Ecology of the Artificial and the Designer’s Responsibility’ in Richard Buchanan & Victor Margolin eds *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1995.
8. One of Fry’s most recent explications of this was in ‘The Voice of Sustainment: The Dialectic of Sustainment’ *Design Philosophy Papers* no 5, 2003.
9. *Interface: An Approach to Design* Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1999.
10. *The World as Design* trans Michael Robinson, Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1994.

11. Such as the Steven Heller edited collections, like all the volumes of *Looking Closer* New York: Allworth, vol 1, 1994.
12. I am referring to the experimentation with fragmentation that Nietzsche learned from the Jena Romantics (e.g., Schlegel, Schelling, Novalis) and the Pre-Socratics and bequeathed to postmodernity.
13. See Pierre Bourdieu's 'The Philosophical Institution' in A. Montefiore (ed) *Philosophy in France Today* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
14. Given the importance of language in these texts it is unforgivable that Anthony Mathews, the translator, is not acknowledged on the cover by Reaktion.
15. See the 1935 lecture course *What is a Thing?* trans W.B. Barton & Dera Deutsch, Chicago: Regnery, 1967.
16. See for example 'Design and Environment' in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* trans Charles Levin, St Louis: Telos, 1981.