

DESIGN AND RESPONSIBILITY IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

In relation to Bloch, and in contrast to the philosophy of hope and utopia, Hans Jonas proposes the "Principle Responsibility" (1979).

The ethics of the societies that rely on technology should be renewed. Should be discussed, again, the supposed formality of categorical imperative of Kant, by focusing too much on individual ethics of today. And also the Marxian utopianism should be reviewed by it don't question of the technical progress of industrialization.

However, the ethic of responsibility is an ethics that still assumes the power of decision and its effectiveness. It is a insurmountable commitment for individuals that, however, your

power is dissolved in the social mass. Again, the social responsibility mandate has come to forget present suffering, and makes that many men and many women are actually considered like a simple means to an purpose that besides it is not exempt of formalism.

The design is well aware of this from his birth. It is not being only to make modest decisions, but is always propose other possibility, especially the other one that is not yet conceptualized within the framework of any possible decision and effectiveness. It is the other one that hasn't power. To propose impracticable things is, perhaps, the specific lesson of ethic of design: the intellectual impertinence is giving birth to the problem, while it feign the solution.

MAIN TEXT (less than 5000 words)

“Ecco perché chi lavora sembra garantire, almeno simbolicamente, per il solo fatto di farlo, la libertà di pensare unita alla potenzialità di trasformare.”

Mari, Enzo (2001): *Progetto e passione*. Ed. Bollati Boringhieri editore s.r.l. Torino. Pp. 74.

Introduction: prudence and the conspiracy of fantasy

Like many other activities, design has at the root of its activity the act of projecting. The theory of design, as a body of thesis that attempt to legitimize the artifacts that result from such activity contains, directly and indirectly, a reflection on its own projectual foundation. Thus the project is a framework where philosophy and theory of design can coincide, even though it must be acknowledged, and often, that these two reflections do not happen at the same level: the barely hundred and fifty years of design give it a lightness that is not comparable to the weight of twenty five hundred years of philosophy. Nevertheless, one can repeat the foundational gesture of William Morris¹ where the option of a

possibility supersedes prudence. That is the aim of this investigation, with the arrogance, so to speak, that philosophy will, additionally, show explicitly the moments in which it has treated, directly or indirectly, the activity of projecting, in the framework of the development of instrumental reason. As did, for instance, Francis Bacon in the eighth aphorism of *Novum Organum*, or Max Horkheimer in his “criticism of instrumental reason”.

In the development of the project, as well as in its results, one can link philosophy and theory of design. Design is pretension of culture: that the artifacts produced in industrialized societies, by the fact of being part of the daily life of men and women, of being comparable to other forms of culture. And, for this reason, philosophy could be so as well.

To make this nexus a bit more concrete: this line of research started with the consideration that design itself is the attempt to preserve the projectual activity as a symbol of human autonomy in civilization that was borne in bourgeois societies at the end of the Middle Ages. We talk of preserving, for projecting, as a necessary form of action if we mean to encompass both freedom and responsibility,

found already in the XVIII century, if not before, the tragic limits of its applicability inasmuch as it contained in itself that instrumental project of autonomy that we call reason; when its effectivity revealed its other side: the industrialization of terror and barbarism.

In this case we present the current state of research on the work of Hans Jonas. In his well known book "The imperative of responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age"², Jonas proposes a resolute renewal of ethics for industrialized societies that will promote the concept of a shared responsibility for the conservation of nature for future generations. The linking of these ethics in any of the activities related to the production of artifacts is evident and it is clear that it affects the line of design known as eco-design. We shall see to what extent an ethics of this kind affects the projectual roots of design and reformulates it, or, on the other hand, affects the intention of its promoters and the final material configuration of the resulting artifacts.

Our interest in the work of Hans Jonas originates in our study of the philosophy of Ernst Bloch and his "Principle of Hope"³ which is contributing many interesting considerations to project and design. Jonas is very critical of

Bloch, even though, as Becchi⁴ notes, they share some fundamental concepts. The basic idea we have been able to extract in what follows, and in contrast with Jonas's thesis, is the extremely important aspect of fantasizing for design. Fantasizing, even while incorporating the symbol of its own effectivity, as Enzo Mari reminds us, has a sense independent of the mere will to achieve power for its realization.

Fantasizing in the logic of action of the project.

What follows will be first of all a series of general considerations on the normative character of the project. As an activity of which the purpose is to determine the characteristics of the resulting artifact, its development presupposes a logic of the path it ought to follow, even though this logic might not be followed, even though it might not always be a truly effective operative procedure. We could call it a "final procedural model" inasmuch as, once the project is concluded we might adduce that it could have been normative of its development in a sort of logical fantasy, as often occurs in academia with "Logik der Forschung"⁵.

The project, the projectual activity, can be described in a variety of ways and as a matter of fact both the most normative as the most descriptive methodologies of design have contributed much to this description and its criticism. In any case, many descriptions of the projectual process leave unexplained blanks in the process, blanks that turn out to be the most interesting points and that too often become mythical pinnacles of genius or talent.

But there is a possible description that affects all the movements of the project, even though it remains as mere formalism (not normativist). We could call it a description from a “conscience of error”. It consists basically of of the formal assumptions one uses in the projectual process when an error has been made or detected. It is the presupposition of a logic that, whether being empirical truth or not, should have been applied for the minimal coherence of the process. It is a “final procedural model” that does not pretend to establish itself as a logic of the process, but it is used only as a reference towards the understanding of particular errors. It is clear that the crisis of the project as a symbol of civilizing autonomy affects this this description as well, in the measure that it affects any logic

as a form of power. As a matter of fact, design, as an attempt to preserve the logic of the project as a symbol, can be understood as well as the attempt to reconstruct such logic, over and over again. Designed artifacts would not only be those that have been projected with more or less success but also those that show other ways of understanding the uses, presences and compromises that they entail. Here, however, we consider the process only as it is given from the error. We will now describe such elemental logic.

Often all descriptions of the project give as a nucleus or as a final direction (and consequently as a scope of its meaning) the decision of a configuration of the projected object.

Consequently, this would be a moment: the moment of the final decision. As an example we might remember that a large number of treatises on design management are, as a matter of fact, treatises on decision making.

Independently of the errors contained in the mechanics of decision making, if a decision has ben shown to be erroneous, then it appears a stage that necessarily must have previously acted in error: the evaluation. Without an evaluation of the results, of its aspects and its totality there is no decision possible.

On the other hand, however, one can find an error in the evaluation as well. In such case a supposed earlier stage appears that must hold a knowledge of the defining aspects, what the result is and how each aspect, as well as the totality, have been determined. In consequence, independently of contingent error, by logic of error there exists an earlier stage.

There might also be an internal error in the knowledge of the what and how; this error is caused by not having a clear picture of the imagined artifact, by not having it in the right disposition for the cognitive control. (Besides the fact that the error might be caused by gaps in the theory and in the general knowledge that is applied: science). There is, then, a necessary earlier stage, the shaping by knowledge, by control: an error in the image.

But in order to give shape there must be something to be shaped, that is to say, something fantasized -even if blurredly- that will contain the understanding of the problem to be solved as well as the capacity to solve it with what will later be given shape.

This is the basic error that engenders a constant path of proposals that slowly lead to the final result. That is, it is the error in the fantasy what

engenders the process of projectual circles in order to control and improve the results (there are also ways to turn these proposals into predetermined means -as, for instance, in engineering, which is subject to a technology that defines beforehand the problems and the possible solutions). The error could take place in these means, and it is in the case of the humanities where it most often takes place since this technology does not exist, can not exist, given the constantly changing character of that which we consider culture and humanism.

It is with this description of the projectual process, which is not a method, only a description that sheds light on the moments and logic of its frantic development, that we can begin to deal with Hans Jonas proposal.

*Form follows... power; knowledge does too.*⁶

Although in a very simplified form, we have already presented Hans Jonas better known work, "The Imperative of Responsibility", in contraposition to Bloch's "Principle of Hope".

However, one can not properly understand this author without considering his larger body of work (even if only as a mere indication). To do so we look at one of Jonas's better known

scholars, Paolo Becchi, who will guide us in the understanding of his texts.⁷

From the point of view of subject, geographic-cultural location, and language, and consequently from the influence of cultural circles, we can consider the existence of three main moments in the work of Jonas. A first stage of Late Gnosis studies. A research conducted in relation to his teachers, mainly Husserl and Heidegger (a research on the problems of hermeneutics and knowledge). A second stage in which his studies lean towards biology, with the influence of the scientific topics of its time and in relation to a previous stage in Canada. And a third stage in which he takes on the issue of responsibility as a problem of the new ethics that must be assumed by new cultures towards an ethics of the future (and not only of the present, as had been, according to Jonas, Kant's ethics).

First stage: power in knowledge

Agnosticism is a trend of thought associated with the first stages of Christianity which believed that only a small elite had the knowledge, through gnostic introspection, of God's purpose.

Jonas studies these religious dogmas from Heidegger's "existentialist analytics". Instead of understanding dogmas as a series of relations between Neoplatonic thought and belief in a divinity, Jonas proposes something more substantial: myths have a unified coherence in themselves and among themselves. They are expressions of existential experiences and, as a whole, they form the basic existential experience of the purpose of the world. Jonas achieves a rational critique of myths while preserving their existential content.

In a historical stage where the experience of the separation between God-Man and World is particularly dramatic, man finds himself thrown into a world where there is nothing but strangeness. The soul is delivered unto a strange body. Only the inner knowledge (gnosis) of authenticity will be able to safeguard the purpose of the world.

The dualism between world and purpose (man and nature, if we could simplify as such in Jonas's case) has appeared frequently in the theory of design. Perhaps this diagram seems to be a recurrent "myth" in the historiography of design and its appearance as a safeguard, as an attempt to safeguard a presumed unity of

the earlier project lost with the industrial revolution.

Following the same diagram, it seems we ought to be able to propose an “existential analytics” between marginal art, claiming authenticity, and an ethical nihilism that, according to Jonas, could be expressed as an indifference about and of nature on the part of industrial production (and all its individual as well as collective benefits), which would be completely indifferent to the purposes of design.

Here, however, the myth would be, in our opinion, more complete. For he does not forget to include power as well. In gnosis, knowledge had the power of unity (the milestone of the final coherence of the knowledge of nature). Knowledge does not automatically have the power in the project, and the project remains in those stages where what is indifferent is not only nature but also the industrialized subject that has seen its power diluted in human masses.

Second stage: biology

The second stage in Jonas works centers in the study of biology as a reflective space. Because

it is this knowledge which represents the problem of not differentiating between man and his nature as a living being. Not only the biological nature of the human being but of any living being: the organism transforms that which it consumes into “living form”. Aristotle’s teleology reappears as the purpose of nature through its living beings.

Man is the final expression of a sequence of attempts on the part of freedom to take concrete form:

“the organic form stands in a dialectical relation of needful freedom to matter”⁸

But here, design, in its research for form, finds itself not only with a decision of cognitive situation (of the hermeneutics of vital experience in biology) but must also question the power of realization-adequation of the proposed form. And it finds that form never follows a function given by a coherence that precedes everything, but that form follows power. Jonas runs into this dilemma in the critique of Darwinism. Darwin’s thesis are anti-finalist ones, the development of forms follows—in a sort of utilitarianism—merely circumstantial situations. Design is also the experience of this re-approaching correlation between form and circumstance where both

are simultaneously defined. There is not a general sense in design, and any theory is short-lived, constantly on the brink of disapproval. It is not enough to defend the individual life of each organism, the coherence of each form versus its circumstances, it is necessary as well to defend this situation as a truthful one. No-power is the situation in which design is represented not by a decision but by the moment in which that which is vaguely fantasized is about to take shape, that which has taken shape is about to be known, that which is known is about to be valued. The error represents the sense of possibility of design.

Prudence causes the future existence of that which is predictable

Third stage: responsibility

Jonas's third stage is represented by the aforementioned book on responsibility in industrialized societies; two main traits could represent his proposal.

- 1) a critique of Kant's formalist ethics
- 2) a critique of the utopian character of Marxist revolution

1) A critique of Kant's formalist ethics

If we compare the following two definitions of Kant's categorical imperative, both from the "Critique of Practical Reason", we find a significant difference:

«Act so that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation»

«That, in the order of ends, man (and with him every rational being) is an end in himself, that is, it might never be used merely as a means by any (not even by God) as without being at the same an end also himself»⁹

In the first definition, which we could call the 'classic' one, the imperative is expressed in merely formal terms, that is to say, there is no reference to any "material" reality, and even the human being is not indicated as the entity to which the obligation of moral principle is to be applied. The principle is a principle of the practical reason and it applies to any rational being, even God. In the second definition, on the other hand, Kant expounds in which way the imperative applies explicitly to the human being, inasmuch its obligatory aspect, as for its

quality of defense of any man or woman manipulated by a supposedly superior utilitarian criteria; to the extent that they are rational beings, men and women are bound and protected by the principle.

In any case, it is clear that the categorical imperative is a strictly rational principle, and we would need to look into different Kant's works to realize that this rational aspect is questionable, since the whole of Kantian thought can be read as a sort of anthropology. It would be that anthropology of the human being marked by the Enlightenment, by the project of autonomous reason, by the project of the project as a civilizing normative of the operative activity.

If we recall Jona's philosophical journey, that we just presented briefly, we will understand his belief that this "classical" ethics belongs to the past and that we must formulate a new ethics for the industrialized society. This "old" ethics ponders the relation between rational beings in an unchanging environment and in a relation of action-consequence limited to a near future (a calculable almost present). The new situation of industrialized societies, on the other hand, where life on earth is at imminent risk of total extinction and where the human

being must constantly rebuild its own "form" in relation to life, to nature, ethics must be founded on principles that compel to guarantee the continuity of human life. Following from this reflexion, Kant's ethics is formalist, based on a concept of reason isolated from the vital context to which it ought to be applied.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the anthropological debate over Kant's formalism arrives too late, for there is another principle that acts above all else. The rational principle in technical societies —those of the project as an "imperative of operativity"— is above the divine consideration on the human being: who would openly claim today that one must give up thinking by oneself without such claim being denounced as barbaric? We can no longer think that the ability to project, of technique, is an unquestionable trait of what we can consider human beings, but this does not occur with a simple decision since such decision is based on the very same principle of projectual rationality.

The fact that it is not a simple decision is what constitutes the very necessity of design (among other activities), as a constant attempt that, once and again, proposes possibilities that, as a whole, achieve nothing but reminding us the

position of rationality as a principle of civilization.

Hans Jonas proposes an alternative procedure: to act with prudence, to dread again that which might befall our children, and to act to minimize the risks. To reconstruct the link between nature and the human being from what we learn from biology, the continuum that exists between microorganisms and the very human being: biology, understood perhaps as a hermeneutics of vital experience that is contained by that biology that makes no distinction between human body and soul. We might recall, first, Wukmir's orrectic theory, but also the tree of life of Maturana and Valera, Damasio's reflexions after neurological research, even Bateson's total science.

However, neither the principle of responsibility is ethics nor are these proposals constitutive of design. Kant formulates it clearly in the "Critique of Practical Reason".

«The maxim of self-love (prudence) only advises; the law of morality commands. Now there is a great difference between that which we are advised to do and that to which we are obliged. The commonest intelligence can easily and without hesitation see

what, on the principle of autonomy of the will, requires to be done, but on supposition of heteronomy of the will, it is hard and requires knowledge of the world to see what is to be done. That is to say, what duty is, is plain of itself to everyone; but what is to bring true durable advantage, such as will extend to the whole of one's existence, is always veiled in impenetrable obscurity; and much prudence is required to adapt the practical rule founded on it to the ends of life, even tolerably, by making proper exemptions. But the moral law commands the most punctual obedience from everyone; it must, therefore, not be so difficult to judge what it requires to be done, that the commonest unpractised understanding, even without worldly prudence, should fail to apply it rightly.»¹⁰

The principle of responsibility can be interpreted as the ethical imperative in the measure that someone (perhaps an elite?) with knowledge of the present state of nature (and within it men and women) might thus consider

it, but it cannot assume its formulation as a true ethics formulation since it is dependent on such knowledge, on such someone and his circumstances. The defense of “materiality” (or, better, of “the tendency of form in materiality”) can be considered as a consequence of the application of the ethical imperative in a framework of circumstances but should not be confused with a utilitarian decision between possible benefits and possible damages.

The logic of the process does not take place in the temporal development of the process itself. It is always omnipresent. No matter how much the project as symbol might have discovered its own limits, if one wants to reconstruct its logic (even for a moment, as design does once and again) it must be formulated as an argumentative premise, and only as such can it make errors manifest. It is for this reason that design must constantly reformulate theories for the coherence of its development as a projectual activity. No matter how much these theories might have been formed with knowledge of cause (the scientific education of designers) they are not applied to a logic because they are knowledge but because they are theoretical constructions, arguments that

are able to act as premises. Eco-design or emotional design are, no doubt, approaches of great interest to design (as far as they are not mere marketing strategies). But they do not, cannot, reconstruct it since they are dependent on a knowledge that leads to a maximum of prudence (contextualization) in its development, that is to say, in which design is previously determined (in contextualization), it is understood as given.

Probability is also a form to dominate what is possible

It would be illusory to think that what we have said so far about Jonas’ philosophical journey could be a critique of this author’s work. We have merely allowed that the text itself Kant’s critique of practical reason provide an answer to the idea that the principle of responsibility is an ethical principle.

But Jonas’ text has a conclusion —the whole of chapter six— that synthesizes his approach as critique of Ernst Bloch’s “principle of hope”, and, in this sense enters in full in a reflexion of political theory. In brief, the criticism of Bloch by Jonas is found almost at the end of his book,

and it is the following: that every present complies with its own reality of sense.

«Everything is “transition” in the light of what follows, some things are “fulfillment” in the light of what precedes, other things are frustration, but nothing is a mere brightness precursor of what is authentic, that only later arrives. (...)»¹¹

What Marxist utopianism has done, according to Jonas, is to turn teleologic the very technology that will free humanity from the forced labors of life. But in a reasoning like the one followed by this critique of teleologism, bound in the present, and in the different presents of history that show us the real possibility of success, it has no other option but imagining a “new” situation in the same present, as if it were the sudden change of a circumstance that forces the awkward adaptation to all the other characteristics: how would a world of leisure be? could it exist without service labor? who would be in charge of pondering the levels of knowledge necessary for the control of the machines that do all the material transformation? who would decide the final form of this transformation of matter? which would be this spiritual world if there is no

control of the matter that is destroying technology and that cannot be dissociated from every spirit? It is the Marxist revolution which boosts the present realization of teleological determination, but, in addition, without having decided how the final result should be, that is, without the possibility of critiquing it: simply thrust onto the utopia of technological power.

These critiques, however, only unveil the political nature of something more fundamental at the root of this technocratism: the project that has, as a symbol of civilization, the force of being an obligation linked to the very liberation of the human beings. The chain of history that links the great characters with the great feats exists as a bond between presents that are not complacent as if they had been fulfilled. Projectual development is not something closed, that has reached its best point and now rests. It continues its generative and control circuits until it is related and confused with others. Conservatism would be the position that, judging imprudent to embark on any new beginnings, considers the observation of the present as the presence of the only possible reality.

But this position is that of the decision in the process of the project. And the freedom that

constitutes the symbol of the project as obligation is not found in this moment if this moment does not have, previously and for other causes, the power to develop the decided content. The project keeps in its movement of constant cycles a few instants in which it might appear that which is unpredictable, that which gives meaning to its movement, that which would not have the possibility to survive its own plasmation. Thinking about artworks, which contemplation represents for Jonas the verification of plenitude in the present, it might show, precisely, the opposite sense of plenitude, the sense of confirmation of "another" that appears postponed to infinity.

Jonas did not include in german version of his book "The Imperative of Responsibility" a more speculative text that he published separately later: "Impotence or power of subjectivity. A Reappraisal of the Psychophysical Problem". This text deserves a detailed study, particularly related to the concept of project. Right in the introduction Jonas presents a case in the history of science in which, according to the him, appears a contradiction between the content of the original goals of the authors of a specific research and the very fact they are precisely goals. It concerns a group of young

physiologists that "conspired" to "validate the truth that there are no other forces acting on an organism other than common physicochemical ones". This conspiracy was, for Jonas, a contradiction with that which they had set to prove, since they did not allow that in due time their physiology could arrive to a different conclusion from that which they had subjectively decided as initial wish. Jonas' answer to this contradiction is the consideration that nature is quantic, probabilistic, and that human decision might act within this margin of probability not always choosing that which is most probable. Nevertheless, the vision of projectual activity might question this solution since the margin of probability can not always be determined, the problem and its possible solutions define each other. The project would not have enjoyed such a generalized symbolic value if science itself had not been so implicated on the movements of its development, and forced science to a constantly provisional description of nature. The crisis of nuclear plants is an example of the arrogant forgetting of the precariousness of science and, at the same time, a concealment of the limits of the project as a civilizing project of

the reason. Design will constantly attempt to renew it.¹²

Conclusion

Jonas' imperative of responsibility:

«Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life»¹³

It is a maxim to which we can subscribe, as long as our act is materially possible with significant a calculable effect. However, the vast majority of men and women can no longer assume this responsibility: their thought is dissipated in the mass, in the formalism of formal democracy. Only howling in despair can one believe that the player visualized on the scree might hear us celebrating the goal.

In the meantime, the project remains. In it appears the moment of forming in which something could be reclaimed as something new, something else, with strict weakness. Nevertheless, an ethics of responsibility, understood as an ethics that assumes the future consequences of the today's decisions, as a specific ethics of the project, is an ethics that takes for granted the power of the decision and its effectivity, the inevitable commitment for

the individuals that are however dissipated in the social mass. Once again the social mandate of responsibility ignores the present suffering, transforming many actual men and women into simple means towards an end not exempt of formalism.

Design knows it very well since its beginnings. It is not only a matter of being modest when making decisions: it is a matter of always proposing the other, especially the other that is not yet conceptualized within the frame of any possibility of decision and effectivity, in any power. To propose that which is impracticable is, perhaps, the specific ethical lesson of design: the intellectual impertinence of generating the problem while at the same time feigning the solution.

«[...] comme il n'y a pas de lieu d'où poser un discours, mais un sol millénaire et aride à fendre, ce que je dis a au moins deux faces et deux visées: détruire, casser; prévoir l'imprévu, projeter.»¹⁴

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