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ARE THERE ANY HUMANS AT ALL?
A Didactic Narrative about Design

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Abstract. The discipline of design is by definition the one to foresee and define the future, from an imminent to a long-term vision. By accepting this view, the movies could prove as an interesting and provoking tool for understanding of design discipline. Their complex visual and verbal narrative testifies to the development of many cultural contexts of industrial modernisation, where design discipline and technology are just two out of many. Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner* and Philip K. Dick's book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, from which the movie was derived, are considered as a source for the new approach to design practice within the context of the extreme technological development of human society.

1. Introduction

The following text offers an interdisciplinary reading of a well-known and critically acclaimed movie *Blade Runner* (1982) by Ridley Scott. As an effort to theorize art that cuts across disciplinary boundaries, this text will explore connections between one media product (movie) inspired by another (book), and principles of design discipline which is in great part considered to be an art itself. But why this attempt for a new interpretation of the movie that stands outside the usual critical practice of this type of media? There are several reasons for that. First, the movie *Blade Runner* has been critically and theoretically approached extensively. So much so that in the domain of film medium there seems to be no other possibilities for a radically different interpretation[1]. Furthermore, this particular movie stands out among other similar attempts that were made according to motifs from the novel by Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*[2]. Ridley Scott's work is the most ambitious, especially in the visual and narrative interpretation of the novel. Finally, since the director of the movie is an alumnus of the London's Royal College of Arts, the text will try to uncover the influence of the theory and practice of design on the film adaptation of the literary model.

2. On design

As a discipline and as an object of research interest in humanities, design is not just an element of material reality, but also an abstract construct of inquiry and a foundation of new critical insights. Whether it is about the shaping of objects or

communications, design as a discipline is a kind of adaptive intermediary in social processes, both material and symbolic. One of the most important characteristics of design practice is that it creates something new according to a plan or project. It creates something that does not exist yet, an object that appears impossible until the very moment when a result of a creative process starts to emerge (Barthes, 1972, pp.109-159; Forty, 1986; Baudrillard, 1989, pp.171-183; Bonsiepe, 1999, pp.26-37; Bolz, 2001, pp.66-69).

All of this takes place in an area of the artificial, in a domain of human intervention into nature by the creation of technological "other nature" (Anders, 1985). This area of the artificial is made real through the mechanisms of mass production and mass consumption, which stand at the core of contemporary social formations founded on the idea of free entrepreneurship and corporate economy. Both in the past and the present the role of design in these mechanisms cannot be overstated.

If the discourse of design is transferred on the thematic level of the movie *Blade Runner*, it is possible to realize how both the social context of mass production and technological modernization are an immediate narrative frame of the movie. In this way,design is involved as a possible signifier in the movie's discursive field. It is exactly this social context that serves as a historical frame for the emergence and development of design both as a discipline and as a cultural phenomenon. Design is human intervention in the natural environment that creates an artificial reality of objects and meanings adapted to humans. But what happens when this artificial environment is out of control?

3.   The human and the artificial

In Scott's movie, the motto of Tyrell Corporation "more human than human" grasps succinctly not just the conceptual essence of the movie but also the movie's relation to the discipline of design. As a form of art, the movie is an adaptation of the novel by Philip K. Dick. It is indeed a very well designed adaptation, especially in the visual field. These are the first and the most obvious elements of connection with design discipline. *Blade Runner* is a reshaped content, just as design discipline is a reshaping of biological and social processes such as work, nourishment, love, movement, ambitions, social dynamics, etc., with the intention to adapt them to a user through the world of material objects and symbols.

Differences between the movie and the book are especially made visible if we compare the text of the novel with the available transcripts of the movie (Dick, 1968; Kolb, 1991, pp.154-177, Martin, 1982). On the general level, the book and the movie have the same overarching theme within which Scott and his associates create new layers of their semantic field. These new layers inherit the initial idea of Dick's book. However, not in its entirety, but just in that what is sufficiently appropriate for the film medium. Thus, for example, the entire content on the belief and cult of Mercerism, extensively elaborated in the book, is omitted in the movie. Also, the theme of the search for remnants of the natural in the post-cataclysmic world, enunciated in the title of the book, is also left out in the movie.

Adaptations, most certainly within design discipline, function as appropriations, as psychological and social intermediaries between user and used, between individual and community, or as it is signified in the design theory, as the "interface" (Bonsiepe, 1999, pp.29-33). Bonsiepe is inclined to interpret the general meaning of design

discipline as an adaptive activity, as planned attempts of technological interventions in the natural environment. It is a creation of the media, a creation of "human extensions" as McLuhan would have it, with the help of which individual or community function in the cognitive and operational sense. This is the area in which design operates, just as Ridley Scott and his team operate as a kind of adaptive intermediaries between Dick's novel and the movie's audience.

To what do these differences between the novel and the movie point? The relationship is somewhat similar to the difference between Vangelis' music in the movie and the same music recorded on a sound carrier, but in the inverted sense – the movie recreates whereas the music reinterprets (Stiller, 1991, pp.196-201). Within this relation is the central theme of both the movie and the book- the motif of technological depression following the post-war twilight of civilisation. Mechanisation of the world created the road toward the apocalyptic end without end, toward a future in which Earth is just an asylum for the disabled, weak, disillusioned and - for the police.

4.   Film as design

By reading the movie *Blade Runner* as a kind of didactic narrative on design, it is possible to distinguish the following layers of meaning: the question of the movie as a new, original work; the problem of synergic creation; the relationship to the idea and practice of liberal capitalism; the question of bioethical boundaries of the artificial or the possibilities of such a project; and finally the aspect of change referring to creative attitude, intervention or redesign.

One of the many and certainly among the most original views on the movie *Blade Runner* is that the film is not an adaptation but a completely new piece of work (Landon, 1991, pp.90-102). Considering this view through the methodology of filmmaking or through the theories of dramaturgic interventions it is possible to conclude how this proposition is both true and not true. Peoples' and Fancher's scenario, as well as Scott's movie, are new inasmuch as the authors managed to creatively interpret and change the original. This is the issue of creating a new content out of an existing creative exercise. In the design theory, there are several attitudes on this issue which could roughly be divided in two. The first one advocates aesthetic, superficial interventions on an object with the purpose of market manipulation. Historically, this attitude is connected with the American *styling* and the crisis of the 1930s. Today it is still very much present through the concept of cultural fashion and the creation of motivational social trends (Meikle, 2001). The second attitude is holistic and environmental, grounded in the scientific and objective verification of design processes. This attitude was mostly advocated by the Ulm School of Design until 1968 when the school was closed (Lindinger, 1991).

This issue of choice between intuitive method and methodology is evident in Scott's movie as his attempt to meet both commercial interests and artistic message of the work. Reduction of Dick's complex original to an attractive narrative structure of an action movie in combination with deeper and disturbing messages of post-apocalyptic visions of the world and mankind are the two continuously intertwining layers of the movie *Blade Runner*. A similar situation can be found in Forman's movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), made according to the novel by Ken Kesey published in 1962. The comparison between the two movies is quite valid not just because both Kesey and Dick belong to a similar American subcultural context of the 1960s. In both

cases, a very complex structure of the novel is reduced to an attractive narrative appropriated for the film medium. Furthermore, in both movies, layers which question reality are omitted or just slightly denoted. This is particularly so with a problematic aspect of the creative process connected with the consummation of hallucinogens. Within a given movie format, Scott is balancing between the possible and the impossible, just as a designer would do guided by the intention to reconcile one's own vision with the requirements of a client.

Documentation on the production of *Blade Runner* warns of and clearly demonstrates a vast amount of creative and technological efforts invested in the making of this film illusion. Some authors go as far as explaining the success of the movie by the communality of author's vision (Pierce, 1991, pp.201-211). Director's management of this type of media project is always grounded on the efforts of collaborators, or on the idea of synergy which completes blank spaces of author's vision wherever they may appear. That the director's vision was multilayered and not entirely compatible with the ideas of the movie's producers is testified by the differences between international version followed by the director's version of the movie. The multilayered character of the vision is also evident in one of the movie's key dimensions of the meaning of which we find no trace in Dick's original. It is the question of the identity of the main character. Is he maybe a replicant? The project *Blade Runner*, in all its versions, has not provided an answer to this question. This aspect of the story is especially important when assessing the adaptation of the novel into the movie. A reference to the methodology of design may be of particular help here. As a kind of "open creation", designing is a continuous process of a synergic interrelationship of actors, users, and owners, but also of physical, cultural and social givens which limit the scope of planned intervention into the natural environment. As Buckminster Fuller claims, the synergy of action and synergy of meaning are compatible exactly through the construction of design discipline as well as through the signifier of design discipline, in all of its appearances in the practice (Fuller, 2001, pp.243-248). The literature and the movies that document the process of filmmaking have given insight into the dimensions of the work which were created right on the movie set, and which were not written in the book or scenario. It is just like in the famous last line of Roy Batty, while he is dying on the roof of a building after he saved Deckard. The fact that the director kept this element in all versions of the movie demonstrates his understanding of the synergic potential of teamwork. This is exactly the kind of understanding he could have acquired as a postgraduate student at the Royal College of Arts where he participated in project groups.

The context of liberal capitalism and its technological aspect of mass production is one of the main motifs of Dick's book. Scott took on this motif and developed it further. However, it is exactly in the way he developed it that we find a specific difference from the book. Both the book and the movie through "a future fiction mode they depict the present reality of capitalist labour exploitation" (Ryan, Kellner, 2004, p.55). It is exactly this fact that is set as the main thematic frame for the narrative (a cataclysm that probably happened as a consequence of misbalanced progress on the planet). It is also the main element of the plot, where technologically created workforce rebels against the creator. This artificial workforce demands more life or at least an answer to the question how much more life remains. In Dick's original this dimension is enunciated through a somewhat ambivalent discourse on metaphysical lamentations of Mercerism, and the idea of the empathic box which secures social order. In the movie,

however, this topic is given explicitly. It is fore grounded by the most sophisticated robots which returned to Earth seeking answers. By using this metaphor of rebelled workforce (a theme elaborated for the first time in Lang's Metropolis) Scott directly dovetails with the radically critical perspectives in the design theory, from Fuller and Panapek onwards. It is exactly these theoretical orientations that created the academic discipline of the theory and history of design, which today advocates a clearly articulated critique of liberal capitalism (Walker 1989, Margolin 1989, Doordan, 1995, Buchanan, Margolin, 1995).

This theoretical discourse is directly related to another aspect of the movie *Blade Runner*. It is the question of bioethical boundaries, and the possibilities of contemporary genetic engineering, which "generated a potential for scientifically controlled evolution"(Telote, 2004, p.60). Whereas Dick's novel deals with this issue only in several scenes, in the movie, however, this is the main topic. In the novel, Deckard muses over the beauty ofthe voice of Luba Luft, an opera singer, but in the movie, Zora, a character derived from Luba Luft, is just an erotic dancer. Both in the book and in the movie, androids are servants up to a point when they develop emotions. They become dangerous to humans when they start demanding answers to fundamental questions. In the movie, Scott simplified this topic. He reduced Dick's long narrative lamentations on what is really human in the world of mass consumption on the easily understandable visual and verbal sets of data. Scott intervened in Dick's original as a director of video clips (over the years Scott directed a number of commercials, the most famous one is for Macintosh computer from 1983). Out of a given set of values of a product, a video clip has to point out and visualise the most distinct ones. In the same way, Scott visualised Dick. He brought to the fore values appropriated for the movie formatandcoded in the background those values that direct to deeper layers given in the book.

These interventions surely reveal the director's attitude. For example, in Dick's book the difference between androids and humans is the lack of empathy, whereas, in the movie, it is the lack of personal history (Landsberg, 2004, p.244). In the bottom line, this is the issue of identity with which Dick deals in two other novels, both which were also made into a movie: *We can Remember It for You Wholesale* (*Total Recall*) and *A Scanner Darkly*. However, the level of Scott's intervention into literary original is far greater than those of Verhoeven and Linklater. Not only he represents the original, he also interprets it. He does so in the same way as it is understood in the discipline of the creation of objects and symbolic meanings under the term "redesign."

Historically, this term refers to aesthetic interventions in the existing product for the marketing purpose, to extend product's lifespan in consumer consciousness. However, the term redesign also refers to the cultural value of design as a "tool of differentiation", as a signifier for the practice of interpretation or adaptation, which, in a new medium, becomes a new value. Dick's book and Scott's movie are two standalone cultural products, even though they stand in relation to each other, just as, to repeat the aforementioned parallel, Forman's movie and Kesey's book do. Some theorists go as far as discovering in industrial design an important segment of signifier creation within the social context of mass production. This segment allows for affirmations and exchanges of identities and is based on the interpretational strength of a planned creative intervention in the existing state, or in other words, on the redesign of the existing (Forty, 1986, pp.62-94).

Finally, the influence of the movie *Blade Runner* can be seen in the extent of its materialisation in other media which, historically, evolved after the movie. A very good example is video game which in the 1990s achieved a high level of mimetic presentation of environment due to faster processors and image generating technology. Such influence has happened not just on the level of visual stimuli, but also on the level of ideas (Atkins 2005, pp.79-91). One of the examples is Esper machine that can see around the corner (which is an original idea from the movie). The idea of such machine analyses exactly that what makes androids different from humans – the lack of memory of personal development. In some way, this is also a metaphor for Scott's redesign, of his own intervention into Dick's original, where the director sees all that the writer suggested "around the corner."

5.   Creative scopes

Why would Dick insist so much on the possibility of the impossible, on the idea that apocalypse can be gentle, technologically controlled so that good old Earth is still a place to live although most desired for – leaving? Is this the melancholy of subcultural resistance of the late 1960s, riding on the wave of Vietnam syndrome and lost illusions of the American dream? In the novel – this is most certainly so. However, in Scott's reading and presentation of the original idea supported by Fancher's and Peoples' scenario, it is a visual saga on few characters of a highly technological society, and on processes of design which participate in the creation of these characters. As a student of the Royal College of Arts, Scott is perhaps conscious of philosophical and methodological implications of design discipline. This is probably why the movie is such a deep and precise visual narrative. It was an arduous creative process for a great number of people, of which a documentary *Dangerous Days - The Making Of Blade Runner* is particularly revealing. In this three-hour epic story about the production of Scott's illusion, the director's strategy becomes clear. Dick's novel is about the battle between imperfect human beings and perfect androids (Sammon, 1996; Kolb, 1991).

Scott's assignment was to create a new, designed world, filled with technological inventions and uncanny hybrid spaces populated by people in mixed fashion codes, just like the languages that they speak. The work on the movie was a battle of identities, Scott's and Dick's. Between the time when Dick's novel was published and the premiere of the movie, the theoretical horizon of feminist theory was introduced to a new critical position of techno-humanised "hybrids" (Harraway 2004, pp.158-182; Papastergiadis, 2002, pp.166-177).

In Dick's novel, Deckard enters the arena to earn money because he wants to buy a real animal. In the movie, on the other hand, Deckard does so to justify the claim of his boss that he is not a "small man." Bryant and Gaff are both *chorus* and *deus ex machine* at the same time, which confirms the hybrid thesis – they are newly designed content out of an original idea.

Scott's movie is a very well designed narrative, visually attractive with a remarkable verbal economy. Spoken word is rare and brief, with the exception of technological dialogue between the creator and the creature (Tyrell and Roy Batty). Even the android's famous words are not from Dick's novel, but a result of inspiration during the shooting of the movie, all of which, as a type of a creative process, is closer to a TV commercial than to a classical playwriting. However, the plot is still very thick, even though the end is unclear, and the future uncertain. In the end, who actually

predicts or can predict? Perhaps, in design discipline, it is the one who occupies the position of interpretation. This is just like the view of Norbert Bolz, who sees design as a cognitive discipline for users of machines which can no longer be used intuitively (Bolz, 2001, p.69).

6. Methodology of the impossible

From clients to users, design process multiplies identities through the position of the designer. In the crisis years of the 1930s, Raymond Loewy enunciated this in his famous motto "most advanced, yet acceptable." In the same fashion the movie *Blade Runner*, as one "reading" of the early 1980s crisis (and through adaptation of the novel from the somewhat similar crisis in 1960s) represents a kind of metaphorical interface for interpretation of the possible and the impossible. Is it entirely impossible that scientific and technological intervention creates perfect artificial creatures? Is it possible that mankind suffers from an identity crisis, balancing on an unclear border between the natural and the artificial? Dick suggests, but Scott clearly demonstrates that the impossible is possible, that traditional values are destabilised due to techno-scientific intervention out of control. In Dick's fantasy from the late 1960s, androids were a development of dystopian artistic conception. In Scott's 1980s, androids became a possible scenario, after mass production of computer technology, artificial intelligence, and satellite TV became commercial reality.

All of the following: techno-mechanisation, interpretative methodology, relations between the human and the artificial, between individual and community, creation of the new, still inexistent object or content for the future, are the foundational motifs of not just the movie *Blade Runner*, but also of design discipline, and of any critical approach within the history and theory of design. It is on these grounds that it is possible to read Scott's movie as a didactic narrative on design, as a metaphorical introductory textbook on all important aspects of design discipline.

It is perhaps too ambitious to think of design discipline as a sort of geometry or theory of mechanics applied to the real phenomena and for the purpose of comprehension. Design is often hyper-commercial discipline. On the other hand, creative interventions such as Scott's demonstrate that it is possible to achieve a high-quality balance between commercial expectations and cultural ambitions of an artwork. Just as it is possible to make a commercial, but also an innovative and stimulating movie, so it is possible to justify design as a discipline only if commercial imperative of mass production of commodities and meanings is not set as the only paradigm for creative intervention into social reality.

7. Conclusion: 2019-2049?

Thirty-five years after the premiere of the original movie, the premiere of the movie *Blade Runner 2049* happened. The fact that big production companies decided to shoot a sequel gives an additional support to aforementioned claims. This is especially so with regard to the key theme of the move – the main character. A policeman who hunted androids in the original movie is an android himself. Besides, there is a character of a blind industrialist, owner of a corporation which flooded the world with artificial but obedient work force. A work force, which according to the "three laws of robotics", should never cause any harm to its human owners (Asimov 1950, p.40). Does this mean

that the only way to balance the irrational nature of people is through the dominance of biotechnological beings? If one of the purposes of film art (as well as design) is to help understand reality, then perhaps the new *Blade Runner* is the first serious introduction to the mass domestication of artificial intelligence both on psychological and social level. Additionally, if one of the functions of film, as well as design, is to predict the future, then it is indicative that in the movie, which is more than just a sequel, there are almost no biological humans. All conflicts in the movie are between old and new generations of biotechnologically generated beings who discover that they have a capability for procreation. Is this the ultimate technological utopia and the final perfect design for man, who as a species could remain viable in a sustainable natural and social environment through artificial clones only?

Notes

1. The most comprehensive literature list on the movie *Blade Runner* (1982) can be found in: Kolb, W.M. (1991) *Bibliography*; and *Bibliography Addendum*, In: Kerman, J.B. (ed.), *Retrofitting Blade Runner, Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1991, pp.229-293.

2. *Total Recall (*1990) by Paul Verhoeven, based on *We Can Remember it for You Wholesale*; *Confesionsd'unBarjo* (1992) by Jerome Boivin, based on *Confessions of a Crap Artist*; *Screamers* (1995) by Christian Duguay, based on *Second Variety*; *Impostor* (2001) by Gary Fleder, based on I*mpostor*; *Minority Report* (2002) by Steven Spielberg, based on *Minority Report*; *Paycheck* (2003) by John Woo, based on *Paycheck*; *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) by Richard Linklater, based on *A Scanner Darkly*; *Next* (2007) by Lee Tamahori, based on *The Golden Man*.

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