

Burning Thoughts about a Critical and Positive Design Pedagogy

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# **Burning Thoughts about a Critical and Positive Design Pedagogy**

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## **The End of History, the End of Design?**

Few disciplines can identify so profoundly with the 20th century as design can: while at the same time recognising the need to constantly redefine its task, its field of action, its social responsibility, its legitimacy, design reflects itself in the transformations and profound upheavals that have taken place throughout the century.

With the fall of the Soviet bloc and the Berlin Wall, we woke up in a world that seemed to have resolved its contrasts and contradictions on a global political level: one belief, one system, one way of thinking. A condition that lowered the threshold of debate, including design: if a different world ceased to be imaginable, the project would act within the borders of the existing world.

However, the challenges we face today as humanity, challenges that concern the very survival of our species, show how wrong was the path guided exclusively by market laws aimed at maximising profit.

This vision has particularly contaminated the discipline of design, whose highly practical and concrete nature lends itself to technical

drifts that have also contaminated the world of research and education in this field.

As designers and researchers, we believe it is essential to start again from the role of education and its various forms in order to offer operational tools to a new generation of designers who should be aware of their role in the environment in which they work.

### **Criticism, Positivity, Actuality: Starting Again from Maldonado**

Maldonado's influence on our work transcends the singular writings and is bound rather to his general attitude: an attitude that is critical but always proactive and attentive to the political value of one's actions and role. As Maldonado says in the introduction to *La speranza progettuale* (Maldonado, 1971, p. 10):

The true exercise of critical consciousness is always inseparable from the willingness to seek a coherent and articulate design alternative to the convulsion of our age.<sup>1</sup>

Consistent with his communist beliefs, Maldonado takes a step forward with respect to the design scenario of his time (and beyond). Marx stated that the task of philosophers should go beyond the objective of understanding society, towards transforming it. An inseparable unity between theoretical thought and practical action, between theory and praxis, as Gramsci would later point out (Gramsci, 2014), and as Maldonado would contextualise in the design sphere:

A dissent devoid of projects, an empty-handed dissent, is not particularly dangerous for the forces of consensus. The discourse of non-projecting is an intellectual luxury of consumer society, a prerogative of wealthy peoples, a rhetorical pomposity of peoples saturated with goods and services (Maldonado, 1971, p. 66).

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from *La speranza progettuale* are taken from the Italian second edition. All translations are by the authors.

A critical and positive approach, always guarded by an attentive and aware spirit, which echoes Marx again: “Criticism is not a passion of the brain, it is the brain of passion, it is not an anatomical knife, it is a weapon” (Marx, 2016. Translated by the authors).

In this sense, design can also be a weapon, but one that can only be practised responsibly through a critical and positive, and therefore conscious, approach. Indeed, design is a non-linear but always methodical process that forces one to observe the design context in its completeness and complexity and in the links it presents with higher order systems. This makes every design action a potential act of holistic vision, in relation to its design context, that consequently leads to build awareness and highlights its political and social value, bringing with it responsibilities that can be accepted or rejected but never ignored.

The rejection of nihilism is therefore intrinsic to the act of design developed with depth and intellectual and ethical honesty. The designer cannot abide from its transformative action: so that we might extend Achille Castiglioni’s famous statement “If you are not curious, change your profession” by adding “If you only want to understand, observe and not act, change your profession anyway”, because the designer’s job is always to make the step from the realm of understanding to that of action.

This process leads the role of design to a constant search for a new terrain of transformation and revolution, and consequently to a constant search for a role for us as designers in this world. A search that must be qualified, however: not the search for a passive role, that forces using some undiscovered market niche, quite the contrary. It is an active, critical and positive search, which leads us to understand what the limits of the system in which we live are and what our roles, postures, methods and practises are. Insofar as designers, we have to contribute to change our world, making it fairer, more just, more sustainable.

In this sense, the synthesis of Maldonado's influence on our work can be found in the answer to Obrist's last question which, not by chance, is entitled in the text *Beyond hope* (Maldonado, Obrist, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Maldonado here wants to leave one and only one piece of advice to the designers of the future: to always activate a critical approach to context and projects, but in parallel a positive and never nihilistic attitude.

Maldonado then goes on elaborating on this advice by referring to the educational context, which is our area of interest, saying that:

If one does not want to betray one's role as an educator, one must try to reconcile criticism and positivity. Because criticism without positivity, without concrete outlets, an end in itself, in short, self-referential, is at the antipodes of any pedagogical intention (Maldonado, Obrist, 2010, l. 4218. Translated by the authors).

An attitude that Maldonado held throughout his pedagogical activity, starting from his reform of the Ulm school programme, creating a design pedagogy that prepared for the complexity of society in all its facets, not only productive-industrial but humanistic and social.

The beginning of our explorations were the programmes from three schools of design: the Russian Vkhutemas-Vkhutein (1920-1930), the German Staatliches Bauhaus (1919-1933) and the already mentioned Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (HfG - Ulm) (1953-1968).

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2 H. U. O.: "(...) What advice can you give a young artist, architect, designer, philosopher or sociologist today?". T. M.: "(...) Most of the time I have preferred to give young people one advice, and only one. (...) I have tried to encourage them, on the one hand, to remain faithful to a critically vigilant attitude towards the world, to always keep alive a healthy and well-considered scepticism regarding the current public discourse on politics, economics, art and culture; on the other hand, not to allow oneself to be easily carried away, although there are plenty of reasons to do so, (...) by an attitude of generalised pessimism which, in my opinion, sooner or later leads to the abdication of any form of action or intervention in reality or, even worse, to sterile defeatism or cynical opportunism. In both cases: to capitulation" (Maldonado, Obrist, 2010. Translated by the authors).

Those three models are still in a lively dialectic relationship with today's design education, with fragments constantly emerging in the curricula of leading design schools worldwide.

Moreover, those models reflected and reacted to the historical and political contexts in which they existed. Our question is: how the design education context should reflect and react to the contemporary socio-political context?

Starting from this question, we think that Maldonado's critical and positive attitude should be recovered and re-contextualized today in light of the challenges we face as humanity, starting from a critical analysis of the context in which we live, design and learn. It is what we propose to do in this text, feeling that we are being called upon as part of the designers of the future to whom Maldonado was addressing us.

In order to do this, we think it is appropriate to start from a reflection on the roles and characteristics of contemporary designers and on those of the educational systems that have formed them.

### **The Designer as Product: a Critique of the Neo-Liberal Educational System**

Over the years, the figure of the designer has evolved, becoming involved in issues characterised by greater breadth and complexity, and opening up to elements from an increasing number of sciences and disciplines.

Maldonado already stated that the relationship between producers and consumers in different economic phases would not be constant, and therefore, the role of designers would change with it (Maldonado, 1958, p. 34). The first phase of the industry's development saw eclectic and diverse personalities acting as designers, inventors and entrepreneurs, such as Henry Ford and William Morris. The role of the designer as such is consolidated in the subsequent second stage, focusing on the product. In the third stage, Maldonado defines the product designer as a coordinator, responsible for the maximum productivity of the

working group and the maximum material and cultural satisfaction of the consumer (Maldonado, 1958).

Nowadays, faced with increasingly complex social issues (Buchanan, 1992; Jones, 2014), the boundaries of design are constantly expanding, with a very diverse development trend. Designers have moved from “making a thing” to “making things happen” (Manzini, 2014), and from designing single artefacts to designing strategies for planning and coordinating complex systems.

In order to approach increasing complexity it is therefore appropriate to expand the didactic areas of design education, but not only: it is also necessary to work on a more personal, cultural, social and individual side other than the technical one, with the aim to gain critical consciousness of what one is designing and to be conscious of the complexity the design artefact will be inserted in.

As Danah Abdulla said in a recent lecture (Abdulla, 2021): “(...) If we take off design thinking tools, can the designer just think?”. What is provocatively emphasised in this sentence is that, in the vast majority of cases, design tools are prepared at a technical and methodological level to serve market needs. Mostly, complexity is addressed without giving the instruments to devise systemic changes that involve the problematic foundations of the existing system. Thus, the design tools provided by the market-driven educational system are useful to approach the problems of the existing world, but they are not critical tools to question reality, society and one’s own individuality to imagine a different world. Horst Rittel’s suggestion to “Do not only teach general rules but also rules for the changing of rules!” (Rittel, 1971) has been lost.

Tony Fry argues that it is because the current design education system reproduces the dynamics and structure of the currently dominant economic system: “Current design education (...) is predominantly based on placing graduates in the labour market. (...) Another direction is needed, based on the recognition of contemporary global imperatives” (Fry, 2017, p. 101).

And Ruben Pater adds that: “A design education that wants to produce creative and critical thinkers should start by listening to the needs of people, rather than the needs of industry” (Pater, 2021, p. 363).

It is obvious that a technical and economic approach in design education is a necessity for the professional future of students, but it must be critical and conscious. We live in a complex reality where different kinds of problems, inequalities and oppressions are increasingly heavy and connected, and design educational institutions cannot ignore this.

The student is trained to become himself a product to be marketed, with his expressiveness, personality and cultural background, and not a conscious individual able to separate this individuality from his presence in the market: “School capital, the amount of knowledge acquired at school, is a subset of cultural capital, but it can be argued that art & design school is slightly exceptional because the student explicitly brings his pre-existing cultural capital (interests, passions, readings, etc.) and the school helps transform it into a ‘practice’, which is the activity through which culture is converted into money. The art and design academy transforms cultural consumers into cultural producers” (Lorusso, 2021).

Even during workshops, which are the moments when students learn practically how to deal with different design challenges, the design methodology taught remains mainly based on design thinking and technical tools: there is rarely a reflection on self-prejudice and diversity, even in the case students are working on projects focused on social issues.

Even if we have the best possible intentions, even if we use tools that are defined as neutral and universal, we always put our own culture and prejudices into our design projects and take a personal position, even if we don’t realise it (Fry, 2017; Pater, 2021).

It is therefore necessary to deepen the critical reflection on our way of designing, our tools and, above all, the responsibilities that should be transferred during the educational process that leads to the training of future designers.



## **Design, Education, Emancipation: a Link between Maldonado and Freire**

If design is the discipline of making choices, it is time to accept that every choice is biased. The issue of objectivity is increasingly difficult to sustain in design.

We think it is necessary to acknowledge and make explicit that what is taught can reproduce power dynamics that are not totally inclusive and equal; dynamics and approaches that have demonstrated their limits on the environmental, social and economic levels.

We think it is necessary to accept that every field of human activity carries political responsibilities: the discipline of design does not escape this, and indeed has an extremely insidious relationship with politics.

The new theory, at least as we imagine it, will have to pivot precisely on the problem of the ethical-practical – let's say tout-court political – implications of design (Maldonado, 1971, p. 129).

The expansion of the discipline to include themes such as design and complexity, social processes on a territorial scale, policymaking and so on (Jones, van Patter, 2009), shows a positive evolution that underlines the interconnection between the different levels of action and therefore of responsibility in decision-making processes.

We strongly believe that it is necessary to take a further, explicit step forward in design education. It must once again become a place of emancipation and not only a place of preparation for the neo-liberal economic system, a place where culture is generated that is “organisation, discipline of one's inner self, taking possession of one's personality, conquest of a higher consciousness thanks to which one is able to understand one's historical value, one's function in life, one's rights, one's duties” (Gramsci in Petrocelli, 2019, p. 16. Translated by the authors).

In short, it is necessary to go back to recognising and exercising the difference between instructing and educating, where the first concept

represents a process linked to training, which results in slavish and non-critical imitation, while the second means promoting the exercise of critical sense, personal values and initiative (Frascara, Noel, 2012).

It is also important to educate on the project as a terrain of possible conflict: a project that can “articulate antagonistic positions (and not standardise them) and represent social and political contradictions” (Facchetti, 2012, p. 32. Translated by the authors). A project that is therefore not only a tool for the evolution and innovation of the present world, but for the imagination and, above all, the creation of new worlds, potentially incompatible with the existing one, and rather fighting to replace and overcome it. More specifically, “Design must disengage itself from consumer culture as the primary shaper of its identity, and find a terrain where it can begin to rethink its role in the world. The result of this activity, if successful, will be a new power for the designer to participate in projects for the welfare of humankind, both inside and outside the market economy” (Margolin, 1998, p. 89).

But how can people learn to design in an “ethical” and “responsible” way if they are not made to reflect critically on the political implications of their projects, their beliefs and prejudices?

Working on subjectivity, on the collective of student subjects and on the politics of the project is not meant to be an attempt to tame expressive freedom; on the contrary, it is a way of expanding it by activating a new critical eye on oneself, on society and on design: exactly the critical and positive eye Maldonado talks about.

This need in the current educational context is not new, and it does not belong only to the sphere of design. We think it is interesting in this sense to start from one of the most important theorists of critical education, Paulo Freire, who contemporary to Maldonado’s elaborated an extremely well-defined theory on the importance of revolutionising the pedagogical context, inserting and proposing elements that allow the development of critical sense, destroying the teacher-learner hierarchy and putting the student in the centre as an active person. The aim is to generate a new freedom through critical awareness, intending education as a form of liberation:

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors-teachers on the one hand and students on the other (Freire, 2000, p. 79).

This concept was also taken up in the context of feminist pedagogy, by authors such as bell hooks (hooks, 1994, p. 12): “Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else’s image regarding who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself”.

The actuality of this type of thinking, which we perceive to be very close to Maldonado’s, is evident and strong.

It is no coincidence that it has been possible to trace some contemporary experiences which, in our opinion, take up the challenge launched by Maldonado in *Arte e Artefatti*, referring precisely to Freire’s theories.

One example is the research group decolonising design (decolonisingdesign.com) which wants to try to carry out a post-colonial reflection on the discipline of design and its educational context. The group consists of researchers and educators who carry out their work individually and as a group, following a precise political approach.<sup>3</sup>

The group openly refers to Freire’s pedagogy, implementing a dismantling of classroom hierarchies, thus placing the student and his thinking at the centre and activating a dialogue on an equal level with him, so as to activate a teaching process where everyone, including the teacher, participates in the learning process.<sup>4</sup>

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3 “This planet, shared and co-inhabited by a plurality of peoples, each inhabiting different worlds, each orienting themselves within and towards their environments in different ways, and with different civilizational histories, is being undermined by a globalised system of power that threatens to flatten and eradicate ontological and epistemological difference, rewriting histories and advancing visions of a future for a privileged few at the expense of their human and nonhuman others” (Decolonising Design, 2016).

4 “In our pedagogical practice, we employ a student-centric approach to disentangle the knotted threads of what design does and what it can do. We eschew solution-oriented approaches in favour of a process of “finding how”, where students seek for

A very similar approach is implemented by two realities that merged in 2021 in a single entity, namely the depatriarchise design project (depatriarchisedesign.com) and the Futuress project (futuress.org). depatriarchise design was founded in 2017 as an association aimed at acting with respect to the apparently (and pretendedly) apolitical set-up of the design discipline. In 2021 it joins *Futuress*,<sup>5</sup> an open research community that is expressed through a web platform and focuses its research, dissemination and education activities on intersectionality.

This interesting community brings together and maps all those voices working to bring to light the relationships between politics and design.

The way in which *Futuress* refers to the keyword “feminism” is not only in dealing with gender content, but much more broadly in adopting a critical and feminist pedagogy approach to the discipline of design.

What these two emblematic experiences of the panorama of design pedagogy have in common is the intersectional approach, that is, not focusing on a single oppressive issue, but conceiving and addressing the different oppressions afflicting the contemporary world as closely interrelated:

Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these

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themselves the best approach to tackle the issues they are interested in. We believe that such a process – inspired by the works of educator Paulo Freire and playwright Augusto Boal – can elicit a much more informed and inclusive perspective on the materiality of design-driven endeavours” (Ansari, Kiem, de O. Martins, 2018).

- 5 “We view design as a social and political practice – one that shapes our lived realities. Design is in the words we speak, in the objects around us, in the things we do, in the systems around us – all of which, too often, are fundamentally flawed. But design can also be a lens to critically look at the world, and unite us toward a common goal. The daunting struggles for social, spatial and environmental justice require us to come together, across our differences, as a learning community” (Futuress, 2021).

differences will find expression in constructing group politics (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1299).

This approach is typical of Freire's pedagogy and can also be found in Maldonado's thought.

### **From Criticism to Action: What Should We Keep, What Should We Take Away, What Should We Focus On?**

We therefore believe that the pedagogical context of design should start from the challenge launched by Maldonado in *Arte e artefatti*, and that authors such as Freire and bell hooks could be a possible starting point, as is already happening for example in the experiences mentioned earlier. A pedagogical approach that is therefore critical, positive and intersectional, and which educates on awareness, compatibility and equity: awareness of production processes to allow us to understand their real value and environmental and social cost; equity to promote the idea that the more progress is shared, the more it is capable of positively influencing society; compatibility with our environment, with the context, with the community (Mincoelli, 2019, pp. 51–52).

At the same time, it is important to avoid excessive labelling and technicalisation: labels risk limiting possibilities, interests and duties, leading to compartmentalised visions: “only those involved in social design must concern themselves with social aspects”, “only those involved in critical design have a critical approach” and so on. The risk exists because these are not technical labels, defining areas of intervention (editorial design, digital design, web design...), but ideological labels that include elements that should be transversal and not inseparable: politics, society, ecology, etc. There is therefore the risk that they limit the designer's possibilities of learning and action (Camuffo, 2019, pp. 76–77).

These reflections are the starting point for the proposal we are putting forward in this article. A proposal born within the limits of our

experiences and the cultural biases to which we are subjected. An open proposal, organised in four broad directions.

We believe it is appropriate to continue to develop and expand a culture of complexity in design education. It is necessary to continue to develop a design vision that takes into account the profound inter-relationship between all phenomena, environmental, social and economic, and that is able to overcome the anthropocentric conception to consider instead humanity as one of the many different elements that inhabit and influence natural systems.

We believe that a critical and proactive vision of history should be developed, which considers it as a material subject to continuous re-interpretation and contextualisation. A vision that does not use it only as a material for the consolidation and reproduction of current social relations and oppressions, but that can instead become an element for questioning those relations and imagining new models. A history that is active and alive, inclusive and plural.

We believe that design must always respond to a social horizon. The damage that our profession is capable of producing and amplifying when it responds solely to the interests of private profit has been known and emphasised for years (Forty, 1992). The exercise of design allows us to develop a certain capacity for anticipation: it is our responsibility to use this to prevent problems and not to multiply them in the name of a return limited to the immediate. The world we live in is bursting with concrete, real, primary needs, in all parts of the globe: we think that the task of the designer is to identify them and attempt to construct the most shared and sustainable responses to these needs, and not to generate further, secondary ones dictated by perverse pursuit of profit.

Finally, we believe that this social horizon must be developed by pursuing the concepts of ethics, care and intersectionality. The social dimension cannot become yet another market niche. It is necessary to educate by reviewing the fundamental paradigms of our society, returning to an economy for the human being (and for the environment), moving away from the idea of a human being and an environ-

ment to be exploited in the function of market economy (Praetorius, 2015). Giving again dignity to work, and even more to those who work; countering a professional ethic centred on exclusionary and destructive competition, and promoting instead constructive cooperation and competition.

We are aware of the more provocative and reflective rather than analytical nature of the work presented here. However, we would like to point out that it is not the result of a presumptuous impulse, but of a sincere urgency that the seminar on Maldonado we have attended has helped to stimulate and enabled us to make explicit. Profoundly inspired by Maldonado's thought, we have decided to remember him not so much by looking at his production retrospectively, but by considering it as a starting point for constructing our own vision.

So, as a work in progress, there are three questions that we are asking ourselves and that we would like to extend to everybody with the same urgencies, to start a collaborative process: what should we keep, what should we take away, what should we focus on in order to create a designer who can deeply relate and design in this society in a critical, and therefore responsible and aware way?

Please respond to [DesignBurningThoughts@disroot.org](mailto:DesignBurningThoughts@disroot.org). Obviously, in a critical and positive way.

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