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Fact and Fiction –

Design as a Search for Reality on the Circuit of Lies

With the approach of "Speculative Design"¹, a new variety was introduced into Design and related fields of Research a few years ago, which has been continuously discussed ever since. Speculative Design is a design practice aiming at exploring and criticising possible futures by creating speculative, often provocative, scenarios narrated through designed artifacts.² Little attention³ has been paid here so far (although there are numerous overlaps) to Vilém Flusser's different approaches to the *fictional*, the *fabulative*, the *speculative*.⁴ What is Flusser's relevance as a philosopher, media and communication theorist, as well as essayist and writer today, nearly thirty years after his death? And how can his reflections be opened up to the discourses and practices around Speculative Design?

Design as an Epistemic Practice of the Speculative

The epistemic potentials of Speculative Design are increasingly recognized within the wider academic sphere, not least in the area of design research.⁵ Generally speaking Design wishes to develop (counter) narratives to demonstrate (alternative) proposals for the future and to furthermore provide impetus for their implementation.⁶ This raises attention to the *discursive*, *critical* and *fictional* practices of design, as its tools and strategies often come along with a narrative, speculative and interrogative design methodology. In recent years, a growing number of research and knowledge fields from within and beyond design research have been devoting themselves to "questioning"

¹ This also refers to equivalent terms listed below.

² „This form of design thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people's imaginations to flow freely. Design speculations can act as a catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality.“ (Dunne/Raby 2013, 2)

³ An exception is for example Alex Coles' anthology "Design Fiction" (Coles 2016; c.f. Neidhardt 2017).

⁴ Cf. Guldin/Finger/Bernardo 2009, 57 ff., 93 ff.; Flusser 1992; Flusser 1994, 9–28; Flusser 2016; Bozzi 2008; and Flusser/Bec 1987.

⁵ Yet, „design research also is a field and practice that, due to its in-between nature, lacks the clear boundaries and formal dogmatism of more traditional research disciplines, as well as their implicit notions of secured knowledge and linear progress“. (NERD 2020)

⁶ Here I refer in particular to the various, process-related, methodical sub-areas of design (for instance scenario-building, prototyping, modelling; or in general: the anticipation of the im/possible and their transformation into the tangible / manageable / experienceable ...).

design, representing approaches such as “Critical Design”, “Speculative Design”, “Design for Debate”⁷, “Design Fiction”⁸, or “Discursive Design”⁹ in which it is primarily a matter of underpinning social, cultural, technical or economic controversies and debates with the help of “critical”, “speculative” artefacts. These do not necessarily have to be functional, real design objects. Rather, the approach of a critical, speculative design consists in stimulating social discourses with the help of fictitious artefacts.¹⁰

These – sometimes fabulative¹¹ – complexes form an epistemic confrontation with different hypothetical futures, which are actively dealt with by design, and which are subsumed as design for debate to trigger discussions. Within these, future scenarios can be developed, and speculative possibilities can be experienced sensually – a method of combining abstract scenarios and comprehensible models, this kind of design thinking and acting has meanwhile been used in design studios, departments and agencies (Zöllner 2017).

Speculative and interrogative Design is not to be seen as an objective, but rather as a “reframing” tool, whose primary goal is not to generate “solutions”, but to put alternative futures up for discussion. The narratives conveyed may appear dystopian, but at the same time open up positive visions, which might inevitably pave the way for solving present or future challenges. This may include the formulation of questions or proposals using artefacts or media for unresolved ends: to provoke, or question, or experiment in search of new social, cultural, environmental or political conditions. It might use and enrich different tools located in the field of visual communications, material cultures or design practices.

While initially many of such approaches had often been located in galleries or universities, we can observe tendencies of manifesting themselves in real-life context, also being able to intervene there.¹² Other than the – often elitist, abstract critical/speculative design projects that have no real impact, these seem to offer opportunities for collaborative approaches with and amongst different communities.

This raises the question to what extent the concept of speculation in design could be used to develop a new understanding of “creative”, “productive” practices of insight. How can the *imaginary* be combined with the *productive* – not only in design? What benefit do we derive from the hybrid, economic, philosophical, cultural and social practices and (design) strategies of knowledge

⁷ Cf. Dunne/Raby 2013. Similar approaches circulate among the concepts of “Design for Provocation” (Bardzel et al. 2012) or “Provocative Design” (Ozkaramanli / Desmet 2016).

⁸ Cf. Bleecker 2009; Coles 2016; and SDN 2010.

⁹ Discursive design has been introduced by Stephanie and Bruce M. Tharpe as an umbrella category encompassing similar forms of design (such as critical design, design fiction, or adversarial design) (Tharpe/Tharpe 2019).

¹⁰ Though Speculative Design might trigger or contain elements of a discourse *about* or *for* design, it shall foremost be understood as a form of discourse *through* design.

¹¹ Cf. Rosner 2018.

¹² Not least in the context of recent public protest movements (cf. Bieling 2019)

that are connected with it?¹³ Flusser provides some starting points here, especially in view of the "as if"¹⁴ (or "what if...") procedures that are often discussed and practiced today in design.

Flusser and Fiction

According to Flusser, science and fiction¹⁵ can equally be considered as "texts" for finding ideas (Cf. Hanff 2015). He points out that many scientific texts are much more imaginative than what is commonly called science fiction. Flusser contrasts two different theories of cognition in this context (ibid.): one that approaches truth through "falsification" by increasingly excluding it unlikely; the other that approaches absurdities ever more closely while remaining phenomenologically disciplined, becoming increasingly unlikely.¹⁶ As an example of the former, Flusser cites the contemporary scientific method. As an example of the latter, he refers to Leonardo da Vinci's *Fantasia Essata* (ibid.).¹⁷ Flusser does not believe that these are contradictory, just as he does not believe that science and fiction are contradictory.¹⁸ Although he attests both strategies to be intellectually not "completely satisfying" but "extraordinarily fruitful". It is to them that the tremendous findings of contemporary science are owed (cf. Hanff 2015, 2).

As a counter-model Flusser considers an epistemology that "goes the opposite way". Its aim would be "to make statements increasingly improbable in order to approach the truth from the opposite side, so to speak" (ibid.). Such strategies were historically long known – for instance in scholasticism or the Talmud. It was the attempt "to let the truth shine through somehow by reduction to the absurd. In other words, to gain insight into the non-fictive through fiction (...). This is what one should actually expect from "science fiction": "to lead science ad absurdum by means of fiction and thereby to become a method of knowledge" (ibid.).

¹³ Cf. the continuous discussions at www.speclog.xyz (moderated) by Anke Haarmann, Alice Lagaay, Heike Grebin, Tom Bieling, Torben Körschkes, Petja Ivanova and others.

¹⁴ With reference to Hans Vaihingers "Philosophy of As If" ("Die Philosophie des Als Ob") (Vaihinger 1911), Flusser was convinced that fictions allow us to grasp reality partially, but do not claim to grasp it as a whole (Guldin et al. 2009, 98).

¹⁵ Compare the term "Fictional Thinking" (Flusser) as well as Daniel Irrgang's analyses of the correspondence between Flusser and Ingold, at the beginning of the 1980s, and their reflections on formal dimensions of fabulous thinking formulated therein. These deal, for instance, with the differences (and similarities) between science fiction and fictitious science, and with the question of how hypotheses and fables differ. Irrgang points out that this epistemological perspective on the fable (or on fictional texts – Flusser uses the term "fable" here across the board), especially its specific effect on the imagination, is not only what makes up Flusser's fictional writings. It is also to be found in the rhetorical feints, surprising linguistic images and "etymologisms", as Jürgen Link, a friend of Flusser's, described Flusser's daring etymological derivations, which run through Flusser's essays and which, not least, account for their intellectual appeal (Cf. Irrgang 2015). At this point, it should be noted, that Link uses a German neologism: "Etymogelegen", which combines both "Etymologie" (etymology) and "Mogelei" (cheat).

¹⁶ Flusser points out that the main point here is to "measure the margin of error of each statement as precisely as possible", i.e. to be able to "work exactly with the fuzziness" (Flusser, Science Fiction, p 2).

¹⁷ Freely translated as "a demanding fantasy".

¹⁸ Flusser's "Science Fiction" remained unpublished. Original texts and translations have been made available through the Flusser Archive and online via Flusser Studies.

Design as Fiction – Fiction as Design

From a strictly scientific perspective, the term "fiction" is sometimes associated with a connotation of "unseriousness".¹⁹ The self-conception of many fields of science is based on the assumption that science is actually the opposite of speculation – an assumption whose truthfulness and validity will not be discussed here. However, what designers do, actually always refers to the future, and is therefore always speculative. Flusser's "Philosophical Fiction"²⁰ clarifies that in order to be able to think the world at all; we have to invent it or try to reconstruct it using different fictions. Science (as well as Design) is truly situated in this complex, too.

Although not explicitly formulated in reference to Flusser, parallels can be seen in the "SF" approach, developed by Donna Harraway (Harraway 2016). SF stands for science fiction as well as for science fact, for speculative feminism or for sting figures: thread games, which loosely connect different elements as dots. According to Harraway, thinking should also be like a thread game, it should connect fiction with facts, invent new stories with open ends that can be further connected. The notion of „Speculative“ in the context of Design might be considered exactly this: a conflation of design, science fact and science fiction. A "way of materializing ideas and speculations without the pragmatic curtailing that often happens when dead weights are fastened to the imagination" (Bleecker 2012, 247). A kind of "authoring practice that recombines the traditions of writing and the story telling with the material crafting of objects" (ibid., 249). A way of probing, sketching, prototyping, exploring and communicating ideas, which allows us to bridge "imagination and materialization by modelling, crafting things, telling stories through objects, which are now effectively conversation pieces in a very real sense" (ibid., 250).

Promises and Pitfalls of the Speculative

The theoretical as well as the practical development of the fictional concepts of design is consciously critical. In view of the growing number of speculative design projects, their actual social relevance has been increasingly questioned. The accusation: too many of these projects arise from a naïve, unreflected attitude, move closer to art than to design and are all too often merely located in galleries, instead of manifesting themselves in actual, everyday use and being able to intervene

¹⁹ In philosophy the term „speculative“ has a completely different connotation. There it is certainly about knowledge – namely that which goes beyond experiential everyday actions.

²⁰ A term and technique attributed to Flusser. Compare to this Gabriel Salvi Philipson's analysis (1999) of Flusser's philosophical, rhetorical and fictional strategies in his texts in *Ficções filosóficas / Philosophical Fictions*. Philipson focuses primarily on the (not least stylistic, rhetorical) connecting lines between fiction and philosophy, which in Flusser's work are expressed, for instance, in the form of constant changes of perspective, (self-)irony, sarcasm, etc. Also compare Flusser 1966; Krause 2012; Hennrich 2015; Popiel 2015 and Philipson 2018.

there²¹. However, we shall consider that the one does not necessarily have to exclude the other. Speculative Design is part of an expanded approach to design. In addition to direct social engagement, it can also operate in other valuable domains (Cf. Tharpe/Tharpe). Those might be considered as "classic", "traditional" design fields, which is to say that it can for instance be integrated into „robust, qualitative user research and development processes“. (ibid.)

After all, the point of speculative design artefacts is to drive the intellectual reflection, to trigger dissent and contestation, to look beyond the horizon, to convey consequential discourse, while at the same time provoking immediate action. This can, but does not necessarily mean, that it is more a matter of stimulating discourse than a tidy fix. And it may amount to a designerly search for the truth, which sometimes takes the detour of speculation, if not the – consciously or unconsciously arranged – lie.²²

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²¹ “There is a lack of general transferability for the various works that are created under the labels design fiction and speculative design at universities and in design studios. They are usually characterized by bulky, avant-garde aesthetics and neither by use or observation comprehensible. The promise to transfer the lost discussion competence of art from the galleries into a broader context, which is more accessible to the public, namely the consumer cosmos of the product world, remains unresolved. After all, debates, which are to be triggered by the use, conversion and appropriation of the designed products, are often pale, because the objects do not allow a real use. The reasons for this are manifold: too bizarre, too complex, fragile [...] This leaves speculative scenarios an intellectual niche sport, a *deduit savant* that is cultivated within a bubble and has hardly any connecting points with a general reality.” (Zöllner 2017).

²² The phrase "seeking truth via the detour of the lie" (translated freely; Original: "Wahrheitssuche auf dem Umweg der Lüge") is taken from a letter from Flusser to Felix Philipp Ingold, dated 12 January 1986, in the course of an exchange of letters lasting several years (C.f. Irrgang 2015).

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