

JAN VAN TOORN REVEALS THE DESIGNER BEHIND THE DESIGN, THE IDEOLOGY BEHIND THE AESTHETICS. Since the 1960s, he has used his design work to unveil the social and cultural implications of mass media. Using physical acts of cut-and-paste, he often combines media imagery into new statements. Through his theoretical books and his commercial work he emphasizes to us that visual communication is never neutral, the designer never simply an objective conveyer of information. Van Toorn is critical, political, and, in some cases, polarizing. As an educator at universities and academies in the Netherlands and abroad, including the Rhode Island School of Design, van Toorn urges his students to take responsibility for their own role within the ideology of our culture. Born in 1932, this influential Dutch graphic and exhibition designer warns us that design has “become imprisoned in a fiction that does not respond to factual reality.” The essay below urges designers to engage and expose the established symbolic order.

DESIGN AND REFLEXIVITY

JAN VAN TOORN | 1994

LE PAIN ET LA LIBERTÉ

Every professional practice operates in a state of schizophrenia, in a situation full of inescapable contradictions. So too communicative design, which traditionally views its own action as serving the public interest, but which is engaged at the same time in the private interests of clients and media. To secure its existence, design, like other practical intellectual professions, must constantly strive to neutralize these inherent conflicts of interest by developing a mediating concept aimed at consensus. This always comes down to a reconciliation with the present state of social relations; in other words, to accepting the world image of the established order as the context for its own action.

By continually smoothing over the conflicts in the production relationships, design, in cooperation with other disciplines, has developed a practical and conceptual coherence that has afforded it representational and institutional power in the mass media. In this manner it legitimizes itself in the eyes of the established social order, which, in turn, is confirmed and legitimized by the contributions that design makes to symbolic production. It is this image of reality, in particular of the social world that, pressured by the market economy, no longer has room for emancipatory engagement as a foundation for critical practice.

Design has thus become imprisoned in a fiction that does not respond to factual reality beyond the representations of the culture industry and its communicative monopoly. In principle, this intellectual impotence is still expressed in dualistic, product-oriented action and thought: on the one hand there is the individual's attempt to renew the vocabulary—out of resistance to the social integration of the profession; on the other there is the intention to arrive at universal and utilitarian soberness of expression—within the existing symbolic and institutional order. Although the lines separating these two extremes are becoming blurred (as a consequence of postmodernist thinking and ongoing market differentiation), official design continues to be characterized by aesthetic compulsiveness and/or by a patriarchal fixation on reproductive ordering.

The social orientation of our action as designers is no longer as simple as that. We seem happy enough to earn our living in blind freedom, leading to vulgarization and simplification of our reflective and critical traditions. That is why it is time to apply our imaginative power once again to how we deal with communicative reality.

The intermediary lays down the law. Mediation determines the nature of the message, there is a primacy of the relation over being. In other words, it is the bodies that think, not the minds. The constraint of incorporation produces corporations, which are these intermediary bodies and these institutions of knowledge, abided by norms and formulating norms, known as schools, churches, parties, associations, debating societies, etc.

Régis Debray | *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms* | 1996

The given facts that appear...as the positive index of truth are in fact the negation of truth...Truth can only be established by their destruction.

Herbert Marcuse | *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* | 1941

Valid critical judgment is the fruit not of spiritual dissociation but of an energetic collusion with everyday life.

Terry Eagleton | *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* | 1985

Criticism is not an innocent discipline, and has never been....The moment when a material or intellectual practice begins to "think itself," to take itself as an object of intellectual inquiry, is clearly of dominant significance in the development of that practice; it will certainly never be the same again. What thrusts such a practice into self-reflexiveness is not merely an internal pressure, but the complex unity it forms with adjacent discourses.

Terry Eagleton | *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* | 1976

SYMBOLIC FORMS ARE SOCIAL FORMS

Symbolic productions represent the social position and mentality of the elites that create and disseminate them. As ideological instruments, they serve private interests that are preferably presented as universal ones. The dominant culture does not serve to integrate the ruling classes only, however; "It also contributes," as Pierre Bourdieu describes it, "to the fictitious integration of society as a whole, and thus to the apathy (false consciousness) of the dominated classes; and finally, it contributes to the legitimation of the established order by establishing distinctions (hierarchies) and legitimating these distinctions."¹ Consequently, the dominant culture forces all

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 167.

other cultures to define themselves in its symbolism, this being the instrument of knowledge and communication. This communicative dependency is particularly evident in the “solutions” that the dominant culture proposes for the social, economic, and political problems of what is defined as the “periphery”—of those who do not (yet) belong.

By definition, the confrontation between reality and symbolic representation is uncertain. This uncertainty has now become undoubtedly painful, since, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, the experience of reality has disappeared “behind the mediating hyperreality of the simulacrum.” A progressive staging of everyday life that gives rise to great tension between ethics and symbolism, because of the dissonance between the moral intentions related to reality and the generalizations and distinctions of established cultural production.

For an independent and oppositional cultural production, another conceptual space must be created that lies beyond the destruction of direct experience by the simulacrum of institutional culture. The point is not to create a specific alternative in the form of a new dogma as opposed to the spiritual space of the institutions. On the contrary, the point is to arrive at a “mental ecology”² that makes it possible for mediating intellectuals, like designers, to leave the beaten path, to organize their opposition, and to articulate that in the mediated display. This is only possible by adopting a radically different position with respect to the production relationships—by exposing the variety of interests and disciplinary edifices in the message, commented on and held together by the mediator’s “plane of consistency.”³

2 Félix Guattari, “Postmodernism and Ethical Abdications,” *Profile* 39 (1993): 11-13.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 506-508.

Symbolic power does not reside in “symbolic systems” in the form of an “illocutionary force” but...is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e., in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced. Pierre Bourdieu | *Social Theory for a Changing Society* | 1991

Designers must come to reflect upon the functions they serve, and on the potentially hazardous implications of those functions. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin wrote that humankind’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”

Stuart Ewen | “Notes for the New Millennium” | *JD* 31, no. 2 | March-April 1990

AND MEOCRITY

Opportunities for renewed engagement must be sought in initiatives creating new public polarities, according to Félix Guattari, in “untying the bonds of language” and “[opening] up new social, analytical, and aesthetic practices.”⁴ This will only come about within the context of a political approach that, unlike the dominant neoliberal form of capitalism, is directed at real social problems. If we are to break through the existing communicative order, this “outside thought”⁵ should also reverberate in the way in which designers interpret the theme and program of the client. In

4 Guattari, “Postmodernism.”

5 Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside,” in *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987).

other words, the designer must take on an oppositional stance, implying a departure from the circle of common-sense cultural representation. This is an important notion, because the point is no longer to question whether the message is true, but whether it works as an argument—one that manifests itself more or less explicitly in the message, in relation to the conditions under which it was produced and under which it is disseminated.

Such activity is based on a multidimensional, complementary way of thinking with an essentially different attitude to viewers and readers. It imposes a complementary structure on the work as well, an assemblage that is expressed both in content and in form. The essence of this approach, however, is that, through the critical orientation of its products, the reflexive mentality raises questions among the public that stimulate a more active way of dealing with reality. In this manner it may contribute to a process that allows us to formulate our own needs, interest, and desires and resist the fascination with the endless fragmented and aestheticized varieties created by the corporate culture of commerce, state, media, and “attendant” disciplines.

The arts of imitation need something wild, primitive, striking...
First of all move me, surprise me...make me tremble, weep, shudder,
outrage me; delight my eyes afterwards if you can.
Denis Diderot | "Essai sur la peinture" | 1766

The more it becomes clear that architecture is a total impossibility today,
the more exciting I find it. I have a great aversion to architecture in the
classical sense, but now that this kind of architecture has become entirely
impossible, I am excited to involve myself in it again....It is indeed schizo-
phrenic. Our work is a battle against architecture in the form of architecture.
Rem Koolhaas | *De Architect* 25 | 1994.

For the situation, Brecht says, is complicated by the fact that less than ever
does a simple reproduction of reality express something about reality. A
photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. reveals almost nothing about
these institutions. The real reality has shifted over to the functional. The
reification of human relations, for instance in industry, makes the latter no
longer revealing. Thus in fact it is to build something up, some-thing
artistic, created.
Walter Benjamin | "A Short History of Photography" | 1880

Not surprisingly, institutions and galleries are often resistant to products
that question generally held opinions and tastes....But the peculiar
dialectics of consciousness, ...and given the relative lack of uniformity
of interests within the culture industry and among its consumers,
nevertheless promote the surfacing of such critical works....With this
modicum of openness, wherever suitable, the [galleries'] promotional
resources should be used without hesitation for a critique of the dominant
system of beliefs while employing the very mechanisms of that system.
Hans Haacke | *Radical Attitudes to the Gallery* | 1977

There are two positions in the mass media. The first says that if something
works, it is correct....This idea is the enemy of our concept. On the other
hand, you have a principle of authenticity. Enlightened narration accepts
authenticity. I do not continually try to make general concepts that control
the individual; rather I let something retain its own genuineness....There
follows from this a number of organizational principles....In the structuring
of a particular work, that is, in aesthetic method.
Alexander Kluge | "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the
Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge" | 1988

SUBVERSIVE PLEASURES

Despite the symbolically indeterminable nature of culture, communicative design, as reflexive practice, must be realistic in its social ambitions. In the midst of a multiplicity of factors too numerous to take stock of, all of which influence the product, the aim is to arrive at a working method that produces commentaries rather than confirms self-referential fictions. Design will have to get used to viewing substance, program, and style as ideological constructions, as expressions of restricted choices that only show

a small sliver of reality in mediation. The inevitable consequence is that the formulation of messages continues to refer to the fundamental uneasiness between symbolic infinity and the real world.

This mentality demands a major investment in practical discourse in those fields and situations where experience and insight can be acquired through work. This is important not only because it is necessary to struggle against design in the form of design, echoing Rem Koolhaas's statement about architecture, but also because partners are required with the same operational options.⁶ It is furthermore of public interest to acquaint a wider audience with forms of communication contributing to more independent and radical democratic shaping of opinion.

Moving from a reproductive order to a commentating one, operative criticism can make use of a long reflexive practice. All cultures have communicative forms of fiction that refer to their own fictitiousness in resistance to the established symbolic order. "To this end," Robert Stam writes, "they deploy myriad strategies—narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions, stylistic virtuosity. They share a playful, parodic, and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions. They demystify fictions, and our naive faith in fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions!"⁷ This behavior alone constitutes a continuous "ecological" process for qualitative survival in social and natural reality.

6 Rem Koolhaas, "De ontplooiing van de architectuur," *De Architect* 25 (The Hague: ten Hagen en Stam, 1994): 16-25.

7 Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xi.

The control of representation and definition remains concentrated in the products and services of media-cultural combines. That control can be challenged and lessened only by political means.... Theories that ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual's message of transformational capability present little threat to the maintenance of the established order.
Herbert Schiller | *Culture Inc: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* | 1989

Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden." It is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about "us."
Edward Said | *Culture and Imperialism* | 1993

My goal is to raise a critical attitude, raise questions about reality, curiosity.
G rard Paris-Clavel | *in a conversation with van Toorn* | Paris, 1994

The challenge for anti-illusionist fictions is how to respect the fabulating impulse, how to revel in the joys of storytelling and the delights of artifice, while maintaining a certain intellectual distance from the story. The subversive pleasure generated by a Cervantes, a Brecht, or a Godard consists in telling stories while comically undermining their authority. The enemy to do away with, after all, is not fiction but socially generated illusion; not stories but alienated dreams.

Robert Stam | *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* | 1992