

Presentation at the 10th Triennial

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Permission to publish the translation of "Intervento al congresso internazionale I.[ndustrial] D.[esign] X triennale, published in Pierluigi Spadolini, *dispense Cors progettazione artistica per Industrie*, Faculty di Architeuurw. firenze, circa 1954 is kindly granted by Francesca Romana Paci.

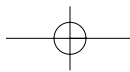
With regard to philosophy and language, based on the reports that I heard yesterday and today, I have some reflections that I'm tempted to pass on.

In the contemporary philosophy of language, we can distinguish three dimensions. We call these three dimensions—semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.¹ In general, by "semantics," we mean the relationship between expression, discourse, style, and the object. In the particular case of industrial design, this relationship is extremely complex in the sense that the object is a fabrication, a construction; thus it isn't a question, as with words, of the correspondence between the word "table" and the object-table, but of the correspondence between the word "table" with the entire process of production of what we, at a certain moment, designate as a table. Regarding "syntax," it is a question of the connection between expressive elements and expressive forms, which creates a relationship between a function and a material; this connection no longer considers the relationship initially established between a form (once viewed as a simple element) and an object, but considers the multiplication of those forms. Then there is "pragmatics." (My philosopher friends have a mania for classifying all those things that they can't manage to place under "semantics" and "syntax" under the word "pragmatics.") Pragmatics concerns the relationship between the object and society and humanity in general. Now I wish to point out two facts: the first is extremely philosophical. Seeing what happens here, I've observed that the distinction is fundamentally logical, but also is very abstract. We can truly differentiate the material from the function. The first attitude taken by the designer is that of syntax, that is, style, form, and relationship with society. Thus, we can distinguish that which is a desired expressive construction from the elements that it possesses. One of the dangers that I feel arises from taking an initial attitude concerning production is that of designing formalistically, incorporating this initial attitude, and then saying that we've taken account for social relationships in this construction.

But this follows upon, and according to a predetermined form that makes me think that this relationship somehow is instilled in the process. For example, I've had the opportunity to observe that one attitude that has been superseded is that of disguising the appearance of the mechanical components to hide its mechanical nature. We should not have any illusions that this attitude is easily surmountable. Even today, it appears that what we do disguises it.

1 This fundamental division of semiotics is universally adapted by linguists. Now, given that architecture and industrial design, can be structured as languages, this division may be usefully applied to this activity. (The demonstration of the linguistic structural properties of industrial design, however, has yet to be given correct philosophical formulation, and studies in the area are still in their initial stages.)

This is clearly shown, for instance, by the fact that it is futile to discuss which of the following objects is the better of the three: the one that works best, the one that is most beautiful, or the one that is the least expensive. These exist on three distinct semiotic levels: the first semantic, the second syntactic, and the third pragmatic. They cannot be compared or confused. Each linguistic analysis is valid only in the semiotic field in which it was carried out.





- 2 In this discourse, Paci, after having mentioned the fact that there can be three distinct analyses for each object produced by industrial design—the semantic, concerning its functionality; the syntactic, concerning the formal values among its components; and the pragmatic, concerning its commercial potential for distribution—makes an energetic demand for the substantial unity of expressive form, and for the artist's ability to synthesize, connect, and unify these three aspects of the object.

The criticism of an object isn't completed by a semiotic analysis of its language, but rather by an examination of the creative process of producing the object, which goes from the study of the artist's personality to "knowing how to see" the way in which the artist has moved gradually through the three aspects of the object with continuity and coherence.

Positivistic culture, to which we owe the analysis of language, and idealist/spiritual culture, to which we owe this trial vision of the work of art as the creative construction of the artist, are not opposed but integrated. The first analysis is necessary so that the second does not remain in the pure limbo of the world of ideals.

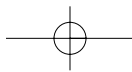
- 3 Essentially, paraphrasing the Bauhaus, we can sum up Paci's concept by saying: *the function tells us what we have to do, but not entirely or precisely.* Or more accurately, the function determines the field in which the designer must operate, but the choice of approach is extra-functional; it is aesthetic, economic, etc. The choice of the relationships between the various "post-functional" components is precisely the characteristic of the designer's work.

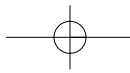
So the problem of the form/function relationship is not as simple as it seemed in the happy days of the Bauhaus. The form that is perfect because it is perfectly functional thus is an illusion; but from time to time, from condition to condition, we have objects that are *all equally functional* but have different qualitative values.

But how do we disguise its mechanical nature? We give it an appearance that corresponds to function, on the one hand, and to the user's taste on the other. And what is that taste? A streamlined taste; thus we see coffee makers streamlined so that they don't correspond to their function, but rather to society's tastes. Should we accept this? Should the artist be concerned with this question? Should the artist reconcile his or her own tastes with this? So, in making this analysis, we see that the artist's function is not only a fusion of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements, but also the expression in these forms of something more in us that, using Max Bill's formulation, we call "the aspiration of humankind."²

I wish to expand on this point a bit. The negative impression that industrial design makes on philosophers and artists—that sense of inadequacy regarding aesthetic productions—derives from the fact that there seem to be few possibilities for artistic choice in creating the industrial product. Yesterday, Mr. Teague brought to our attention the fact that the airplane always is beautiful in spite of itself because, unless it is extremely well designed, it won't fly at all. So since it is impossible to draw on a variety of forms in designing an airplane, we can't always come up with a beautiful form. All this is true; far be it from me to impose a beautiful form on an airplane that then wouldn't fly. As far as I'm concerned, there is something more to be said relating to this function. If we don't succeed in establishing this concept, we are saying that there must be just a strict correspondence of form to function, with no consideration given to the harmony of an existing society for which we are all struggling, whether we are constructing machines, creating form, or writing poetry. That is, if we don't posit something more than the mere correspondence, the homage to facts, then the aesthetic function must proclaim that there is no such societal component.³

I think that this attitude links up to information theory. Allow me a moment to clarify this concept of "information." It is a very complex concept that, in contemporary culture and philosophy, derives from rather strange origins: it may be said to derive from communications, such as broadcasting or telegraphic communications. We see that there is someone transmitting a message and someone receiving it. If we take away all the original meaning of this word "information" and cause it to pass through the different meanings that it can assume, for instance the relations between individuals using a language and the relations within a society, or relations between two different societies, we notice a quite interesting fact that remains constant: the consumption of information. An important thing is that, in creating a language, at a certain moment this language no longer means anything because we've worn out or exhausted it. We wear out language as we wear out all social relations as well as the forms that, at a given moment, we gave to certain industrial products. "We wear out" means that they not only





- 4 Regarding this concept of the consumption of forms, see Gillo Dorfles's *Il divenire delle arti*. [*The Future of the Arts*]. See also the next to last of these essays, which states consumption is extremely important for industrial design, particularly for the distribution of various forms of designed objects, much more so than for architecture.
- 5 Paci views the designer's social function under a broader and more original aspect than we normally are accustomed to. The designer isn't just the person who creates objects for agreeable uses; otherwise, the designer would be little more than the "cosmetician" for industrial production. But by renewing forms, the designer's contribution conquers the "linguistic wear and tear" of the object. By opposing the using up of forms, the designer struggles against the death of a category of form through the use of a process that is quite similar to that of creation in nature, in which everything dies and everything is reborn. Just as the spoken language is a continuous becoming contributed to by both poets and the mass of those who use the language for simple communication, so the language of forms also is a continual becoming to which both designers and those who treat objects as simple tools contribute.
- 6 One more example of Paci's linguistic precision: if the poet draws on the components of the living language for his own poetic language, he is not a mere "recorder," for the linguistic foundation (the *langue*) becomes the "parola" [word] of the poetic work. It is loaded with significant details, it is enriched, and it acquires a new force. The poet writes to establish a communication that is a step higher than the level of everyday discourse. While remaining comprehensible (otherwise there would be no communication), the poet "forces" the language and depends on it to establish the direction of this exertion, which can be negative if the direction is mistaken.

Exactly the same thing happens with the designer, who must be a step ahead of society, not behind, otherwise, the designer would be a pure stylist; but not two steps ahead, which would interrupt the communication process, and the designer's work would amount to nothing.

go out of fashion, but that the forms are used up, just as we used up the materials that we used initially.⁴

Half our lives and half of our futures depend on the inventions of machines as substitutes for the materials that are wearing out. Think of the importance of a new form, a new mode of communication, a new language; think of the importance of the fact that, at a given moment, an object (that is, an industrial product used by human beings) has a relationship with other objects that society has yet to realize.

All this is entrusted to the artist's invention, or else the artist repeats himself; then the language and the form given to the product inevitably end up forfeiting any connection, any relation, and any meaning; or vice-versa, the artist invents and this invention of new forms, which are aesthetic but also possible new forms of life, fits the needs of consumption. So in speaking of the aesthetic relations of a form that are separate from its simple functionality, which represents not just artistic beauty, but a possible beauty, let's give this great achievement of the "renovation" of the language to the artist and to industrial design. Poets, confronting linguistic institutions, renew and create styles and new forms of communication. Were it not for such poets, the language of these things, the Italian language, would be exhausted and depleted: at a given moment, it would no longer say or mean anything at all.⁵

Now, says Bill, the artist's creation shouldn't reflect only him/herself. He or she expresses a new conclusion, a new communication, and new relations not yet realized, which are anticipated, even dreamed of, if we wish to use this word that is so ill-adapted to the production of industrial design. Again, design should provide new forms that function within society. Design must function, however, not only according to the tastes of the present society, but function precisely in terms of this invention, with the harmony that is conditioned by the machine but always is of such a nature as to be created by those whom we call artists. Thus, I defend invention, but equally, in a certain sense, I validate and recall the activities of contemporary humanistic studies because there is nothing new regarding aesthetics in the productions of industrial design. This must be our mission that we have as human beings: we must create new forms and new relationships. The industrial designer who conforms to society, who no longer seeks to be inventive but only to repeat himself, definitely is fated to deplete his abilities and energies.⁶

