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Translated from the German by John Cullars.

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On the Word *Design*: An Etymological Essay

Vilém Flusser

In the English language, the word "design" is both a noun and a verb, a situation that is particularly characteristic of that language. As a noun, it can mean, a "purpose," "plan," "intention," "goal," "malicious intent," "plot," "form," or "fundamental structure." These and other definitions are related to "cunning" and "craftiness." As a verb, "to design" means, among other things, "to concoct something," "to feign or simulate," "to draft," "to sketch," "to shape," or "to proceed strategically." The word is derived from the Latin word "signum" ["sign" in English and "Zeichen" in German]. "Signum" and "Zeichen" have the same ancient root. So, etymologically, "design" means to "draw a sign." The question is how did the word "design" receive its contemporary international meaning? This question isn't posed historically, since it can be determined in historical texts when and where the current meaning originated. Rather, the question is one of semantics, namely why this word came to have the meaning that it has in the title of this journal.

The word fits into a context involving cunning and craftiness. A designer is someone who is artful or wily, a plotter setting traps. Other very significant words fit into this same context, especially the words "mechanics" and "machine." The Greek "mechos" indicates a device meant to aid in deception—the Trojan Horse being a good example of this. Ulysses is called "polymechanikos," which is translated as "full of stratagems." The word "mechos" is derived from the ancient root "magh," which we can recognize in the German words "macht" [power] and "mögen" [will; desire].

Accordingly, a machine is a device for trickery. For example, the lever tricks gravity. "Mechanics" is the strategy to manipulate heavy bodies. Another word fitting into this context is "technique." The Greek "techne" means "art" and is related to "tekton," which means "cabinetmaker or joiner." The underlying concept here is that wood (in Greek "hyle") is an unshaped material that the technician shapes and thus causes form to become visible. Plato's fundamental objection to art and technique is that the theoretically intuited forms (ideas) are betrayed and distorted when they are embodied in matter. Artists and technicians are, for him, betrayers of the ideas and thus traitors because they artfully seduce mankind into contemplating distorted ideas.

The Latin equivalent of the Greek "techne" is "ars," which actually means "twist," as is still the case in German thieves' jargon. The diminutive of "ars" is "articulum"—"a little art,"—and refers to something twisting around something else; a wristjoint, for instance. Thus, "ars" points towards "flexibility" or "maneuverability," and "artifex" (artist) especially points toward "swindler or cheat." The true artist is the juggler or conjurer. That can be seen in such words as artifice, artificial, and especially in artillery. In German, an artist [Künstler] is a knower [Könnner], since "Kunst" [art] is the noun from the verb können [to know], but artifice also is involved here.

Only these reflections can clarify how the word "design" can be used in all of the contexts in which it is found in contemporary discourse. The words "design," "machine," "technique," "ars," and "art" have a very close relationship to one another: one concept is unthinkable without the others, and they all arise from the same existential view of the world. This inner connection, nonetheless, has been denied for ages, at least since the Renaissance. Modern, bourgeois society rigidly separated the world of the arts from that of technology and of machines, and, in that way, culture was broken into two branches that were alienated from each other—the scientific, quantifiable "hard" and the aesthetic, qualitative "soft." This ruinous division began to be called into question around the end of the nineteenth century. The word "design" leaped into the breach and provided a bridge. It was able to do this because of the internal relationship between technique and art in the word and concept, itself. In this way, "design" currently indicates just about any situation in which art and technique (including evaluative and scientific thought) combine forces to smooth the way to a new culture.

That is a good but insufficient explanation. For what unites the concepts presented above is the fact that they all mean trickery and craftiness, among other things. The better culture, for which "design" should smooth the way, will be a culture that is consciously aware that it is treacherous. The question is whom and what do we betray when we involve ourselves in this culture—with art and technique, in short, design? The lever, a simple machine, is a good example. Its design mimics that of the human arm, but is an

artificial arm. Its technique is probably as old as the species. This machine, this design, this art, and this technique outsmarts gravity in craftily manipulating a law of nature to dupe a law of nature, thus freeing us from our natural condition. We can raise ourselves to the stars despite the mass of our bodies, thanks to the lever. Given a fulcrum, we could use a lever to tear the whole world off its moorings. That is the design that underlies all of our culture—to trick nature thanks to technique, to overcome the natural through the artificial; and to build machines, with ourselves as gods in the machine. In short, design lies behind all culture that craftily makes naturally conditioned mammals into free artists.

Isn't that a glorious explanation? The word "design" has won its current place in everyday discourse because we are beginning to be aware that being human is a design against nature. Unfortunately, this explanation still isn't good enough. If "design" is becoming the center of our interest, and if the question of design is taking the place of the question of the idea, then the ground is beginning to shift under our feet. For example, plastic pens are getting cheaper. The material is practically worthless, and the labor (according to Marx, the source of all value) will be carried out by fully automated machines, thanks to ingenious technology. The only thing that gives the plastic pen its value is its design, which enables us to write with it. This design is a coincidence of splendid ideas arising from science, art and business, which, overlapping creatively, have been mutually effective. And yet it is a design that we pay no attention to, so that pens are apt to be valued lowly—objects to carry advertising, for instance. The splendid ideas behind pens are scorned, as are the materials and the labor that went into making them.

How is this stripping away of all values to be explained? By the fact, thanks to the word "design," that we're beginning to realize that all culture is a deception, that we are deceived deceivers, and that each engagement with culture leads to self-deception. It is logical that, after overcoming the split between art and technique, a new horizon will open up, in which we can perfectly "design," freeing ourselves still further from our human condition, and living artistically (beautifully) evermore. But there is a price to pay, and it is the renunciation of truth and authenticity. The lever is there to remove all truth and authenticity from existence, and to replace it with the perfected, "designed" artwork. And therefore, all artwork becomes as valuable as plastic pens—throwaway gadgets. So it turns out at the end, when we die. For, in spite of all technological and artistic strategies (in spite of hospital architecture and deathbed design), we do die, as all mammals die. The word "design" has won its current central place in common discourse because we (seemingly correctly) are beginning to lose faith in art and technology as the source of values, and because we are beginning to look behind the word and concept of design.

That is a sobering explanation. But it is not final, either. Here a confession is required. This essay pursues a very specific goal: to bring to light the crafty and insidious aspects of the word “design.” I did this because these aspects normally are never mentioned. If I were dealing with other aspects of design, I would have spoken of “design” in connection with signs, indications, patterns, and sketches; which perhaps offer another, equally plausible explanation for the word design’s current standing. So it’s all one—everything comes down to design.

The Designer’s Glance

Vilém Flusser

There’s a verse in Johann Scheffler’s (aka Angelus Silesius) *Cherub-inischen Wandersmann* [Angelic Wanderer] that I cite from memory: “The soul has two eyes: One looks into time, the other looks away, upwards into eternity.” (Anyone who wants a precise translation may look it up and correct the citation.) Since the invention of the telescope and the microscope, the first eye has benefited from a number of technological improvements. Today, we can achieve a broader, deeper, more exact glimpse into time than Angelus Silesius ever envisioned. Recently, we’ve been able to draw all time together into a single instant and to see it all simultaneously on the television screen. As far as the second eye is concerned; the eye that looks into eternity; the first steps toward improving its glance have only been undertaken in the past few years. This essay will examine these developments.

The ability to see beyond time into eternity and to represent what is seen there has been explored for at least five thousand years. People stood on the hills of Mesopotamia, looking downstream, predicting floods and droughts. They drew lines in the clay, marking future sites for digging canals. At that time, these people were seen as prophets, but today we would call them designers. This difference in the estimation of “the soul’s second eye” is pregnant with meaning. The ancient Mesopotamians (and most people today) thought that they were looking into the future. If people dug an irrigation canal, they did it because they could foresee the future course of bodies of water. Since the Greek philosophers, however, our more or less educated people hold that such activities predict, not the future, but eternity. Not the future course of the Euphrates, but rather the form of all paths taken by bodies having mass in a gravitational field: eternal forms. Contemporary educated people do not, however, have exactly the same opinion as the Greek philosophers.

Taking Plato, for whom the glance of the soul’s second eye was called “Theory,” as an example; we look beyond the fleeting