MAN BITES DOG

Two paradoxes as agents of knowledge: Artefact-Accident/ Hospitality-Hostility

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Abstract

Design deals with the making of the artificial, and produces new knowledge by introducing new artefacts –that may or may not be physical three-dimensional products. Further understanding of these man-made creations would provide us with insight into what is accessible (hospitable) to decipherment, that is, to the *sharing* of knowledge. Awareness of the paradoxical relations artefact-accident and hospitality-hostility can increase our insight into the articulations between artefacts, people's individual representations and cultural laws. This would enable the further development of theoretical models for understanding complex situations for the refinement of design practices;
a privileged dimension where much knowledge production remains unformulated.

Context

We open a door, come into a room, sit down on a sofa and start dialling a number on our phone. We feel comfortable, the room is warm but we only perceive it when seeing the snow gently falling down against the windowpane. We hear a voicemail inviting us to leave a message, and we do, but with the unease of having been pushed somehow by the distant voice, we didn't expect the tone to come so suddenly, to be so demandingly present by the first second of silence. Before going into the room next door, and half regretting having said what we just said, we turn the phone off. Our voice mail service will take care of those who call.

Our project studies the dynamics, the tensions, the transitions between different *states* of a given artefact or set of artefacts. Our introductory paragraph describes an everyday atmosphere of

comfort and ease mixed with an event that leaves a slight taste of disappointment. The impressions that make an experience pleasant –or not- are partly based on expectations; *conceptual models*[1] are formed, mental images or gestalts about how things "are" or "work", which depend on the context and the environment in which a person is immersed, and the knowledge and expectations of the particular elements (i.e. artefacts and their relationship to each other) that constitute that environment. If we pay attention to the expectations that man-made objects may create, we start dealing with areas of knowledge such as perception and hermeneutics. That is, how we *process* what we experience, and how we *interpret* our experiences based on previous knowledge and current context. Of the many lines of thought that cross over the aforementioned areas, we can consider one of them as a starting trajectory for our discussion: that of language; namely, language as a modelling system and as a medium of knowledge. Our capacity to "picture" the possibilities of –to follow one object from our example- the phone; the act of calling/dialling, or the alternative of a voicemail service, among many others, opens up the possibility of having "pictured" the *wrong* picture. In this way, we take notice of the fact that the very alternative of leaving a message, that "open invitation" to speak is, or can be, also the beginning of disappointment. A pivotal point in which our

expectations are manifested, even if with subtlety; a potential space for conflict if not *anticipated*, if not "read" in accordance.

Hostis: A guest, an enemy

The person that welcomes or invites us, *the host* that receives us, or the thing that offers a range of possibilities, offers them according to a set of rules, a law or a language that may or may not be ours. It is therefore interesting to look into a conflict that exists at the root itself of the etymology of a keyword to our study, that of *host*:

"Host (1): one who entertains guests. L. *hospitem*, acc. of *hospes*, (1) a host, (2) a guest. The base *hospit-* is short for *hosti-pit-*, where *hosti* is the crude form of *hostis*, a guest, an enemy.
Host (2): an army. (F.-L.) The orig. sense is 'enemy' or 'foreigner.' M.E. *host, ost.-* O.F. *host*, a host, army.- L. *hostem*, acc. of *hostis*, an enemy (orig. a stranger, a guest); hence, a hostile army..."[2]

"The foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated" mentions Jacques Derrida (2000: 15), who suggested in his seminars on Hospitality that hospitality is impossible without hostility. Hospitality and hostility constitute each other by defining each other's limit; by tracing (re)movable boundaries that open up spaces of possibilities within a set of conventions, of cultural traditions. This flow of *states*, this "contradictive" or "complementary" disposition is also observable at other levels within the realm of design. A simple everyday object such as a door offers both, hospitality and hostility, by delimiting the boundary of the outside/inside, between shelter and

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[1] With regard to the concepts of affordances, constraints and conceptual models, see D. Norman (1988 and 2004). Norman suggests that these three concepts/categories are essential for the understanding of a product. When specifically discussing affordances I tend to follow J. Gibson's original conception of the term (*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* 1979). The discussion of these three classifications is vital to many of the problems formulated in this proposal.

[2] Skeat, W.W. *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. Wordsworth Editions. (1993: 208-209)

exposure, but more specifically, by being *accessible*, "readable"[3], easy to use. Not as a symbol –that of the welcoming guest house- but as a physical entity. Through its affordances, the door offers several possibilities of behaviour; the designer limits those possibilities by imposing specific constraints in order to guide or give clues about how the door should be used.[4]

One could take MacIntyre's statement "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"[5] and apply it to the interpretation of artefacts: in order to make sense of what something "is", or how it could be used. We need to grasp contextual information, and "*make* sense"[6] of it upon those circumstantial relations. A person working on a garden will be inclined to perceive a knife as a spade rather than as a weapon. A screwdriver could be used to scratch your ear if suddenly in need of relieving that itchiness at a workshop, even if it is not the most appropriate tool to use.[7] Human perception is *intentional*, we tend to narrow the scope of our searches and look for the most relevant features or pertinences that would satisfy that which we are looking for, i.e. a hungry driver will tend to find the kind of signals that will eventually take

him to a restaurant[8]. What must be highlighted is the importance of the presence of a narrative element or "narrativity" (of what story do I find myself a part: "I am hungry and the world is a food-supplying-place") that when identified, can help providing clues for behaviour.

The potential of being able to open or not to open a door, dictate both options: hospitality and hostility. Does the hospitality of this object lie in the very possibilities of behaviour (affordances) that the shape allows or in the making clear how it should be used? (presence of a "narrativity"). Can we call a difficult-to-open door hostile to its user? Is it not, essentially, the task of design to be "hospitable"?

The Accident

Artefacts tell us –on a different plane- of a series of similar contradictions or complementarities; a paradoxical condition that can also be studied in order to understand complexity and movement, that of a given creation and its accident. By creating the car, we are not only creating the possibility of moving from on place to another, but simultaneously creating the car accident. By creating stairs, we are not only creating the possibility to go up and down, but also the possibility to fall -the stairs' accident- and so on (Virilio 1997a, 1997b, 2003). The accident is inherent to the artefact; it is part of its potentialities, a latent threat at its very heart. Drawing parallels, it is possible to say that the accident represents *one* of the hostile sides of the hospitable artefact (a man-made product, since

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[3] The reading metaphor helps us to address another issue that is directly relevant to the dichotomy hospitality-hostility in relation to language; that of the alienation produced by new technologies, being difficult -sometimes even impossible- for users to understand the language of the appliances they try to operate.

[4] If we adopt a utilitarian perspective, being usability the focus of the design.

[5] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Duckworth. ([1981] 1994: 216).

[6] "we do not make worlds; we make *descriptions* that the actual world may fit or fail to fit". See Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. Penguin. London 1995;166. Searle argues against "world-making" following Nelson Goodman's concept (1976).

[7] See Eco, Umberto. (1992: 145).

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[8] By discussing "the limits of interpretation" (Eco) we are back to the concept of affordances and perhaps to the idea of *niche* described by Gibson "The observer and the environment are complementary" (1979: 15) or "a niche refers more to *how* an animal lives than to *where* it lives…" (1979: 128).

these are inscribed in a system, a law, a language, "where hospitality is formulated"). It is important however to keep in mind that not all accidents are *destructive*; or more precisely, that what is destroyed yields way to new forms, new lives; being *at the same time*, *constructive*, being essentially *creative*. A transition from order to disorder and vice-versa that points out at a phenomenon that Yurij Lotman has called *explosion*.

Lotman's *explosion* is not a physical phenomenon (dynamite, the atomic nucleus, etc.) but a philosophical concept associated with the idea of transformation and generation. The moment of the explosion is also the place of a sudden increase of informativity. Information about the latent state of things, their tendencies, their possibilities and their *propensities*;[9] being therefore a description of a movement, of an event of the kind of phenomena that are relevant to our study. It is at this point where we re-state the issue of design as knowledge production[10], where we reconnect -and not only etymologically- *form* with in*form*ation (from Latin, *informare*; to bring something into form).

Stated in these terms, the subject invites us to examine both artefacts in isolation and a set of artefacts that form object families or interact in a given environment with other artefacts. It will always focus on our *relationship* to them, on the processes of interaction, on the in-between, on the articulations and what is being articulated.

"Articulations" in this context, refer to the dialogic relationships, the inter-faces where knowledge is produced.

Paradoxical Realms

Both hospitality-hostility and artefact-accident are inseparable; they are each other's reverse, each other's negativity. A negativity that when exposed, brings to the surface an element of seduction, an element of attraction.[11]

"In journalist schools it is taught that if a dog bites a postman that is not news, but if a postman bites a dog, that is news. News is all that which breaks the norm; and that which breaks the norm sometimes surprisingly, fortuitously since it happens when it is less expected, that is the accident".[12]

The news is appealing because it is extra-ordinary (although not all of it of course). The news goes beyond the normal since it breaks the norm; the fact that the environment is news these days is an alarming sign of the ongoing accident. Current understanding of our global environmental impact as a species has brought ecological issues to the front pages of all media. This is not only a media phenomenon, in the sense that today "is news and sells well", that has to do with voyeurism and fatalism, with a daily dose of fear to be administered to the safe TV-watcher at home; but also the exposure of a progressive step towards awareness and a more articulated knowledge of the paradoxical realms that we live in. *Man bites dog*

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[9] Lotman (1998: 28). With regard to the notion of propensity, see Popper, K. (1995).
[10] See Löwgren & Stolterman 2004. Löwgren and Stolterman point back to Schön's (1987) concept of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* to emphasize why "the problem and the solution have to evolve in parallel".

[11] I believe that McLuhan underestimated this issue. In *Understanding Media*, one can read: "Ads are *news*. What is wrong with them is they are always *good* news. In order to balance off the effect and to sell good news, it is necessary to have a lot of bad news." ([1964] 2003: 227).
[12] Ignacio Ramonet. "Medios y Catástrofes". *Seducidos por el accidente.* Barro and Ledo Eds. 2005: 36.

is an inversion, and like all the norm-breaking phenomena that we have been describing, it exposes an unusual or unlikely –but possible- event (since the potentialities are there) and a degree of complexity that demands the acceptance of uncertainty and the incapacity to conceive absolute order, but also, the incapacity to avoid contradictions.[13] Paul Virilio (1997b:118) has mentioned that "the beginning of wisdom would be to acknowledge the symmetry of substance and accident instead of constantly dissimulating it". Design, as a science of the artificial, needs to articulate and expose these problems and materialise proposals that incorporate to the full the use of existing *resources*, potentialities (both constructive and destructive), and acknowledge the transitions between different *states*; from order to disorder and vice-versa. Awareness of this *flow* increases the chance to perceive problems (pivotal points) and "weaknesses" as opportunities, but also, (when put into a narrative scenario) awareness of the life-cycle of an artefact. A crucial –ongoing- refinement that is needed at a macro and micro levels of planning and strategy, a visibility which raises awareness of the impacts of the most natural of human activities: the making of the artificial.

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[13] See Morin, Edgar. (2004:99).