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How We Intend to Future

Review of Anthony Dunne
and Fiona Raby, *Speculative
Everything: Design, Fiction,
and Social Dreaming*

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ABSTRACT Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's new book argues for the value of design projects that speculate about possible futures rather than just realize market-feasible futures. The claim is that our societies, and the industries responsible for furnishing our societies with products and environments, are losing the capacity to envision futures in order to evaluate their desirability. In response, Dunne and Raby, and the designers of which they approve, insist on the importance of speculations being physicalized beyond prototype but no longer (compared to their earlier "critical design" work) deployed for people to use. This review essay is critical of the "shopping" framework and taste regime that underlie Dunne and Raby's arguments and projects.

KEYWORDS: critical design, design fiction, design futures, speculative design, taste

It is annoying. Things change because of designers and yet no one could say that we, humans, are designing our future. Samar Akkach has noted that the Arabic for design derives from the term for strong, decisive intent, as in the English phrase “by design” (Akkach 2003). Despite the prominence given to design as a source of innovative value these days, the futures we are getting hardly seem like the ones we explicitly decide on; they are more like the messed-up ones we are drifting unwittingly and implacably into.

While annoying, it is probably not all bad. The current profession of designing has its origins in the very strong intent to future in particular ways known as modernism. In hindsight, this imposing willfulness was a disaster, not least because it was the will of a very select “we.”

How then to avoid drifting uncontrollably without resorting to fantasies of control? How to take responsibility for the futures we are designing toward even when we cannot take charge of that designing? How to gather a “we” to do this postmodernist designing?

And where? Ideally, universities are the institutions in our societies with the rare capacity to engage with these questions. However, as Tony Fry and Clive Dilnot have often pointed out, universities until very recently have been profoundly ignorant of design. Design did finally enter the university system at the exact moment that neoliberalism began imposing an audit culture on research productivity. Design was drafted into the academy with the other “creative industries,” but unlike those other practices (the visual and performing arts), could have rested on its commercial applicability laurels. It has instead joined with those other practices and battled to constitute distinctive methodologies and epistemologies for its research.

For example, the primary concern of Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne in their “New Methodologies in Art and Design Research: The Object as Discourse” was that the new research work being undertaken at the time might “produce solid and worthy ‘applied’ research projects, [but] most will be narrow in scope, usually rather dull and pedestrian ... at very real risk of losing those qualities of originality, iconoclasm, energy, style and wit which have characterized the best of [pre-university incorporation] art school culture since the 1950s” (Seago and Dunne 1999). The article case studies doctoral design projects in which, Seago and Dunne claim, “research is interpreted as ‘conceptual modeling’ involving a critique of existing approaches to production/consumption communicated through highly considered artifacts” (Seago and Dunne 1999: 17). In particular, Dunne’s own Ph.D. (one of the three projects presented), which is apparently reminiscent of Walter Benjamin, John Cage, and Michel Foucault (Seago and Dunne 1999: 15, 16), “offers a positive and radical

model of the action researcher in design as a critical interpreter of design processes and their relationship to culture and society, rather than a skilled technician preoccupied by the minutiae of industrial production or a slick but intellectually shallow semiotician” (Seago and Dunne 1999: 16).

Irrespective of the validity of these claims, it is the case that fifteen years later, the precedents of the now quite extensive work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby are fairly pervasive within the domain of university-located research-by-project. If this realm does afford a rare opportunity for us to ask after the futures we are being designed toward without necessarily intending to, the dominance of “critical design” of Dunne and Raby in that realm should be held to account. Is it allowing us “critically interpret” the designer’s role in society?

The publication of *Speculative Everything* is an important opportunity to hear how Dunne and Raby claim to be helping us to think in productively critical ways about our futures; about what is likely, and within that, what must be resisted as unlikable; and about what else might be possible, and how we can make quite different kind of futures more possible.

We, We, We

For this reason, it is frustrating how badly written this book is – though clearly I am no model. Despite the claim in the preface that the book moves from “a general setting of what conceptual design is, through its use ... to [its] aesthetics” (Dunne and Raby 2014: vi), the structure is more like multiple overlapping perspectives on “speculative design.” This repetitive approach can end up being confusing and often contradictory.

By far the most annoying thing about the book is the incessant use of “we.” Dunne and Raby – for reasons that will be explained below, I will from now on refer to them as DnR – are a couple, so they must use the first person plural. And better that they are up front about owning the opinions expressed in the book rather than the perspectival-less declaratives of most academic writing. But it is disconcerting when, despite most uses of “we” meaning “we, DnR,” many of them are there to invoke humanity in general. The “we” of “We have become a society of individuals ... We live in a very different world now but we can reconnect with that [visionary] spirit ... But to do this, we need more pluralism in design, not of style but ideology and values” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 8, 9) is obviously not the same “we” as “We coined the term *critical design* ... We feel it is the right moment to offer an updated view of what we think [critical design] is” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 34). But which “we” is the following?

We view people as obedient and predictable users and consumers ... Are we prepared to treat society as a living laboratory as we do with digital technologies? ... For the most part, we

live in a consumer society and consumerism drives economic growth ... But we are designers not writers ... Whether we like it or not, we now live within a multitude of realities ... We view people as free agents, not necessarily rational, but free to make up their own minds. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 38, 48, 51, 86, 159, 161)

Even more annoyingly, often when a claim desperately needs to be qualified by a “We, DnR, believe ...,” it is not:

Most people believe [design] is about problem-solving ... All good design is critical ... If it is labeled as art it is easier to deal with but if it remains design it is more disturbing ... Although on the surface this project may seem absurd, it raises interesting questions. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 2, 35, 43, 65)

This is more than a stylistic quibble. This is a book advancing the notion of critical design. It tackles global issues that are not being satisfactorily handled by the very Western, even though globally dominant, modernist approaches to designing. The book explicitly names homogenizing global capital as what design must be critical of, generating speculations about other possibilities that can resist capitalism’s “There is no alternative” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 8). So questions of “Who is this ‘we’?” are axial. But there is very little ethnic “diversity” in any of the projects, and there is no explicit discussion of cultural difference in the text. Even when projects are reviewed that were produced in particular contexts, East Asia for example, and developed notoriety as a result of culturally specific media platforms and habits, these are not taken into account in any significant way.

There is of course plenty of diversity in the projects when it comes to human–machine and human–animal relations. Disability is negotiated – as an opportunity for trans-humanist futures, for instance. But this only makes the lack of other kinds of diversity even more conspicuous.

Notably absent is class difference, despite the primacy accorded by the book to the 2008 financial crisis. One of the newer DnR projects documented in the book is that of Foragers (2010). Motivated by a scenario in which coming food shortages will not be adequately dealt with by governments, the project explored DIY digestive devices that groups of people might use to gather food from the urban environment. It seems to me that there is an unavoidable issue of wealth inequality here. But it is explicitly erased: “Rather than the foragers being grungy and dressed in obvious clothing, the photographer suggested they wear outdoor, sporty clothes to challenge expectations of them being organic and anti-technology” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 151). This aesthetic choice is justified in terms of “avoid[ing] hyper-realism ... so that viewers were aware they were looking at ideas, not products” (151). But why those ideas, and not

ideas of race or class? These are not a stretch in this case, but part of the premise – if grassroots groups are forced into subsistence by scarcity, wealthy people hoarding what resources there are is the unavoidable corollary.

Preferably Plausible, Probably Possible

All this goes to the opening premise of the book: that “we” (all seem to) have lost the capacity to vision and dream. For DnR, evidence is how much we merely “hope,” “hope that we will not allow ourselves to become extinct, hope that we can feed the starving, hope that there will room for us all on this tiny planet ... We don’t know how to fix the planet and ensure our survival. We are just hopeful” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 1).

This claim then leads to the primary hypothesis of the book, which arrives via the “Cone of Futures.” This is a diagram that is common in Foresight literature. The future is seen as series of widening cones extending from the present. The narrowest cone is the “probable,” the limited range of futures that we are already heading for given that we have no visions for alternate futures. If we did start dreaming about alternatives, that would give us a much wider cone that we could call the possible. Of course, some possible futures are fairly unlikely, so the cone midway between the possible and the probable is the plausible. Somewhere on this diagram you could indicate where the preferable lies. DnR locate it as overlapping the probable and plausible, though there is no reason to imagine why the preferable does not in fact lie outside the plausible, and even outside the possible. Many utopias, as highly preferable, are deliberately implausible. And though DnR cite Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Wright 2010) repeatedly, DnR seem to see their project as working in the space between the possible and plausible rather than the plausible and probable, and not necessarily in terms of the preferable. Their brief is to make affecting designs that lie outside of the cone of the probable in order to widen that cone, and indeed all the cones, creating space for different kinds of futures, or at least consideration of different kinds of futures:

This is the bit we are interested in. Not in trying to predict the future but in using design to open up all sorts of possibilities that can be discussed, debated and used to collectively define a preferable future for a given group of people ... We believe that by speculating more, at all levels of society, and exploring alternative scenarios, reality will become more malleable and, although the future cannot be predicted, we can help set in place today factors that will increase the probability of more desirable futures happening. And equally, factors that may lead to undesirable futures can be spotted early on and addressed or at least limited. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 6)

We believe that even nonviable alternatives, as long as they are imaginative, are valuable and serve as inspiration to imagine one's own alternatives ... Speculative design can inspire ... a feeling that, if not exactly anything, more is definitely possible. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 161)

Before explaining this further, I should finish my point about the neglect of cultural difference. This hypothesis, that design can and should correct the paucity of futures available to us, restoring to us our capacity to vision, depends on the claim that “we” currently have constrained futures. This assumption is captured accurately by the diagram when it insists that “we” are all at one singular point in time, the apex of the cones from which all possible futures narrowly extend. However, it is very apparent that while “we” are all at this moment in the calendar imposed upon us in the name of functional global capital, many of us are in very different “places,” with very different sets of futures. From where I am, a privileged white male, my cone is wide and long (though I am personally running out of time, and may be living at the moment in a rapidly declining post-empire). My cone is not dissimilar to DnR's, I imagine. But it is very dissimilar to the cones of Pakistanis I know, or Brazilians or indigenous Australians. I don't mean by this my personal ontogenic futures, but the trajectory of my phylogeny. While we in the North/ West seem to have lost our capacity for visioning, could the same be said for those up and down the line of now in BRIC nations? An Islamic caliphate is a highly motivating vision held by many in our present that is changing what futures are probable if not preferable for many, not just those who promote that vision.

Again, this is not just a cheap identity politics criticism. It opens the way to seeing that DnR's rationale for their work is itself open to question. There are strong design communities, practicing and researching, with models of futuring that challenge those of DnR. The DESIS Network, for instance, works with William Gibson's oft-quoted, “The future is already here – it is just not evenly distributed.” The motivating claim is that, far from being poor-in-future-vision, communities – usually the more marginalized ones – are already innovating systems for meeting their everyday needs that are quite distinct from market provisioning or government services. The job of the designers is not to come up with these visions of alternate economies, but to find social innovations, to find people in the now trying to build different kinds of future cones, and bolster and proliferate them through service design.

By comparison, DnR still see the designer's job as modernist-ly leading rather than postindustrial-ly servicing communities. The task of the designer is to get “the people” to think about what they cannot and/ or will not. It is no wonder then that while DnR will frequently insist that such “people” be allowed to do their own imagining and make up their own minds, they are nevertheless often cast as just a

little annoying: “Many people struggle to know what they are looking at and how they should relate to [a speculative design]” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 141).

Viewers need to understand the rules of the game and how a speculative design prop is meant to function in a given situation. This is very difficult because viewers are not used to encountering design objects with this purpose either in the press or exhibitions ... One challenge for design criticism is to clarify and promote new rules and expectations for viewing speculative design objects in noncommercial settings such as museums and galleries. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 94)

This “designer’s voice” (96), directing us as to what “we” should be looking at, and how, has pride of place for DnR: “This is the bit we are interested in ... We are interested in ... We are more interested in ... We believe it is more interesting to ... We are very interested in ...” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 6, 76, 89, 131, 149).

Nevertheless, while it is not the only reading of the present with respect to the future, I do think that the working assumption of *Speculative Everything* has merit, at least for the late consumer capitalist economies of the North/ West. With cultural qualifiers, I certainly agree that, “As Frederic Jameson famously remarked, it is now easier for us to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Yet alternatives are exactly what we need” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 2).

The Difference Things Make ...

On this count, DnR do have a very important contribution. The book goes to considerable effort to distinguish between the futures thinking possible with design as compared with literature (science fiction), cinema, and art. When DnR insist that *design* has a unique and much-needed contribution to make to the project of enhancing our futuring capacities, they mean mostly *product design*. They are insistent on futures being made present through artefacts – artefacts that are finished design works, not prototypes. Or, more accurately, these artefacts of possible futures must have the polish of finished design works because, of course, they do not actually function. In contrast to *Design Noir*, the artefacts being promoted by *Speculative Everything* are not to be experienced in everyday life, but instead exist primarily within carefully curated exhibitions, alongside high-end photography and textual fragments from the scenario being exhibited or about the exhibition as a whole. Images of the artefacts as exhibited then circulate in the media.

So why? In terms of aiding our capacity to vision and evaluate futures collectively, why design, why product design, why completed yet nonfunctional artefacts, and why exhibited (and photographed)?

How does this enable us (“we”) to widen and deepen our engagement with the future?

The argument is far from clear because it is dispersed unevenly throughout the book and never summarized. As far as I can make out, the argument turns around particular epistemological claims about designed artefacts, about the ambiguity generated by their physical reality when only partially contextualized:

1. Making the Future (Physically) Present

The prime objective of speculative design is to force an aspect of the future into the present so that it demands a response:

A key feature is how well [a critical design] simultaneously sits in this world, the here-and-now, while belonging to another yet to exist one ... That is why for us, critical designs need to be made physical. Their physical presence can locate them in our world whereas their meaning, embodied values, beliefs, ethics, dreams, hopes and fears belong somewhere else. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 43–4)

While imaginary, not yet, speculative designs are nevertheless present, physically “in the same space as the imaginer ... making the experience more vivid, more alive and more intense” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 90); more than, DnR argue, literature makes possible: “One strength for design is that its medium exists in the here and now. The materiality of design proposals, if expressed through physical props, brings the story closer to our own world away from the worlds of fictional characters” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 79).

2. Distancing Overidentification

Nevertheless, and somewhat contradictorily, DnR have a concern for the overwhelming reality of cinematic experiences: “Films also require us to put ourselves in the place of the protagonist but they require less effort because we are immersed in a high-resolution world designed to push our emotional buttons” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 91). At times, this concern seems Brechtian: DnR want to ensure that there is still space for critical questioning, interrupting audiences that might slip into more passive identifications with characters in narrative scenarios. “[Speculative design] proposes an alternative that through its lack of fit with this world offers a critique by asking, ‘why not?’” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 43). “The props of speculative design are different [from those in the narrative arts]. They are triggers that can help us construct in our minds a world shaped by different ideals, values, and beliefs” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 91).

3. Maintaining Designerly Intent

DnR are very particular about the design aesthetic that qualifies a project as a speculative design. I will discuss this below, but in

overall terms, though there must be something in the design that distances the audience from overidentifying with the fictioned future being materialized – a “glitchy”-ness, DnR call it (Dunne and Raby 2014: 96) – this must not devolve into parody or irony. This appears to be part of the reason that DnR have dropped “critical design” for “speculative design”; to move from something that sounds too rationally commentary-like to something that is more affecting: “Stephen Duncombe argues that the radical left has relied too heavily on reason, ignoring the place fantasy and fabricated realities play in our lives” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 159).

When people encounter the term *critical design* for the first time, they often assume it has something to do with critical theory and the Frankfurt School or just plain criticism ... Critical design is critical thought translated into materiality. It is about thinking through design rather than through words and using the language and structure of design to engage people ... It is the gap between reality as we know it and the different idea of reality referred to in the critical design proposal that creates the space for discussion. It depends on dialectical opposition between fiction and reality to have an effect. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 35)

In terms of positive characterizations, DnR maintain that there must be a consistency and even an authenticity to project. Speculative designs must have a strong, coherent, designer-as-author “voice” if their patent impossibility is to nevertheless be impactfully plausible:

The most interesting voice, or perspective to design from, for us, and probably the most neglected, is the designer’s own language. Usually this is missing in design fictions because designers try to make their design prop as “realistic” as possible by using the prop’s presumed language, the language of the world as we understand it. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 96)

The rationale here seems to be to ensure that the audience cannot get off too lightly: even if the design is humorous, or ambiguous as to whether there is seriousness behind the proposition, viewers must sense that the issues involved are very serious. The designer is being serious about whether this proposal is serious or not: “The objects [of one exemplar of speculative design] were created in a dry and straightforward way with the high attention to quality of materials, construction and detail one would expect in a well-designed object. It is through its demeanor that one starts to wonder just how serious it is” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 42).

4. Exhibiting for Imagination

So if the projects have a material reality that is nevertheless not immersive, but also not merely glibly contemplated, what activates

viewers into serious engagement? The answer seems to be something like “incompleteness.” Each component is a flawless-looking design, but the context for these products is not all there. The lack of totality, in an exhibition for instance, leaves (carefully circumscribed) room for a viewer’s imagination to fill in:

One way of considering the fictional objects of speculative design is as props for nonexistent films. On encountering the object, the viewer imagines his or her own versions of the film world the object belongs to ... Props used in design speculations are functional and skillfully designed; they facilitate imagining and help us to entertain ideas about everyday life that might not be obvious. They help us to think about alternative possibilities – they challenge the ideals, values and beliefs of our society embodied in material culture. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 89–90)

It is for this reason that the natural habitat of speculative designs has become the museum: “Becom[ing] active imaginers ... is something people do when they visit museums to view historical artifacts, often carrying out a sort of imaginary archaeology on the artifacts on display” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 93).

5. Disseminating Debate

Having materialized possible futures in compelling ways that are nevertheless not comprehensively conclusive, speculative designs should elicit not only generative responses from audiences, but also then critical reflection and discourse. “Speculating through design by presenting abstract issues as fictional products enables us to explore ethical and social issues within the context of everyday life” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 51). There is no designing of this debate: it is deliberately left open.

The idea of the “proposal” is at the heart of this approach to design: to propose, to suggest, to offer something ... The project’s value is not what it achieves or does but what it is and how it makes people feel, especially if it encourages people to question, in an imaginative, troubling, and thoughtful way, everydayness and how things could be different ... Not a solution, not a “better” way, just another way. Viewers can make up their own minds ... Ultimately, it is a catalyst for social dreaming. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 189 – closing sentence of the book)

At times, there are claims that certain popular media, from newspapers to social media, are the forums for these debates (for example, in relation to Auger and Loizeau’s *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots* [Dunne and Raby 2014: 50]). But at other

times, the media is more just a vehicle for distributing these speculations otherwise trapped in museums. In this regard, DnR note the danger of the photogenic quality of these physical designs (as per step two) overpowering their intent to provoke discussion:

Speculative designs depend on dissemination and engagement with a public or expert audience; they are designed to circulate ... Each channel [exhibitions, publications, press and the Internet] or medium creates its own issues of accessibility, elitism, populism, sophistication, audience, and so on. This need for dissemination means speculative designs have to be striking but a danger is they end up being little more than visual icons. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 139)

... So Says Us

Now the entire of this dialectical defense, of why futures should be negotiated through exhibited products, that I have tried to reconstruct here, is based on unsubstantiated supposition. Many of the claims seem common-sense-like, but we are talking about “critical speculations” on “technoscience”-derived futures: the stakes are high, so I would expect each step in the argument would be carefully argued. Consider these assumptions:

1a. “We” Are Bad at Imagining Alternative Futures?

– Though science fiction is strong in film and literature, as are speculative startups, sometimes crowd-sourced, and trans-humanism.

1b. “We” Are Bad at Negotiating Abstractions?

– Yet people argue robustly, even physically, about nationhood or notions like freedom and God.

1c. “We” Are More (Critically) Engaged by Things That Are Physically Present?

– Though gaming is strong, and people fear cancer and radiation, and some reorganize their communities in response to theories about post-Peak Oil collapse.

2a. Immersive Experiences Pacify “Us”

– Yet simulations are used for learning and films and literature can spur creative fan elaborations.

2b. Things Whose Reality Is Ambiguous Are Thought-Provoking?

– How does the experience move from an “is” to an “ought,” from the affect of uncanniness to the question of whether what is represented is preferable or worrisome?

2c. When “We” See One New Alternative, “We” Are Opened to Contemplating That Everything Is Alterable?

– Or “creatives” appear able to imagine alternatives that will not in the end make a difference to the overall directions we are heading in.

3a. Critical Commentary Is Less Effective for Getting “Us” to Negotiate Futures Than Affective Visions?

– Yet activists debate the futures emerging from governmental analyses, and nothing constitutes the future like the arguments informing a business model.

3b. A Strong Designer’s Voice Countering Expected Styles Generates Audience Engagement?

– Or it marginalizes the work as the speculations of certain prominent individual designers.

4a. “We” Are Activated by Incomplete (Narrative) Contexts?

– Or we remain despondently puzzled.

4b. “We” Project Ourselves into the Lifeworld of Artefacts in a Museum?

– Though perhaps we do this more when we can interact with artefacts, even dwell with them for periods of time.

5a. “We” Only Engage in Debate When Proposals Remain Open?

– Yet strong positions are what elicit the most media debate.

5b. What Circulates Through “Our” Media Generates Debate?

– Or occludes debate, and debate happening where, and to what end?

5c. “Our” Media Is a Locus for Debating the Future?

– Though its presentism and pace preclude debate, unless you mean the “Comments” section.

Future Shopping

DnR do have one central argument underwriting their account of speculative design that I have not yet mentioned. Again, despite its centrality, it is ambiguous, but not deliberately.

Another place where, it is claimed, each of us (in the global consumer class) is prompted to contemplate ourselves in futures on the basis of incompletely contextualized products, apart from museums, is shop windows: “When we see a strange shoe or ritualistic object we wonder what kind of society must have produced it, [etc.] ... We

enact a form of window shopping, trying things out in our minds” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 140).

Now this is problematic. In some ways, the enemy from which speculative designs try to defend us is the market, that is, the way the market is able to dominate our futures:

Although there have always been design speculations ... design has become so absorbed in industry, so familiar with the dreams of industry, that it is almost impossible to dream its own dreams, let alone social ones. We are interested in liberating this story making (not storytelling) potential, this dream-materializing ability, from purely commercial applications and redirecting it toward more social ends that address the citizen rather than the consumer or perhaps both at the same time. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 88)

So DnR, as “designers working outside a strictly commercial context and aiming to engage people with complex ideas” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 102), work hard to indicate that while speculative designs should have the polish of a product on the market, as in step 3 in the argument reconstructed before, they must also be clearly differentiated from a product on the market (without lapsing on the other hand into art). Speculative designs must work homeopathically with the same language of desire and imagination as market-led product design but in order to constitute the very alternative futures that market-led product design refuses.

This aesthetic dilemma for DnR is most apparent when it comes to how the products circulate in the media. DnR reject cinema for being too totalizing but favor the more fragmentary nature of photography. While you would imagine CGI would appeal to DnR in being able to make the speculative appear hyperreal in an image, DnR worry that “it is very difficult for an artist, designer or architect to transcend the dominant style” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 102). Their response is to endorse examples where a CGI-ed component of the image is evidently superimposed onto a real image. Some of the examples are public service announcements, but others are advertisements. Hence, then, the dangerous claim that: “Highly aestheticized fashion photography is also a rich source of inspiration for the creation of atmosphere [in speculative designs]” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 131). With this example – expensive clothing marketing – we have arrived at the place at which highly speculative, critical even, propositions are in fact just another means for reinforcing the market-driven status quo.

In the end, this aesthetic question is merely a symptom of the underlying politics of the whole of speculative design. What warrants the whole of DnR’s project is a far from critical or speculative “theory of change” or “model of man.”

- We [“We”] have recently become interested in the idea of critical shopping. It is by buying things that they become real, moving from the virtual space of research and development by way of advertising into our lives. We get the reality we pay for ... In a consumer society like ours [i.e., “we”], it is through buying goods that reality takes shape. The moment money is exchanged, a possible future becomes real. If it did not sell it would be sent back, becoming a rejected reality. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 37)
- The problem for DnR is that:

When we act as consumers we often suspend these general beliefs and act on other impulses. There is a separation between what we believe ought to be and how we actually behave ... Usually when we discuss big issues we do so as citizens, yet it is as consumers that we help reality take shape. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 49)
- The corrective response is not more mere criticality, as was noted in step 2, but rather ambiguously real propositions that can seed questioning into the otherwise unthinkingly emotional reactions of consumers:

By presenting people with fictional products, services and systems from alternative futures, people can engage critically with them as citizen-consumers. Being faced with a complex mix of contradictory emotions and responses opens up new perspectives on the debate [about technoscience-driven futures]. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 49)
- These now questioning-yet-still-engaged “citizen-consumers” are what DnR mean by “critical shoppers” (37).

This is one of the purposes of critical design – to help us become more discerning consumers, to encourage people to demand more from industry and society as critical consumers. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 36)

This argument is again based on unsubstantiated assumptions: are “we” stupefied into uncriticality when shopping as opposed to reflecting on technoscientific risks as diligent citizens? Do “we” become questioning of market-led futures when we see something apparently speculative yet still as photogenic as a fashion editorial?

My main concern here is that it is patently clear what futures DnR think are not just the only ones possible, but also preferable: ones structured by competitive markets in which “our” only agency is choosing to buy or not buy. Or to put it another way, agency to determine futures lies only in the hands of those with discretionary budgets to spend.

While beginning the book with a claim that the financial crash of 2008 “triggered ... a new wave of interest in thinking about alternatives to the current system” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 9) and closing the book with a call for “speculative everything,” in the end DnR are insisting that that to which there is no alternative is consumerism. This is why the book is so adamant about its individualistic pluralism:

Design can be combined with any of these [forms of change], but it is the last one – individual action – that we value most. We believe change starts with the individual and that that individual needs to be presented with many options to form an opinion. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 160)

Even neoconservative precedents cannot warn DnR off this consumer-desire-based future:

We believe, like Philip K. Dick, that there is no longer one reality, but seven billion different ones ... The individualistic approach, although associated with right-wing liberalism, is also an impetus for highly individualistic micromodifications to reality, usually to satisfy some desire that official culture is unable to meet, such as unconventional political views or specialist sexual fantasies and fetishes. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 162)

This is why the basis of the speculations by DnR always have technoscience at their center, rather than altered social relations. Putting the focus on problems that we *all will* apparently face is a good way of excusing the need to deal with, if not concealing altogether, that there are problems today that not all of “Us” face, that there are people who benefit – from what is available on the market, from technoscientific advances; and then there are people who most definitely do not get to enjoy those benefits – and who invariably also are made to bear the costs of those “advances.”

DnR™

As DnR’s project descends from utopianism to the tasteful shopper’s plea for “more pluralism in design” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 9), DnR must make sure to clarify their brand niche as opposed to everyone else’s competing fetishes. This is the last aspect of the book that I would like to register: the almost petulant policing of what meets with DnR’s approval. Deadpan, absurdism, black humor are good (Dunne and Raby 2014: 40), and irony, parody, pastiche are bad (Dunne and Raby 2014: 102); sketches can seem old-fashioned, but detailed drawings are daydream-like (Dunne and Raby 2014: 107); Buckminster Fuller is too technological, better is Norman Bel Geddes (Dunne and Raby 2014: 164); Matthew Barney is too idiosyncratic, the Yes Men too sensational (Dunne and Raby 2014: 40); model-like is good, toy-like is bad (Dunne and Raby 2014: 118);

museums were to be avoided, now they are perfect (Dunne and Raby 2014: 140); etc.

In so many ways, this book ends up being not an argument for a new kind of designing, one that is taking up the challenges of “our” depleted futures, but instead just a declaration as to what entails a copyrightable “DnR” project: “*Speculative Everything* began as a list we created a few years ago called *AVB*, a sort of manifesto. In it, we juxtaposed design as it is usually understood with the kind of design we found ourselves doing” (Dunne and Raby 2014: vi).

But in fact that is the convenient lie. Given who DnR are in the field of design and design research at the moment, this book is not so “idiosyncratic,” but instead a speculative recuperation of critique, a significant investment in returning criticism of market-based futures back into a source of just more market-based futures.

Worse, it would seem that what is dominating one of the few spaces we have to try to renegotiate the irresistible futures bequeathed to us by non-inclusive modernist impositions, is yet another style-obsessed modernist imposition.

The Critical Design I™ Believe In

So if we must now add DnR to what we, design researchers, must in turn renegotiate, what to do with “critical design”?

1. Expert Accelerationism

While advocating on behalf of the significance of design, especially when designers move “upstream” to sit alongside technoscientific researchers, *Speculative Everything* nevertheless tends to reinforce the superior status of technoscience. It is not questioned as a practice, so is instead recast as something we are just going to have to get better at adapting to. However, designers should instead be acting as what Don Ihde once called “science critics” (Ihde 1997). DnR hint at this without taking it far enough:

We [designers] can take research happening in laboratories and fast-forward to explore possible applications driven by human desire rather than therapeutic need ... As designers, we need to shift from designing applications to designing implications by creating imaginary products and services that situate these new developments within everyday material culture. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 49)

The strategy here is related to what is currently being called “accelerationism,” a critical hyperbolization of current techno-libertarian tendencies. Designers need to use their capacity for “creative leaps” to rush scientific research to a diverse range of marketizable technologies. This is a race against what market-based Lean designers are employed to do anyway.

The difference with what DnR are proposing concerns the target audience. DnR pitch these rushed moral ambiguities to the general public for democratic consideration. But as Ulrich Beck (1994), Bruno Latour (2004), and Michel Callon (2009) – among others – have made clear, our modernist forms of democracy are not up for this kind of debate. Plus, this passing on of the issue allows the originating sciences to maintain an erroneous faith in their own purity: there is their research, and very separate the commercialization of the implications of that research, something that is so separate that it is not their responsibility but instead the concern of everyone else, the public and its government who must police the evil market. By contrast, if the designer is sitting alongside the scientific researcher, sketching amoral or even immoral implications, then the scientific research expert is the audience. The critical designs can then impact the very people in a position to respond to those designs. Science would be more immediately contaminated by its own techno-profiting byproducts; and so a very different technoscience practice will need to be designed.

2. Prefigurative Criticism

At one point, DnR seem to glimpse the risks associated with their insistence on producing troubling designs that are nevertheless proposed deliberately without clear intent:

Dangerous ideas can be conceived that open up possibilities better left unexplored, and once thought cannot be unthought. And these projects might prepare people for what is to come by unintentionally paving the way for a greater acceptance of [some technoscientific venture] through desensitization. (Dunne and Raby 2014: 51)

Instead of negligently concluding without explanation that: “Despite this, however, we feel the benefits of this approach far outweigh the negatives” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 51), it seems to me that with careful design, these negatives represent exactly the power of critical design. As we have seen with Google Glass, despite a multi-fronted PR campaign, the perceived negatives of this technology are prefiguring its reception: a few rough scenarios of things the technology is not even capable of (e.g., extensive video recording) have highly sensitized “us” to what this particular system entails.

Doing this concertedly is a strategy that Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis called “prefigurative criticism.” The aim of this practice is preemptively ambushing the branding of an objectionable project in development, associating it with negative consequences before it has had an opportunity to market its benefits. In contrast to DnR, this is a decisive strategy of critique, not merely an attempt to stimulate debate. But it is not distanced commentary; it must take place through artefacts that can circulate in the media with exactly the same level of resolution that DnR insist on.

3. Seeing Round Corners

“As the science-fiction writer Frederick Pahl once remarked, a good writer does not think up only the automobile but also the traffic jam” (Dunne and Raby 2014: 49). As I have indicated, DnR do insist that material products are crucial for seeing these sorts of seeing second-order consequences. What they get wrong is why, and so how. This kind of generative foresight certainly does not come from contemplating a removed museological object. If these things are props, it is because you must play with them, performing in improvisatory ways. The point is not to imagine the future, but to feel your way in that unknown dimension. Products, especially speculative ones, demand enactment, bodystorming. By interacting with critical designs in these ways, and preferably over significant spans of time, the worlds that such things afford can be sensed. It is not just a matter, then, of seeing whether this or that design will work, but what the consequences of it being able to work will be. This is the essential perceptiveness of designing; the capacity to know reliably, without conventional metrics of validation, the patterns of use that will be likely as a result of this kind of material intervention into certain sets of everyday or workplace activities. That space between the possible and the plausible, but innovatively distinct from the probable – that is the space that designers can inhabit through their embodied precedent knowledge of habits and tastes. This is not the expertise of visioning wholly new futures, but exactly as DnR identify, the expertise of seeing what our now would do given that kind of future. Right now, when people are extolling that we should throw precaution to the winds and embrace trans-humanist possibilities, we need more than ever this foreknowledge that designers access through physicalized and enacted design prototypes.

4. Comprehensive Affirmations

DnR might be wanting to move beyond “critical” toward propositions that are more ambiguous, but there is very little in their designs that looks strongly positive, that builds an argument for certain kinds of futures. As discussed, DnR insist that they wish to merely offer options for imagination and discussion. While there is deliberate avoidance of outright critique – prompting my call for more defiant prefigurative criticism – there is nevertheless always a kind of “knowing” concern in the designers’ serious intent. This is why the overall taste regime still tends toward noir, just with a colorful palette. For these designs to be truly ambiguous, there should be much more readily identifiable moments of non-ironic endorsement, elements that make clear cases for what would be valuable (and not just sexy or fun) about these futures for significant sections of the population.

What this would require, however, is a complete reversal of DnR’s strategy. Speculative design presents discrete artefacts with hints of context. It is these absences which imbue the work with its noire-ishness; the fragments, exhibited in the austerity of museums, create

haunting mystery, foreboding. To have elements of affirmation would require richer contexts, contexts that are made real by exemplary artefacts. These would not be glimpses of what scarily might be, but declarations about what should be.

This is in fact what DnR began complaining about: that we have only vague hopes rather than motivating dreams. But there is absolutely nothing in any of their work that you would actually dream of coming to pass. Everything they make real is concerning at best and often just horrifying. In the absence of taking responsibility for the debates they claim to be fostering, DnR's work can only be received with a quietly repressive "Well, I hope that doesn't happen."

It would not fit the DnR brand – very uncool to actually commit to a particular future, and to argue forcefully for its wider desirability – but that is what we need of design right now. Not speculations that just fuel the market-as-usual, but decisive intents to constitute different futures, especially ones that seem currently impossible.

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