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For Sensitive Skin: On the Transformation of Architecture into Design

The Beautiful and the Useful: take this middle term: the True. The Beautiful, gratuitous, turns to the ornamental, repudiated; the Useful, alone, or what is useful to mediocre needs, expresses some inelegance. "To fashion," exactly, means, for the artisan a kind of forgetfulness as to use, just as with any jewel — only the direct formation of the idea into a word as the object presents itself, to please and serve, causing an impression, completely modern, of truth.

(Mallarmé, "On the Beautiful and the Useful" 52)

For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine, Klee's figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in their general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior, rather than their inwardness; and this is what makes them barbaric.

(Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" 733)

Beyond the City's Semiotics

The progressive annexation of the work of architecture to the category of design has played a decisive role in the spectacular development of the world's cities. In 1952 Ernesto Nathan Rogers re-introduced a slogan once dear to Hermann Muthesius, "from the spoon to the city" ("dal cucchiaino alla città") auspicing a new philosophy of architectural design that was meant to be liberated from disciplinary distinctions and buoyed by a redefinition of hierarchies based on the singular discriminating principle of design, intended as a great social and democratic question of post-war modernization, or, rather, of a reconstruction effort guided by critical thought (*Editoriali* 46).¹ At the time Rogers did not perhaps imagine that technological development and experimentation with new materials could have allowed such creative freedom to completely unyoke form from function, recalibrating the philosophy of architectural design to its smallest part, or rather to the spoon as a unit of measure, so that today cities look like great tables overflowing with furnishings each unique in its own way; what is

¹ "From the spoon to the city" ("Vom Löffel bis zur Stadt") was a favorite aphorism of architect Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), and it dates back to 1910-1916, when Muthesius was chairman of the Deutscher Werkbund (Campbell). Subsequently it was adopted by designers and architects, Max Bill and Ernesto N. Rogers among them. If not otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian are by the essay's translator (*Editor's note*).

worse, though, is that one has trouble grasping what the function or necessity of any given piece might be.

In certain moments, desperation can trigger a fit of laughter. It happens when one realizes that the city is in every way similar to the scene abandoned by a cohort of cheerful drunkards after a sumptuous dinner in which everybody involved had gone around putting their hands in each other's plates without regard for etiquette. This is of course a Breughelian scene, though it is anything but inaccurate, given the effects of contemporary architecture on cities (where the poorest are forced, like dogs, to fight over the scraps that fall from the table). Rather, to be honest, hyper-realism is a risk that today only nature runs, subjugated as it is to the continuous affronts of artificial reality and a ludic use of the imagination that conceals, behind ostentatious forms, nihilistic conceits, the total disenchantment that identifies the means with the end.

The error, however, is evident: namely, to have considered the city, its composite nature, exclusively under the category of language, as a system of signs, that is, as a "semiotic unity." Though they share a semantic field, there are languages that are governed by different syntaxes, articulated in a system where the general function includes and absorbs into itself the particular one. The example that can help us to understand comes from Roberto Longhi: in a discussion of *ekphrasis* and critical mimesis, Longhi warned against the facile assimilation of the language of visual forms into that of words. They do not have, so to speak, the same linguistic substance, inasmuch as they might share the same aesthetic. It happens, in the same way, when one speaks of the city and the spoon: though they are united by an idea of functionality, they nevertheless present an entirely different degree of complexity. The city is a *concave form*. It is a work molded around the void, in which objects, actions, psychologies, relationships between objects and human realities that express semantic levels not always interconnected between them converge and interact; it is this very concavity that belongs to forms as geometrical as they are metaphorical, welcoming forms that constitute themselves in mutable paradigms capable of harmonizing their "differences." But the attempt to attribute a single orientation to these concave forms derives from the initial equation that, on the theoretical level, renders the project of modernity and democracy complementary and dependent.

If you take an object endowed with a particular utilitarian function (from domestic appliances to household furnishings, from a piece of furniture to an automobile), and inasmuch as it is connoted by a *convex form* typical of what is contained within something greater, in which it justifies its existence and is placed in relation to the other realities that determine the whole, it will not be difficult to see that you cannot consider an individual object and the space it inhabits as though they shared the same linguistic field. (Gropius understood architecture as a syntax superior to all the other arts and, precisely in his embodiment of the ideal completeness of the Renaissance artist, he projected it

onto the relationship between society and democracy, with the intention of leaping beyond the disciplinary distinctions that once obstructed the "totality" from manifesting itself in the historical and quotidian dimension).

Urban space expresses a complex and polyphonic tempo, and the parameters of functionality and organization justify themselves in the form of a system when even the most sophisticated and efficient object exercises a limited dominion over the whole that represents an idea of living. Naturally, where laws of urban planning permit it, no one will be able to impede an architect from designing a clothing iron factory in such a way that the shape of the building would correspond mimetically to that of the object that is to be manufactured there. In this case, the object imposes its form onto the architecture and renders it symbolic not of its function, but of the object itself and of its representative worth, transforming it, in this way, into a hyper-realistic or, for its iconic aspect, propagandistic sign for something that lies beyond the scope of both aesthetics and architectural language. This is what happens in some of Frank Gehry's work: in the Fishdance restaurant in Kobe designed in the shape of a fish and in the Chiat/Day advertising agency headquarters in Venice (California), the façade of which, emulating an idea from Claus Oldenburg's sculptures, features a gigantic pair of binoculars that replaces the syntactic function with a semantic (or "symbolic") function as it houses two conference rooms.

These are paradoxical cases that draw inspiration from the vernacular of advertising and pop art and that, to an attentive critical eye, turn out to be typically commercial phenomena, the linguistic force of which does not express an actual heteronomy of architecture. The classic example is precisely Las Vegas, the city where kitsch reaches nearly sublime heights, but it is also where architecture disappears behind the language of signs, so that the essential function of a building becomes that of providing support and a neutral background for the luminous insignias that sparkle in the night sky (the counter-evidence is found in its diurnal phase, when Las Vegas returns to being an agglomeration of forms deprived of architectural worth).

From Manet to Gehry

Recently I happened to experience a rather strange case of *déjà vu* in Florence. I had stopped in front of an Edouard Manet painting, a small canvas on display in an exhibition of Impressionist works. In it the painter portrays a bundle of asparagus tied together with a double thread of string and leaning against a bed of green leaves. The dark background, recurrent in many of Manet's still lives, caused the plastic energy of the subject to stand out, to project off the canvas as in a sculpture. I was certain I had seen this particular painting before, but where, when?

In 1991 the Venice Biennial awarded the *Leone d'oro* for sculpture to a German couple, Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were responsible for a series of photographs dedicated to industrial architecture: out-of-use factories, rusted

machines, gasometers, silos, water cisterns. From an analogous experience, the history of utilitarian and rationalist architecture had begun eighty years earlier...

The *déjà vu* lasted only a couple of seconds, long enough to understand that this form and the others that it conjured as corollaries in my mind had evoked in me a false memory. My awakening occurred when I clarified that the subject, I don't know how, reminded me of Gehry's architecture: not through direct analogy between the forms of the bundle of asparagus and a building by the Canadian architect, and not even for its resemblance to any other formal element; in the end the whole thing was far simpler and more puerile. I realized that if Gehry were ever to design a green market, all he would have to do is insert the image of Manet's painting into his computer, ask it to enlarge that bundle of asparagus to an urban scale, according to certain specifications, and have it situate that strange architectural object in its appointed place, given the necessary information regarding its orientation and the expectations of the client; and the computer would produce diligently elaborated solutions, perspectives, cross-sections of the interior, as well as possible alternative solutions, and it would, finally, verify the correspondence between the blueprints and the building code. At that point, sitting down at the drafting table, Gehry would make some adjustments, mostly aesthetic in nature, righting certain functional junctures, choose the most suitable materials for the exterior, and calibrate the dynamism internal to the building adding everything needed to make it a place of wonder. Without crumpling up even a single sheet of paper — as we see in Sidney Pollack's 2005 film, *Sketches of Frank Gehry* — and asking the young architects he has working for him in Santa Monica to follow the phases of the project, they will make a plausible and coherent reality in compliance with the laws of statics out of all the non-Euclidean and stochastic geometries they were given. Irony aside, the process I have just described corresponds in large part to the method behind Gehry's design process: creative serendipity here emphasizes its banality as much in forms he creates as in its "out of scale" relation to urban planning, as Oldenburg had already done many years prior in sculpture. For Sydney Pollack, Gehry's work is that of a "creator of dreams": the dream allows truths that had been forgotten, repressed, denied, to reemerge only in the symbolic or allusive forms that correspond in Gehry's architecture to what is often called its iconic value. Thus the critical gaze that treats design with the parameters of an unusual and up-to-date Freudian "interpretation of dreams" (*Traumdeutung*) sneaks into architecture. For Gehry, forms are re-elaborations of objects dug up out of the depot that collective memory accumulates daily and continually reorganizes as new fruits of the imagination are added. The "found objects" (*objets trouvés*) that come back to light from the depths of the psyche unleash powerful energies that test the intelligence of the architect when he is confronted by the danger represented by his own imagination (to allow creative intoxication to take him by the hand is the equivalent in this case of what we could call a "Golem syndrome," where the

object has the upper hand over its creator). What happens in Gehry's architectural forms is what happens to Robert Rauschenberg's painting after the advent of the combines: anything can become art, from natural things to the signs of industrial civilization, as in a *Wunderkammer* of consumer culture.

For Gehry the principle of combination annihilates the boundary between mental and tactile, and it makes manifest the spirits that agitate the architect's unconscious. Thanks to the architect's inventions, they are reflected in the collective imaginary with a creative power fueled by the fire of Prometheus. Berenson had spoken of the enigmatic "imaginary motor sensations" that only art can produce and communicate, above and beyond any conceptuality (Collingwood 261). Here, if anything, we regress to the primitivism of an art that treats things, colors, forms and objects inserted in the frame or in space, taking them to represent pure immanence, inasmuch as they are no more than self-referential forms that negate any symbolic and functional extremism, without even considering their obvious dissonance with respect to any order or canon. It is the immanence of the object that interprets itself without any symbolic or functional point of reference: the artistic object that shamelessly declares its own self-referentiality.

Mental and tactile constitute an opposition that can even end up being decisive if, suddenly and spontaneously, a typographical error acquires conceptual significance, which is what happened, for example, in the passage between the first and the second version of Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In discussing architecture the first version notes that "buildings are received in a two-fold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely (*taktisch*, literally "tactical") and optically" ("The Work of Art," 40). The editors of Benjamin's collected works have demonstrated how this was an error that in the second version is corrected and becomes, and reasonably so, "tactile" (*taktil*). Enrico Filippini, in his pioneering Italian translation, went with the first term and confirmed the suggestive, though improbable, juxtaposition between "tactical" and "optical" (*L'opera d'arte* 45). Even *a posteriori* and after the philological clarification, there is no doubt that the opposition between tactical and optical could have had at the time a certain credibility, and it is not necessarily the case that it has been entirely surpassed even today. Applying, for example, that dialectic abundance to Gehry's architecture, the adjective "optical" expresses the *forma mentis* that creates the typical iconic product prevalent today, while "tactical" is certainly appropriate for how that same architecture intends to break free from any historicist and stylistic bonds, combining forms with their imperious, catastrophic, volumetric analysis. Just as Rauschenberg introduced into the frame objects whose valence, at the ends of the work, was not narrative, it did not allude to a story, but played on the table of the mere objectivity of the forms, determining a new aesthetic school of thought in contrast to that of the European tradition. Rauschenberg assembles, dirties, exalts or negates whatever he pleases, like a captious demon,

but his end is still painting, as one can see in the *Gluts* series from the 1980s realized with sheets of steel from automobiles and scrap metal abandoned by a society in a recession that the artist utilizes to give body to the critical metaphor driven by the oil surplus. Revisiting these works today they seem laden with a pictorial significance (and have almost completely lost the critical forcefulness they had when the artist produced them). The tactical and the tactile can coincide in the instant in which the object, capable of producing sensations, in reality attempts to enlarge the semantic field of an art form beyond the rules that have been all too codified. Tacticity, in this case, corresponds to the relativity of that enlarging of the expressive boundaries, or rather in the fiction that seems to revolutionize a system that has been controlled for so long (but in the end affirms only the ideology of design as a liberation from any utilitarian servitude, and for this reason it is reduced, tactically, to a “representation”).

The Streamline Model

With a caustic and resolute tone, the *habitus* of the favorite master polemicist, Bruno Zevi wrote in one of his architecture chronicles that the Pirelli skyscraper, “designed” by Gio Ponti, looked like a “mobile bar blown up to the scale of a skyscraper,”² (which leads me to say, seeing today that the new headquarters of the Regione Lombardia is nearly complete, that history repeats itself, with the simple variant that the piece of furniture is a gigantic *abat-jour* for Milan “by night” that dreams of the pomp of the 2015 Expo and hopes to revive a season like the one it enjoyed twenty years ago). The hyperbole was founded on an assessment that is still tenable: the formal inertia of the building, a cement box with beveled sides and covered in crystals like the classic liquor cabinet found in so many sturdy bourgeois homes. The assessment, may it be clear, was an ungenerous one — Zevi, among other things, also lavished his ire on the Pan Am skyscraper designed by Gropius, that bears a certain resemblance to Ponti’s skyscraper — because, without having the slightly pandering poetic intensity of the Velasca Tower at its disposal, the Pirelli tower today carries its half-century of life with a certain *nonchalance*, in virtue of the laconic elegance that has turned it into an abstract sign capable of transforming the burdensome material of reinforced cement into aesthetic levity. Zevi’s assessment intended, however, to distance itself from the planning method of the architect who had conceived this tower with the mentality of a “decorator,” a creator of coverings and of surfaces more than of places to inhabit — a choice that to the eyes of Zevi the “spatialist” was the aesthetic symptom of the immaturity of a bourgeoisie incapable of completely assuming the responsibility of guiding the country

² “Un mobile bar ingrandito a scala di grattacielo.” This Zevi aphorism has been quoted innumerable times. The author probably used it for the first time in 1960 in one of his “Cronache di architettura,” a column that he wrote for the weekly magazine *L’Espresso* (Editor’s note).

toward a modernity that would have expressed a different degree of civility, risk and social justice.

Zevi’s disparaging assessment of the Pirelli skyscraper should be kept in mind today because it took aim at the previous history of a trend that, while becoming an ever greater presence on the international scene, has got the best of contemporary architecture since the 1980s: the transformation of architecture into design.

Already through the 1970s, as the earliest symptoms were materializing of the crisis that would follow the Italian economic boom brought by reconstruction and industrial development, the aesthetic object and *design* becomes the bastion of the architect’s freedom to experiment. But with the passage of time the slogan “from the spoon to the city” turned out to be a boomerang and the idea of “integral design” relieved the architect of the effective responsibility of the project. The first step came when the term “design” became, with an ideological valence, synonymous with *plans*: even if it was not immediately observed by everybody, architecture as a result was reduced to an aesthetic and communicative question. Architects had to assume fewer ethical burdens in the practice of building, with the possibility of dedicating oneself above all to the problems posed by a society that discovered the power of the image as a means of information and representation. The leap led to identification with the simulacrum rather than with the object. And the result was that architecture as an ensemble of technical, artistic and anthropological competences was divided up, taken apart, parceled out, in the act of entrusting its various responsibilities, once inseparable from the work of planning and constructing, to new professional figures. In the best of hypotheses, or rather when its ideological tie to modern movement is maintained, the architect begins to resemble a theorist, an intellectual who loses his temper with the ethical constraints of the building process, the communicative forms, and does not move beyond the concept of the project. The model that could serve as a source of inspiration is that of Leon Battista Alberti, humanist, philosopher, writer, architect and precursor of all designers.

However, in the society of the image, the architect-stylist will no longer be merely a “decorator,” he will also have to be a good salesman, in short, a marketing expert. In this state of affairs one explains even the heterogenesis of the ends of the ideal prefigured by Rogers, or the nemesis of what Cacciari would call a “thoroughly totalitarian” interpretation (“totalitaria del tutto” 6), which is precisely the original sin of modernism. One can efficaciously summarize the change in perspective, with respect to the social ethic of architecture, by paraphrasing one of Louis Kahn’s aphorism: “Form is ‘what,’ design is ‘how’” (Lobell 28). Today the syllogism sounds like this: design is everything, therefore architecture, in the epoch where technique guarantees every practical choice, is only a problem of form.

The coordinated image, to borrow terminology from the jargon of the sector of advertising design concerned with Corporate Identity, according to Rogers's perspective was meant to be the product of the synthesis of the arts following the indications of the plans, of the work in progress, which entrusted to the hands of the architect and the urban planner the responsibility of conceiving a model for the city that might be the physical expression of a new society; in reality, just the opposite occurred. The dissolution of productive processes with the advent of electronic and digital culture rendered ephemeral even the craft of "building" to the advantage of a levity that, even before being an aesthetic phenomenon, it was the metaphor for a disciplinary emptying of the architect's prerogatives. By now the whole thing has become a question of image. And the wall, the roof beam, the pilaster are anachronistic figures for a concept of architecture in which tectonics is only the negative legacy of the art of building in order to give humankind a space to inhabit, interact and protect themselves from the perils of nature (and at times to protect human beings from their fellow humans).

Architecture as design is architecture that in its image justifies itself, urban set design, a mental space like that of painting, a playful and self-referential object. Apparently, there was a moment in which design was adequate, for reasons intrinsic to the technical-productive process, for the architectural planning imperative that guided Adler and Sullivan in Chicago: *form follows function*. But, in effect, up to what point does industrial design follow such dictates? The idea conflicted with the commercial demands of an industrial system that in design discovered one of its greatest rhetorical resources. It all started with the American industrial system that in the 1920s and '30s introduced the style of the *streamline* into automobile aesthetics. The streamline applied aerodynamics to objects of design whose tapered form ended up looking like a drop of water (not to mention the erotic element that was sexually suggestive of the curves of a woman's body). The inspirational model came from the aeronautics industry — it was the form utilized by airplanes and submarines that were supposed to carve through air and water without losing speed — and it was applied, *ipso facto*, to vehicles produced for domestic use. And so from one day to the next automobiles began sprouting great fins capable of expressing a more aggressive and appetizing aesthetic, though always moored to the idea of efficiently cleaving the air as well as implicitly serving a more economic consumption of fuel. The bond between form and function, in this way, was safe. The streamline quickly became a fashion craze. And we know that an image or a form, once they attain success, can cause the market to broaden its semantic field in order to create further profit. Someone even found the perfect slogan for celebrating the streamline: "improve the curve of your sales." This is how the streamline, beyond automobiles and motorcycles, was applied to clothing irons, baby carriages, domestic appliances, as much to the refrigerator as to the toaster oven, even to the most commonly used pieces of furniture. It served as the testing grounds for a field of design that struck upon

the functionality of *kitsch* in the realization of commercial objectives (let us not forget that two decades later, in 1955, in order to define the popularity of the styling of American automobiles the English critic Reyner Banham coined the expression *Pop Art*, which art criticism will later adopt with a different meaning).

Dramatic events like the Great War and the Wall Street crisis had produced a collapse of consumption, and the most dynamic American entrepreneurs realized that the success of a product did not depend exclusively on high (technical and functional) quality. It was necessary to endow their products with a slick new skin that distinguished them from others by making them more seductive than the competitors with whom they shared shelf space in stores and supermarkets. The design of the packaging therefore played a decisive role in inducing the consumer to consume, according to classic marketing philosophy: "difference makes the difference," or, rather, packaging determines the success of a product. A generation of creative men and women who had cut their teeth in advertising or other areas of commercial communication put their expertise and fantasy to work in the service of industrial design by revolutionizing the language and the function of packaging. At the height of the depression to know how to express in the packaging of a product a positive message regarding modernity and beauty, capable of convincing the consumer that this particular product was not only necessary but also the best available on the market, by simply making it attractive in its wrapping, was one of the salient points in the rebirth of the American economy.

Pleasant Objects

The great hopes of architects that Rogers had re-launched in the aftermath of the Second World War were slowly disappointed over time in disputes with dogmatic excess and the aging of rationalistic language. The economic growth that led to an excess of production — as if surplus and consumerism were proof of the glorious and irreversible destiny of a society in which wellbeing coincided with the accumulation of means and objects — got a wake-up call with the petroleum crisis of 1973 and introduced into the language of the West the word *austerity*. This crisis of industrialized societies, the earliest signs of which were already apparent in the end of the 1960s, shed light on the dependence on limited energy resources of the economic model prefigured in the wake of the war, and insofar as modern architecture is concerned, rendered almost disastrous the outcome of half a century's worth of ethical battles:

There is no longer any salvation to be found [...] neither by wandering restlessly through “labryinths” of images so polyvalent they come off as mute, nor by closing oneself up in the sullen silence of geometries satisfied with their perfection.³

Such is the account drawn up by Manfredo Tafuri in 1969 in the third issue of the magazine “Contropiano.” That very same year, Ettore Sottsass was designing *Valentina*, a typewriter that without revolutionizing its mechanics stood out for the very innovative aesthetic of its design. With *Valentina* the ethical stereotype of “sincerity” is suppressed once and for all, or rather the formal idea that the object has to declare its function in its appearance without ceding to the formal caprices of those who in art also look for the ludic dimension. *Valentina* is meant to be a tool for writing, but its appearance has turned it into an eccentric piece of furniture. And Olivetti’s advertising and marketing campaigns emphasized precisely this enlargement of the semantic field of an object that has moved once and for all out of the austere enclosure of the office (a turning point toward which Marcello Nizzoli with his *Lettera 22* had already imparted a decisive push), as it enters the homes of ordinary Italians. By developing a friendly relationship that transforms its practical function into a possibility for the expression of the desires and dream of the common man, you can keep it in your living room, on the children’s desk, even in the kitchen where it becomes a housewife’s best friend in the confessional vein. You can even bring it along on vacation where its playful appearance ensures that those who use it do not fall into the temptation of depositing on the page thoughts too serious or engaged. Its aesthetic almost cancels out the idea that it could actually be a typewriter. *Valentina* has a happy, casual appearance that communicates a positive message; it is a playtime companion, familiar and graceful enough to please everyone; it is an anti-depressive symbol and it makes its arrival at the end of a social and economic cycle that elevated Italy from the class of countries that had been behind the times in terms of lifestyle and industrial development. *Valentina* was conceived to become a fixture in every home like the refrigerator or the washing machine, with an important difference: these domestic appliances cannot occupy a space in the home without performing their function, while *Valentina* can sit on an end-table, next to the television, in the bedroom or on the rug without being used regularly (as it would be in the office), and this becomes almost “natural” the moment in which design confers that ludic and disengaged aspect that makes it seem like a pleasant *joujou*.

³ “Nessuna salvezza è più rinvenibile [...] né aggirandosi inquieti in “labirinti” di immagini talmente polivalenti da risultare mute, né chiudendosi nello scontroso silenzio di geometrie paghe della propria perfezione” (Tafuri 32).

Valentina embodies the idea of the democracy of speech that, from this moment on, is no longer the prerogative of intellectuals: if it is true that in every Italian man and woman there lurks a poet, *Valentina* affirms with pleasant though biting levity that since Italians are literate, it’s now time to make writers of them. In order to become a writer, *Valentina* whispers into the unconscious ear of the great masses of unacknowledged Hemingways, it is enough to believe in yourself, and at a distance of several decades from *Valentina*’s debut, the development of digital technology and the Internet make it apparent that this is not an exclusively Italian phenomenon. *Valentina* makes its entrance into society during the years in which the imagination had announced its candidacy for governing, for going into power; therefore even the creative use of language had to become common commerce. It begins with the means for writing. But already lurking in this idea is a concept of writing as a return to the private sphere of individual therapy. (In fact, in the excess of verbal activity that distinguishes, by contrast, our present day and age, the depth and force of words are undermined, their essence diluted by the individual right to say whatever comes to mind, effectively lessening the power of the speech acts of those who have real linguistic and expressive abilities. All writers, no literature: and indeed the Italian language, like other idioms in Western society, quickly grew impoverished. As a result of conforming to stereotypes, it lost its own unique identity, which also connotes a manner of feeling and thinking.)

Since the *leitmotiv* of the period, as we said, is that of the coordinated image, Sottsass studies an object that behaves like a self-referential icon and reflects itself even in its packaging, no longer a simple means of protection and representation of content, but a simulacrum that embodies in the image the idea and the function of the object itself. This changes the cards on the table with respect to a still relatively recent past: the principle function of the object is no longer syntactic, tied to its use, but semantic. It doubles itself and projects an image of itself through its very own packaging, which with logical perfection is the perfect embodiment of Marshall McLuhan’s axiom: *the medium is the message*. As we were saying, design will no longer be understood — reformulating, in this way, the first precept of the modern movement — as the relationship between *form* and *function*, but it will follow the “communicative” path of the binary *form-message*. And the richness of the image presented by the packaging, at that point, becomes inseparable from the object that only enters the scene at a second moment, when its communication with the sensibility of the purchaser has already been set in motion. Behind an entertaining and ironical façade, *Valentina* launches its provocation at a society only just coming out of an economic boom: design prefigures a world in which the “system of signs” unmask the “system of commerce” by taking its place. It is the extreme version of the Marxist aesthetics that after having conceived of modern architecture as a language critical — even demystifying, so to speak — of industrial society, it is instead obliged to play, unwillingly, the streamlined role of ideology in a context

where, with the advent of the advanced service industry, manufacturing no longer represents the most important sector of the economy (and this changes even the centrality of the world of the working class within this society). "Radical" design is therefore the conclusive act, the final attempt of the deterministic mirror theory that has contributed, despite its actual intentions, to establishing the idolatry of the object, and now in order to combat the consumer impulses that keep the system of commerce alive, it separates aesthetics and functionality by focusing on the form as a space of "creative" freedom, as much for those who produce it as for those who receive it through the object and who are invited to discover in it, with a little imagination, the ludic, or rather critical, dimension regarding a system that values the utilitarian above all else. But we also have to say with clarity that anti-utilitarianism, at the end of the day, is an idealistic escape from the anthropological and ethical questions of design, a regression toward an idyllic past free from the servitude of labor, which humankind has probably never known (for at least as long as organized societies have existed).

With respect to this moral crisis, *Valentina* anticipates the language of "post": it is post-industrial insofar as it is free from the dogmas of rationalism and functionalism; it refutes, that is, the austere ethic of the Protestant sort; and it is post-modern because it announces a future deprived of strong values, where we live in search of pleasure and entertainment, liberated from the sad conformity of the precepts imposed by authorities that had since been delegitimized. For this reason it becomes an emblem of the "anti-authoritarian" turning point of 1968. "Post" expresses the condition of being halfway in between, in transit toward a general vision in which fiction exceeds reality and produces the ephemeral emptying out of the objective substance of the world. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger in *Off the Beaten Track*, it is the age of the world in "The Age of the World Picture." Design and communication are the places delegated to a philosophical question that introduces into the dialectic between authentic and inauthentic — stereotypical of industrial society — a new category, the artificial (or the "fake," to put it in Hans Sedlmayr's words), which from a distance seems to include the other two terms without expressing a final synthesis, rather remaining on the ambiguous border of a reality that no longer coincides with a certain objectivity, but inclines toward the virtual. The gamble becomes even riskier when design, in virtue precisely of the technology of new materials, elaborates a concept of itself that considers the "natural" not as a term of contrast, but only as one of many factors that determine aesthetic decisions freed from representative functions. Design extends its reach, in this way, into every sphere of existence, into life itself re-created and manipulated in a laboratory, and becomes, inasmuch as it is an integral and coordinated plan, the aesthetic category of the self-determination of a humanity that has definitively taken its own destiny into its hands. It seeks the truth no longer in the light of the past but stakes a claim on the future, taking its own humanity, that is, to an

extreme with an anthropocentrism that does not seem to want to run the risks of instability that hide behind even the most sophisticated technological society. (September 11 showed us precisely this very element of weakness in the country that can boast more than almost any other of its technological sophistication as well as its economic and military strength.)

Emancipation from labor, and from its servitude, an idea of the future that idolizes "free time" as individual liberation from the obligations imposed by living together: even this ideology turned out to be, no less than any other, chimerical. *Valentina* was, in a microcosm, a sort of revelation for a society of individuals still unable to conceive of themselves in their new condition as cheerful consumers of the immense possibilities that wellbeing offered to a country that had never experienced such a high rate of growth, which, moreover, it reached with extraordinary speed. What happened with *Valentina* might happen at a party when an unknown woman arrives, who in her manner and dress brings a gust of novelties into the customary routine of habit and hackneyed stories. Unfortunately, just around the corner, the crisis of the Seventies loomed large, and no radical design would have been able to ward off the demons of an economic depression that would last more than a decade, not to mention the social and political costs it also incurred that we know all too well. At the time, no one, with the exception of a certain intellectual "radical chic," possessed enough light-heartedness to be able to reverse the outlook. Who could now believe — with the workers crowded at the gates of Fiat, with the protests that evolved into acts of violence and terrorism — that wellbeing was a promise made to everyone, that form was no longer enslaved to function, and that (after having been democratized by mass consumption) liberated form would have created a society freed from those hierarchies of power that still, in many ways, reflect the history of Italy in the first half of the century and have placed many doubts on the effective quality of our democracy?

Two facts seem indisputable: design that preached a social ethic in no way produced objects within reach of the pockets of the common laborer or working class ("quality is expensive" was, and still is, the entrepreneurs' answer, a sentiment to which architects also willingly subscribe). Furthermore, something perhaps still more decisive in the development of social relationships — that aesthetic radicalism once considered "formalist" for the good of humankind — was, more than an avant-garde, the anticipation of a world constructed on the desire for a new social figure, the "mass bourgeois." Here is where the causes of the failure of the humanist and democratizing intentions of design should be sought. Not by chance, when the word design begins to pepper the talk of respectable people, it almost always alludes to the product that expresses a status, a luxury. And it is not an unforeseen as much as an unwanted effect, because the risk was clear even to pioneers like Gropius, who alluding to the objects and architecture created by the Bauhaus movement said: "Much of what

we today consider luxury, will tomorrow be the norm"⁴ Unfortunately, design today has an additional value that delimits a target of exclusivity directly connected to a level of well-being that is not that of the majority of humankind even if it could be called, for the breadth of the market, a "mass" level.

Thus this is how *design* torched the ethical ideal that in a short essay entitled "L'automobile di Mallarmé" Rosario Assunto summarized with these words: design "is not designing *for consumption*, but liberation *from consumption*" ("non è progettazione *per il consumo*, ma liberazione *dal consumo*" 27). The "consumption of forms" ("consumo delle forme") — the philosopher specifies is not attributable to design, but "to the falsification of design" ("alla falsificazione del design") and leads to the "crisis of counterfeit design as a 'style of non-contemplation,' although in this forgery (in which the Useful proposes itself for what is True, abolishing the mediation in the Beautiful) what [William] Morris called 'the terrible power of the profit-grinder' played its part."⁵

Ten years after having dictated the ethical principles of industrial design in light of the equivalence "to unlimited quantity corresponds unlimited quality," Giulio Carlo Argan raised many brows when he drafted the act of surrender of this utopian hope. The possibility of educating or reforming society through design, namely, through a technical design-oriented intervention, was indeed subordinated to the fact that the artist-designer had the power to influence the progressive development of the technique and, on a much broader scale, the active or productive behavior of society. This meant, however, that the designer should assume the political direction of production.

However, in the post-industrial world, the designer is like the architect of the late nineteenth century: he is useful for lending the product a more pleasing, more seductive, if not more unusual aspect, especially if its unusualness might set a trend. The function of design is to create commercial beauty, fundamentally, to favor the growth of productive intercepting and conditioning of the desires of individuals (and today it also means producing experiences, sensations, impulses). But has the architect or designer that Argan ideally saw in charge of entrepreneurial decisions ever actually existed? Only in a case in which the designer is the entrepreneur of himself, or rather when the enlightened entrepreneur — Adriano Olivetti, for example — is moved by the desire to intervene in the reality that goes beyond the single object and becomes part and

⁴ Gropius used this very well-known aphorism (a shorter form reads "Today's luxuries are tomorrow's norm"), when he explained his design of the Master Houses built in Dessau in 1925 for the Bauhaus school. See Droste (*Editor's note*).

⁵ "[...] crisi del *design* contraffatto come 'stile della non-contemplazione' non senza che in questa contraffazione (nella quale l'Utile si propone in quanto tale come Vero, abolendo la mediazione nel Bello) abbia la sua parte quello che Morris chiamava 'the terrible power of the profit-grinder'" ("la tremenda potenza del macinatore di profitti") (Assunto 27).

parcel of society. But this is obviously not the norm. The last generations of creative individuals, for example, seem to be deprived of strong ideologies; they think in a realistic and pragmatic way, as one can gather from the words of an architect who figures among the names emerging on the contemporary scene, Manuelle Gautrand: "We architects are called upon to anticipate and imagine new life styles, the needs of the future," and confidently adds, "Works conceived from this vantage point will be less permeable to the financial context."⁶

Aware that such development has almost never happened, if not giving way to the demands of industry or rather producing a design niche (or, if you will, one for the elite, exclusive to those who long for that "one-of-a-kind piece"), we must ask ourselves up to what point those statements do not reflect the usual façade of good intentions later disregarded in practice. The crisis of design is one of the consequences of the change in the upper-echelon of the powers that govern the fates of post-modern societies, where indeed the political is subordinated to the economic. But there is not even space for the benefit of the doubt, which the architect Gautrand dissolves with an example: "This is particularly true in the case of commercial spaces, which have to be very innovative in their conception."⁷

Is any comment necessary? If the shopping mall becomes so important as to be in need of conceptual innovations; if the hyper-market is the new agora; if the metabolism of the system of commerce becomes the motor of social relations; and if, finally, this is the ineluctable destiny of human aggregations (the desire for gadgets as reason for living together, for enjoying oneself, discussing and, at most, clashing over a scale of values dictated by the possession of material goods), it is evident that consumption is no longer just one function among the many that lend consistence to social life, but the reason on which a majority of our existence depends and is transformed. Is this the idea of city to which we have to resign ourselves after having discussed and argued for decades over the moral task of design and of architecture?

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(Translated by Steve Baker)

⁶ "Noi architetti siamo chiamati ad anticipare e immaginare i nuovi stili di vita, i bisogni del futuro"; "I lavori concepiti in quest'ottica saranno meno permeabili al contesto finanziario" (Gautrand, quoted in *Il Magazine dell'architettura* 19).

⁷ "Ciò è particolarmente vero nel caso degli spazi commerciali, che dovranno essere molto innovativi nella loro concezione" (Gautrand, quoted in *Il Magazine dell'architettura* 19).

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Francesco Chillemi

Carmelo Bene and the Overcoming of Logocentrism: Epiphany of the Primordial Voice in the Eclipse of Meaning

The theatrical and cinematographic works by the Italian playwright, director, and actor Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) are marked by their philosophical relevance. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the international debate in Europe was strongly influenced by French post-structuralism and Derridean deconstructive criticism, Carmelo Bene overstepped the limit of logocentric language by escaping from the metaphysical assumptions that — according to Derrida — dominated Western thought and were impossible to elude (*Acts of Literature* 49).

Beginning with the similarities and differences between the theoretical speculation conveyed by Bene's *opus* and the philosophical thought of Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben regarding the origin and nature of language, this article will focus on the distinctive stylistic techniques and *mise-en-scène* of the television film *Amleto di Carmelo Bene, da Shakespeare a Laforgue* and the functions of the specific codes involved (verbal, body, and audiovisual language). Finally, this essay will investigate the phenomenon of ineffability, in its theory and practice, by drawing a parallel between mystical experiences and Beneian performances.

Bene's works are based on the demolition of the common function of codes and their traditional stylistic features and devices. His theater rejects the written text as the fulcrum of the show insofar as any play script, having lost its sense of immediacy, is "already dead." Bene abhors the traditional theater, which revives written literary texts and offers a weakened version of them. On the contrary, he aims to give birth to *il teatro dell'irrepresentabile* ("the unperformable theater"), where unpredictable and ineffable theatrical acts take place by systematically violating the integrity of scenic illusion. The texts in which each work is based are completely altered and turned into "critical essays" rather than expressions of a new interpretation. Such essays are critical adaptations or, in Derridean terms, respectful countersignatures, which, in order to be inaugural, need a partial betrayal of the original work (*Acts* 69).

In this way, as Bene asserts,

non è legittimo mettere in scena i classici, [...] erano grandissimi poeti. [...] Ma mettere in scena oggi il loro teatro, comunque lo si "rivisiti" o lo si "riscrive", significa cadere nell'equivoco.

(Bartalotta 13)