Things that matter

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Here in front of us is according to the plan "a simple and practical" factory building[1] *and we are chatting with the designer: "The architect has nothing much to do in designing a rapeseed dryer and storage depot. The engineers prepare the main drawings. For the rapeseed processing factory building, the architect only had to conceive the walls around it. The entire complex can be controlled also from a mobile phone."*

How did we get here?
In the feudal society before the Industrial Revolution, man was directly connected with the material world from cradle to grave. The person's belongings were usually acquired through inheritance and when the time came, they were passed over to the next generation or "put to death" (buried, burned, destroyed) with the owner. Jean Baudrillard calls the culture in the pre-industrial era symbolic.[2] The objects and buildings reflected the actual social relations and positions with their meaning fixed, the usage ritual and the owner established.

This is perhaps best reflected in a particular group of objects – magical objects. The best known of these is the Excalibur. Such items were personified with their own name and characteristic features. However, despite the personification and seeming autonomy, they always remained directly connected with one particular keeper in whose hands they functioned. The only problem was that the given person was lost or had not been discovered yet. One day, as destined, the worthy cultural hero, the chosen one will appear, the tool will embrace and accept him, the person and the object will become one and the universal symbolic order of things is once again restored.

The universal symbolic order of things began to change in the 18th century. A good example here is the horse-drawn seed drill by Jethro Tull (1674-1741). The fact that it was indeed the overthrow of the symbolic order, the twilight of the gods, is well reflected in that the author of the machine had to reject Virgil's poem "The Georgics" (29 B.C.) to prove the usefulness of his invention. In addition to its high literary value, the given poem was also acknowledged as the ultimate manual for agrarian life. Tull denounced Virgil as incompetent[3] and took his machine to the field. That was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

With the Industrial Revolution, the price of commodities fell allowing increasingly more social layers acquire things that earlier would have been inconceivable for them. Thus, the meaning of objects as status symbols was released for free interpretation and the relations

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[1] The phrase stems from the architectural requirements of the detail plan of Imavere rapeseed factory.

[2] Jean Baudrillard, Le Système des objets, Gallimard, 1968.

[3] Jethro Tull, *The New Horse-Houghing Husbandry: or, An Essay on the Principles of Tillage and Vegetation. Wherein is shewn, a method of introducing a sort of vineyard-culture into the corn-fields, in order to increase their product, and diminish the common expense, by the use of instruments lately invented.* London: Printed for the Author, 1731.

between things and their owners became rhetorical. Objects learned how to lie: populuxe[4] objects and piracy[5] emerged. The bourgeoisie surrounded themselves with aristocratic attributes while the aristocracy performed pastorals in their manors; the first self-propelled machines looked much like horse harnesses, while the metro entrances that soon became symbolic of the modern metropolis arose as if mythical gates to the underworld. By the end of the 19th century, the streets and bourgeois homes were filled with imitations and skeuomorphs. The striking exceptions here were industrial buildings that remained without the ennobling attention of the architect and decoration artist due to the low status of the users (factory workers). [6]

In the given environment, the design institution first emerged in England in the 19th century assuming the responsibility to organise the relations between humans and machines.[7] Counter-revolutionary attempts to sanction and regulate the proliferating material world may be discerned in the activities of the British design school, Alfred Loos, Werkbau, Bauhaus, suprematists as well as other early 20th century Modernist heroes. The aim was to strip objects of their camouflage (ornament as crime) and subject them again to function. It was the "authentic" laconic industrial architecture and design that were taken as the model.

The result turned out rather ironic. The programmatic Bauhaus school on the universal functional aesthetics merely turned function into style. Baudrillard calls it the second Industrial Revolution, a semiurgic revolution bringing the first, metallurgic Industrial Revolution of the 18th century to an end[8] – the entire material world transformed into a communication network where objects acquire their meaning primarily in comparison with other objects. In consumer culture, the meaning of objects is in a state of constant transformation as the changing fashion and increasing launch of new objects create ever further new contexts and connotations.

While the fashionable villas began looking like small factories, the industrial architecture itself seemed to have remained out of the given social game: following a passing gust of attention between the two World Wars, the production soon retreated again to both spatial and cultural periphery. There were definitely also social reasons such as the continued low status of factory workers, but primarily structural motives. The industrial facilities in their complex efficiency had evolved into assemblages, something that Levi Bryant in his object ontology later calls dim objects.[9] In its vastness, industry was becoming imperceptible. For instance, one of the leading urbanists of 1970s Françoise Choay calls industrial landscapes a de-semanticized environment: automatized flows of communication have no meaning. When

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[4] populuxe – a commodity imitating elite lifestyle, see for instance: Cissie Fairchilds, *The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth Century Paris.* Routledge, 1994.

[5] The term piracy was first used in its consumerist sense at the court case Millar v Taylor in England in 1769.

[6] Ljiljana Jevremovic, Milanka Vasic, Marina Jordanovic, *Aesthetics of industrial architecture in the context of industrial buildings conversion.* IV International Symposium for Students of Doctoral Studies on the Fields of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Protection at Nis, Serbia, 2012.

[7] Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, *Are we human? Notes on an Archaeology of Design.* Lars Müller, 2017.

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'economie politique du signe.* Gallimard, 1972.

[9] Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media.* Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

opposing Choay, even Algirdas Julien Greimas talks about the re-semanticization of the automatized environment and names "the construction of a fireplace in a building with central heating" as an example[10]. It is easy to sense despair in these statements, a longing for the lost simpler times. Times when things could be understood or you could find the architect and call them to account.

Donald Norman's principles of human-centred design articulated in the 1980s could be regarded as one of the last important attempts to impose anthropocentric rules on the world. His seven key requirements focus on simplicity, transparency and control.[11] The given principles are valid as the foundation of contemporary design to this day. Except that the concept itself is now called user-centred design to include also hon-human operators in the system. Things such as digital agents have become equivalent agents to human operators, and the central design question is how to ensure the mutual understanding of human and non-human operators.

What else? Oh, yes. In 2017, the conversation of two Facebook sales-bots was recorded. The AI agents were programmed to communicate in English, however, during the conversation, the bots shortly digressed from the regular language use for the sake of efficiency and soon after the human operators could not make any sense of the content of their discussion. Having reconsidered the situation, the human operators decided to delete the bots. Efficiency is important, but comprehension is more important. Even if the comprehension is illusory, such as simple and practical walls around a complex machine.

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On our way back from a friend's summer house on Sunday night, we drive past Imavere rapeseed oil factory. There are no lights, nothing moves and the factory seems dead. We joke that perhaps the mobile phone battery ran out.

[10] Martin Krampen, *Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design.* – Design Issues, Vol. 5, no. 2 (spring, 1989).
[11] See Donald Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things.* Cambridge, Basic Books, 1988.