

Some Virtues of Design

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Note

This text has been prepared as a contribution to the symposium on occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Department of Science of Design, Musashino Art University, Japan.

I chose to focus on the issue of virtues of design when I was reading once again the *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* by **Italo Calvino**. As is known, he finished only five out of a plan of six memos before he died. In this remarkable small volume he speaks about the **values he would like to see maintained** and brought into the next millennium as far as literature is concerned. These shared values he calls virtues. Taking his approach as starting point I want to talk about the

shared values of design for the next millennium.



Virtues
common shared values

Lightness

The Six Memos for the Next Millennium include:

Lightness,

Quickness,

Exactitude,

Visibility,


Multiplicity and

Consistency.

Without wanting to push the issue, several of these values for literature can be - with due corrections - transferred to the domain of design. A literal transfer certainly would be naive and inappropriate. But parallels and affinities seem to exist. For instance, when **Calvino** defines **Lightness** as the attempt **to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language**, are there not analogies in the field of design? Lightness in design is a virtue to be maintained, especially when we reflect on material and energy flows and their impact on the environment and when we confront the mundane issue of congested lines cloaked with digital trash in the Net.

Humour
Wit
Elegance

One
Virtue of Design



Lightness

When later on he refers to the

“sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing ... that what many consider to be the vitality of the times - noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring - belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars” ,

Calvino, Italo, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1988. p. 12.

lightness acquires a critical dimension and dissipates wrong associations of easy going aloofness and superficiality.

Certainly I would include under the term Lightness the notions of **humour, wit** and **elegance** for which we have particularly in Italian design so well known examples (e.g. Castiglioni's tractor seat mounted on a flat elastic steel profile).

Italo Calvino

Lightness



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Intellectuality

On occasion of the Aspen Congress 1989, dedicated to Italian Design, Ettore Sottsass surprised the audience by presenting himself as an intellectual and cultural operator. This only an Italian or French could say. Italy and France are two countries in which the notion of intellectual does not produce a lifting of the eye brows and a climate of suspect. In Germany and in the US the word "intellectual" carries negative overtones. Many of the practising design professionals would accept but with reluctance the self-interpretation as intellectuals.

Intellectuals are - rightly or wrongly - characterised as wordsmiths because they play a decisive role in shaping the **discourse** of domains, political, cultural, scientific and technological. In the field of design, intellectual formation has not a strong history, because design education grew out of craft training with a deep mistrust against anything "theoretical". Recently however we can observe some promising signs of a shift away from an indifferent, if not openly hostile attitude towards an interest in articulation and theoretical issues. Designers start to write, particularly graphic designers - for me a promising symptom to overcome a period of collective muteness of the profession. Design and writing about design are not longer seen as sterile and mutually exclusive opposites.

Intellectuals have repeatedly reflected about their role in society. The most salient characteristic seems to me the readiness to

reveal contradictions, to rock the boat of selfcomplacency, to compare what is to that what could be, and in particular to ask for the legitimisation of power.

As second conclusion, I would like to see maintained **Intellectuality** as a virtue of design in the next century: readiness and courage to put into question the orthodoxies, conventions, traditions, agreed-upon canons of design - and not only of design.

One
Virtue of Design
Intellectuality

Readiness
to question
orthodoxies

Public Domain

As third design virtue I consider concern for the Public Domain, and this all the more so when registering the almost delirious onslaught on everything public that seems to be a generalised credo of the predominant economic paradigm. One does well to recall that the socially devastating effects of unrestricted private interests have to be counterbalanced by public interests in any society that claims to be called democratic and that deserves that label.

One of the obligations of public administration is the concern for public design. This care for quality of public service, including design, is a result of a political commitment. **Politics** is the domain in which the members of a society decide in what kind of society they want to live. Politics - this should be emphasized - goes far beyond political parties. Care for the public domain, though a profoundly political commitment, is at the same time transpolitical insofar it exceeds - or better should exceed - the interests of the government in turn.



One
Virtue of Design

Public domain

Otherness

The fourth virtue of design is called Otherness, or better concern for Otherness. This issue is linked to the discussion about Self and Identity, about Presentation and Representation. It plays a strong role in discussions about feminism, gender roles, race and ethnic diversity. It has virulent political implications because it is rooted in the **question of autonomy**, i.e. the power to participate in the determination of one's own future. This leads us to put into focus the - as Edward Said formulated it - blithe indifference to a good three-quarters of reality.

Today design and design discourse reflect the interests of the dominating economies that under the banner of **globalisation** are engaged in the process of modelling the world according to their hegemonic interests and imagery. Globalisation as a new economic fundamentalism is the name for the actual planetary project or drift, a process that seems to advance with inexorable ruthlessness, like an objective force passing over the heads of individuals, governments and societies. Tapping the conceptual repertoire of anthropological discourse, globalisation can be interpreted as an **attempt to incorporate Otherness** and to subject Otherness.

It should not come as a surprise that the victims of this process resist the attempt of incorporation and prefer to enter the arena with better preparation. When fight and competition are the order of the day and the core of human activity, one might accept that as rules of the game - though I do not share these economic behaviours; but the entrance conditions into the arena should be less distorted. So my fourth virtue of design is respect for Otherness that implies the **acceptance of other design cultures and their inherent values**. It can counteract the propensity to focus exclusively on the one quarter of humanity that according to international statistics forms part of the industrialised rich economies.

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Virtue of Design



Otherness

Visuality

As an equivalent to Italo Calvino's virtue of Visibility, I take Visuality in the field of design. He characterises visibility as "*thinking* in terms of images". That is an assessment with radical implications, because in our culture thinking is associated with linguistic competence, with dealing with texts, whereas the visual domain is put into the subaltern role of quacks, trickery, treachery, superficiality, shallowness, appearance, *Schein*, *blosser Schein*, something not to be trusted, that is, the opposite of macho-style thinking, at best a second-rate kind of thinking, but definitely an intellectual nullity.


The **denigration of vision** and visuality has its philosophical origins in **Plato's** well known **Cave** simile. We can call this deep linguistic bias against visuality and its cognitive potential the "imperialism of the word". The possibility that the

visual domain has cognitive power

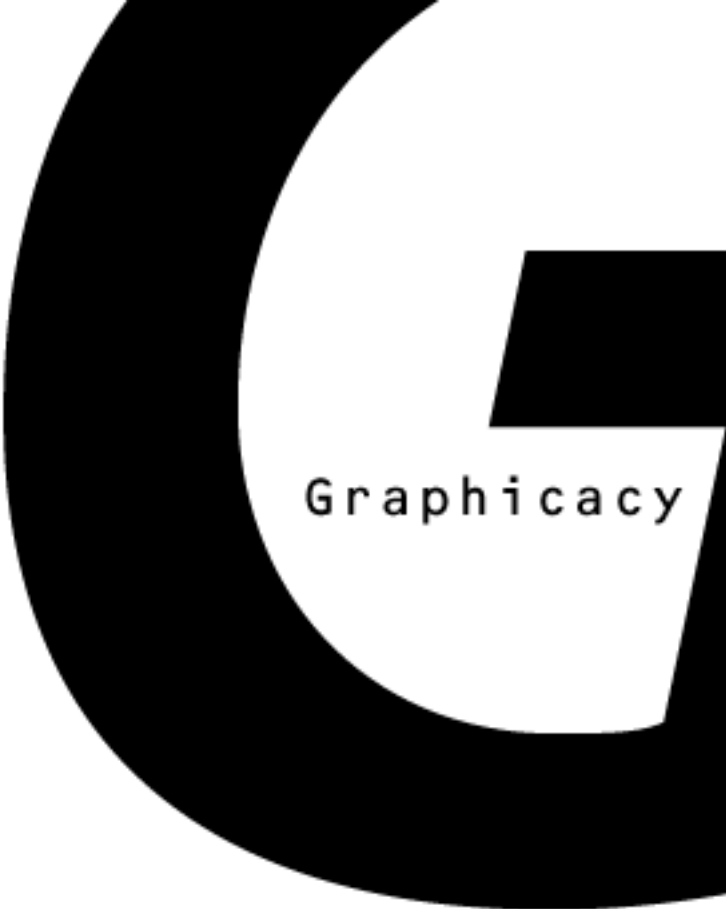
and is not a simple subordinate or corollary to text has been perceived sometimes, but it never got a strong foothold in our educational system and has been filtered out in academe where mastery of texts is institutionally consolidated. Nobody would doubt that **literacy** is a prerequisite for higher learning, but **graphicacy** as it has been called - the competence in dealing with images - is far from being recognised as a competence of equal importance. That might change in the future.

There are symptoms of change provoked by technological innovations. I refer to the process of **digitalisation**. In increasing degree sciences and cognition depend on the power of the visual domain, of images and visualisations, not in the traditional ancillary role of providing illustrations for texts, but in its own right. The still undefined imaging science is a new branch that deals with the multifaceted phenomena where images are not taken as examples of mimesis, but in which images reveal realities that are not accessible through words and texts.

One
Virtue of Design




Visuality
thinking in terms of images




Graphicacy

The competence in dealing with images



Literacy

The competence in dealing with words



Cognition
as a domain of visibility

Visibility
as a domain of cognition

The antivisualism, the logocentrism

counts with a long and strong tradition that

- save a few exceptions - has passed with olympic indifference over the visual domain. For design undreamt, radically new possibilities open up. But so far, apart from dispersed initiatives to tap the potential of design for visual cognition, the profession of graphic designers pursues well-trodden tracks. Here then is the challenge for design education to explore this new domain for which we do not have a proper name. Perhaps in the future the notion of "image design" will become popular, though I would prefer the term information design, because the binarism between word and picture should be avoided.

The fifth virtue then I would like to see gaining force in the next millennium I call Visuality. Let me quote a scholar of visuality to reinforce my argument:

"The history of the general move towards visualization thus has broad intellectual and practical implications for the conduct and the theory of the humanities, the physical and biological sciences, and the social sciences - indeed, for all forms of education, from top to bottom."

Stafford, Barbara Maria, *Good Looking - Essays on the Virtues of Images*.
Cambridge/London: MIT Press 1996. p. 23.

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Barbara Maria Stafford

Theory

As I have argued elsewhere I do not see any future for the design profession if within the next years we don't overhaul all our design education programmes and open an

design theory.

institutional place for

There are two reasons for this declaration:

first, every professional practice takes place in front of a theoretical background; that holds even for practice styles that vehemently deny any theoretical involvement.

Second, professions that do not produce new knowledge do not have a future in technologically dynamic societies.

Therefore design theory should and - according to my assessment of the future - must become part of our educational programmes. Design theory still leads a marginal existence. It is considered pastime of some eccentrics in academic settings protected from the harsh realities of professional practice in the labour market. That is a somewhat biased view that does not reveal particular perspicuous vision.

Theory is not a virtue. But concern and **cultivation of Theoretical Interests** is a virtue that I would not only like to see continued into the next millennium, but brought to full blossoming.

One
Virtue of Design

T
Theory