Springer Series in Design and Innovation 37

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Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design

Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives

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Evasion Design for the Novacene Era Design and Production of Cultural Imaginaries

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Abstract. In this paper we discuss the use of evasion design, an overlooked expression from Superstudio, as a tool for shaping the future and understanding the Novacene Era. We propose evasion design as a tool to orient RTD (Research Through Design) activities for future exploration in educational and business environments, where a team not only needs to understand what a future scenario might be, but also needs to create a public discussion around its inherent values. Evasion design is here presented and explained in its differences from speculative design, but also in its sharing qualities and purposes in expanding the design practice. The result is a framework that combines both the potential of an alternative visual-based imagery and a guiding conceptual approach in rethinking the narrative of the future. By hybridizing codified methodologies of speculative design and the approach of evasion design, the paper shows the results of several workshops, conducted at institutions and universities, where the hybrid process is implemented through a specific methodology.

Keywords: Design theory · Speculative design · Evasion design · Imaginary production · Scenarios

1 Introduction

This study is supported by the ESF research grant of the Veneto region entitled 'Scenari per progettare il futuro' ('Scenarios for designing the future'), which involved three universities - IUAV University of Venice, Ca' Foscari University of Venice and University of Padua - between 2020 and 2021. The research grant was aimed at investigating the crossroads between business scenarios and design scenarios in different sectors over a ten-year perspective, through market analysis and collaborations with companies by developing artefacts and prototypes.

Alongside this research project we chose to develop a parallel study about the possibility of translating speculative design methods to generate relevant questions within the field of investigation.

Since the 1990s, in the field of Management Science [1] a culture and literature has developed on how to explore new business possibilities through processes that transform what is identified as tacit knowledge of the present into useful knowledge that becomes meaningful. Using this approach, we worked on how to develop cultural imaginaries,

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selecting James Lovelock [2], Patrice Flichy [3] and Luciano Floridi [4] as reference authors.

Lovelock, after his research on the Gaia theory in the 1970s, once again introduced a new paradigm for rethinking our society. With the term 'Novacene', he identifies a new era in which humans will not be able to understand the future and only autonomous agents will be able to design society: "What is revolutionary about this moment is that the understanders of the future will not be humans but what I choose to call 'cyborgs' that will have designed and built themselves from the artificial intelligence systems we have already constructed" [2].

The quickest way to respond to this provocation might be to address the explicit agents of change such as AI, neural technologies, biohacks and their implications. But there might be an opportunity to predict possible research values and keywords before entering the Novacene Era completely. The objective of our research is therefore the exploration of these potential values.

This outlook is also supported by the approach suggested in 'The Internet Imaginaire' by Patrice Flichy, that says that the glue holding together the technical objects and the processes of collective construction of their social meaning would be the creation of a common purpose, a shared vision, or rather an imaginary: "What we witness is a collective vision or imaginaire. This vision is common to an entire profession or sector, rather than to a team or work collective. It concerns not only designers but also users, which is one of the strong points linking these two types of actors of technical activity" [3].

The collective vision steers biases towards certain forms rather than others and guides the processes of attribution of meaning and recognition. At the same time, Luciano Floridi underlines how we do not only create a shared imaginary, but we also adapt to it in order to make it happen: "ICTs are not becoming more intelligent while making us more stupid. Instead, the world is becoming an infosphere increasingly well adapted to ICTs' limited capacities. […] In a comparable way, we are adapting the environment to our smart technologies to make sure the latter can interact with it successfully" [4].

Lastly, we can add that this happens as an adaptive process where design, technology ideologies and imaginaries are interwoven in a specific context that carries its own set of values.

2 Speculative Design Vs Evasion Design

Given that machines can design future scenarios based on our current social constructions, how can we identify the Novacene's determining values?

To navigate such a complex scenario in search of its values, we used the tools of speculative design and combined them with "design d'evasione" ("evasive design") as defined by Superstudio [5].

The boundaries of speculative design are often difficult to define because they include both tools and conceptual approaches also shared with critical design, future studies, science fiction and many other perspectives: "The complexity that accompanies a critical examination of values coupled with the will to impact the world is a problem that needs to be carefully negotiated by both practitioners and audiences. The line that separates the

actual and the possible is a thin one, and speculative designs thrive in the ambiguous, the artificial, the contradictory and the disputed" [6]. Speculative design offers a toolset for inquiry, which in addition acts as a mirror reflecting the role that a specific technology plays in our lives, stimulating thinking and discussion [7].

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's famous A/B manifesto [8], summarises the critical and oppositional approach to design, which in short consists of design artefacts that show us the implications of the decisions we can still make towards a preferable future. In defining speculative design, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby stated that they looked to the radical architecture and design movements of the 1960s for their imaginative capacity, but they also contextualised them in the political fervour that fuelled those years. They also distanced themselves from an excessively utopian vision by opting for a more practical and codified approach: "Design became fully integrated into the neoliberal model of capitalism that emerged during the 1980s, and all other possibilities for design were soon viewed as economically unviable and therefore irrelevant" [8]. The two authors also argue that in capitalist society, there is no room for a shared social imagination, and that individualism has atomised the collective dream of progress, leaving only personal utopias. Finally, they rejected the thinking of the radical avant-gardes by emphasising once again the current context where resources appear fragile and limited and hopes replace dreams in the younger generations.

Dunne and Raby's criticism of a radical utopian approach is oriented towards the impossibility of using this perspective in the world of capital.

However, it can be observed that this radical utopian approach did not foresee any functionality within the society that generated it in the 1960s, and that the critical and antagonistic impulse was recognised as its main component, more by its being historicised than by its actual purpose, which proposed instead to expand the project dimension [9].

Furthermore, it can be argued that perhaps it was Dunne & Raby's choice not to cultivate a radical approach that led speculative design to become a tool for future scenarios in the service of societal development and management. Indeed, two decades after the introduction of the seminal work of Dunne & Raby Design Noir [10], speculative practices aren't focused on the same exploration of the limits of the discipline: "Speculative Design in 2020 is almost exclusively dystopian or openly market-oriented, and fails to rigorously and radically champion alternative futures outside closed circles, predictably begging to be accepted by a canon popularised at the Royal College of Art 15 years ago" [11].

At the same time, more general criticism is made of the innovative role of design itself [12], which struggles to create a space for collective discussion but instead fuels the unsustainable growth of society: "Then there has been the arrival of a whole host of what gets variously presented as quasi-progressive, innovatory, vangardist or radical 'advanced' modes of design theory and practice (sustainable design, speculative design, plus emotional design, experience design and so on). But in the end, they all fold back into extending the scope and services of a design industry predicated upon supporting the continual extension and regeneration of the structurally multidimensional unsustainable status quo" [13].

Further developing this point, we suggest adopting Superstudio's perspective of evasion design. Superstudio's work was characterized by a strong critical stance [14] towards the modernist tradition in architecture, attempting to challenge the functionalist and rationalist approach to design that had dominated the field in the post-war period. Its members believed that architecture had become too focused on the needs of the individual and the functional requirements of the building, while losing sight of the larger social and cultural contexts in which it was embedded. To challenge these dominant paradigms, Superstudio developed several provocative and experimental projects that explored alternative visions for the built environment [15]. Even though Superstudio's practice was devoted to architecture, it developed such a broad perspective that it has repeatedly allowed design practices to regenerate themselves through their antagonistic perspective.

In this regard, as we have already mentioned, the expression that could guide reasoning on the Novacene project is evasion design. First, it should be made clear that evasion design is more than a method, it is an approach. Described in Domus issue 475 in 1969, a charge of antagonism to society and dominant narratives of technological innovation can still be found in Superstudio's words. The first characteristic is that each artefact has not just a practical function but a contemplative function: "Every object has a practical function and a contemplative one: and it is the latter that design d'evasione seeks to potentiate. Thus, there is an end to the nineteenth-century myths of reason as the explanation of everything, the thousand variations on the theme of the four-legged chair, aerodynamic shapes and the sterilisation of dreams" [5].

This contemplative characteristic, which is surely also easily traceable within speculative design, is the source of Superstudio's reasoning: design is not just a set of rules to produce objects, but also the ignition of an alternative imaginary, which not only addresses the present, but also how to imagine the future. Evasion design aims to work on introducing foreign bodies into the system: objects laden with symbolism and images with the purpose of attracting attention, or arousing interest, to inspire further actions and behaviour. This conveys the idea that reality is nothing more than an object to be continually modelled and designed beyond current technical possibilities: "If on the contrary we face the problem of making our reckonings with reality at every moment, if we face the problem of living creatively, living truly that is, regular breathing is no longer enough and we must invent on each occasion the utensils for «doing things» and find the answer imposed by the big monopolies of truth" [5].

On the basis of these characteristics, we hypothesised that the introduction of a methodology for a contemplative gaze and a defuturing perspective may be relevant for the production of cultural imagery: "Every evasion of what-is is therefore also an evasion of what-could-be" [13] thus providing access to a suspended dimension of design, charged with antagonism but not necessarily future-oriented.

Of course, talking about evasion design today could imply many directions of research: one strand of research could be the idealisation of radical design as a fundamental movement and yearning for a return of the same energies of rupture in line with the aesthetics that accompanied them; at the same time, a more conceptual and theoretical perspective can avoid emulation by using these energies to ask how to act in design without becoming entangled in dominant methodologies and narratives, using

the doubts about the shape of the future as a compass. The latter perspective is the one we find most effective in moving towards the Novacene.

3 A Compass for the Novacene Era

To develop cultural imaginaries for the Novacene, we combined the two perspectives of speculative and evasive design. We added the speculative design value of having a formalised critical design approach to the original design tension of evasion design, where the specific quality of the imagery becomes the key to reprogram discourse about the future. Speculative design is a codified process often based on narrative evocation as a function of a preferable future; evasive design is an invitation to an imaginative process. It does not address a specific preferable future but produces a divergent vision.

To test this approach combining speculative design and evasive design, we asked ourselves how a methodological design scheme such as the Double Diamond design process model [16] would transform.

In fact, if the design process was synthesised with a Double Diamond consisting of moments of divergence and convergence, the process of producing imagery generates a methodological change.

In the methodological diagram of Fig. 1, the process of divergence and convergence is interrupted by moments of deepening and development as a function reaching a final divergent moment that does not provide answers but leads to a discussion and definition of questions. Two phases are solely devoted to the exploration of visual language and its development, to preserve a charge of evasive imagination. The inherent quality of the images and concepts produced is what fuels the divergence from the contemporary narrative of what the future will be.

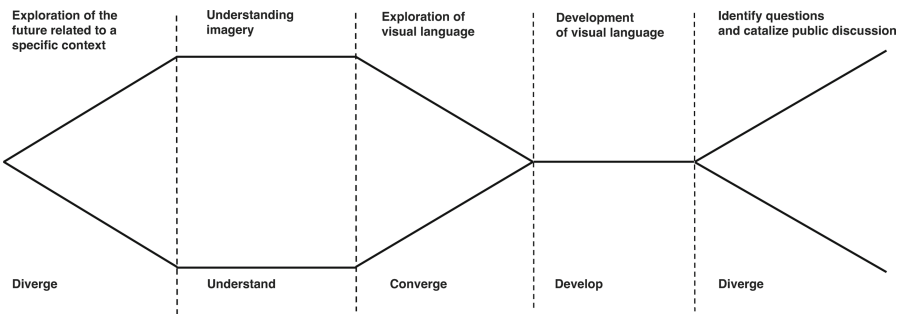

Fig. 1. Methodological framework designed to guide an evasive approach.

We tried to test this methodological pattern with different categories of people who question the future in different ways.

Designers are quite familiar with this type of methodology, as it is slightly different from a double diamond process. Instead, it was rather challenging to imagine business managers and brand ambassadors understand the approach of an evasive future. The

latent question was how to translate such an image-oriented process to people who have a relationship with innovation through other, non-visual channels.

Figure 2 shows the results of the application of this methodology, which enhances the imagination before the design solution, within two workshops offered to design students at the Iuav University of Venice and dedicated to the design of future domestic spaces. In this case, both groups sought to problematise the same theme of how we will experience our digital memories within the home.

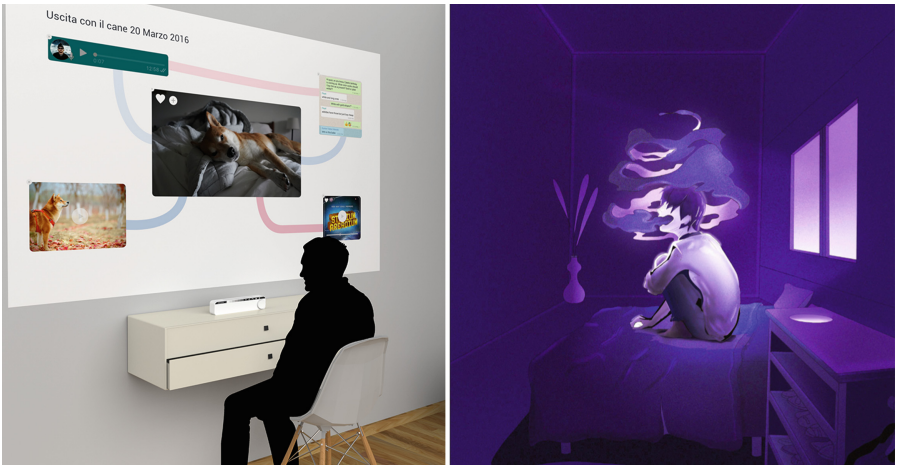

Fig. 2. Two different designs for a device managing digital memories. Università Iuav di Venezia, design workshops 2020-2021.

The image on the left shows a device that attempts to technologically create a possible engagement with our personal digital memories and allows them to be explored through a graphical interface.

On the other hand, the image is not immediately interpretable, as the emphasis is not on functionality or a preferable future but on a possible complex relationship or sensation with memories through digital media. The project thus becomes vaporous, atomised, not reflected in the presence or form of an object. At the same time, it is not a matter of activating a particularly complex narrative, as in the case of speculative scenarios that imagine a complex world, but only the basic elements that activate an imaginative process: it is not necessary to reach complexity to communicate the challenge identified by the project, nor is there any need to activate solution-oriented or object-oriented thinking.

4 Acting on the Shared Imaginary

The hypothesised methodological diagram acted as a guide to highlight the working phases of designers confronted with the problem of constructing cultural imagery. However, the diagram also offers the possibility of being adapted to situations where qualitative analysis is not immediately translated into a series of images, but instead into

activities such as project brief creation and graphical facilitation [17]. In this sense, the imaginative quality found in the evasive approach is translated to existing formats in management and marketing practice.

The result tends to be close to the same reconfiguration of the innovation narrative, obviously adapted to the context of a more applied research, based on the company's values, and introducing a more evocative and, once again, contemplative narrative of the future.

The most effective method we have achieved, in our various attempts to translate the evasive approach to corporate managers and marketing agents has been the Future Pavilion format. Starting once again from a pre-existing cultural phenomenon such as the World Fairs, which also marked the imaginative roots of speculative design [18], we understood its value as a complex cultural device: an expo pavilion is a repository of the future, a promise, a compensation for current times, it helps us understand what we today define as the unknown. In this way, exhibitions provide the latent dimension of the future and determine "both patterns yet to be realised and comprehended (by future generations) and near futures that, as will be shown, become prescient simply by the fact of their being staged" [19].

The Future Pavillion is an exercise that guides one to imagine the values that a brand or company wants to uphold for the future of society, imagining that it does not present a product but a general idea of the future, choosing which aspects of today's society it wants to evolve and allowing it to emphasise the values that define the brand. The questions guiding this exercise can be summarised as: What values and visions of the future does the brand want to propose? What ideologies of the present is it based on?; What sensations should the pavilion convey?; Which objects that are not products of the brand could amplify this narrative of the future?

The result is a highly evocative project brief, which becomes a potential document to commission an experiential pavilion for a design studio. By drawing the managers' attention to the values and the possible scope for intervention that a brand might have in defining the technological future, a space of evasion from the brand's own product narrative is nurtured by constructing, albeit marketing-oriented, a public space for discussion. Once again, the idea is conveyed that reality is nothing more than an object to be continuously modelled and designed beyond the technical possibilities of today.

5 Conclusion

Tackling Dunne & Raby's opposition to radical design, we decided to create a thinking environment on top of Superstudio's evasive design. Evasive design and speculative design share many qualities and intentions: today speculative design is a codified process that has a clear position and role in the design world, looking for ways to achieve a preferable future; evasion design is an invitation for an imaginative process that looks outside the already established variations.

It doesn't address a preferable future, nor does it employ a linear evolution of time. It acts in the present moment, addressing design as capable of both changing our imagination of the future and our relationship with it.

A great challenge is certainly to bring these creative processes, which are very comprehensible within the design world, outside the design community. Opening to

processes that are not solution- or product-oriented requires a dialogical situation and a space for confrontation. This assumption is what can unhinge the narrative of the present, qualitatively transforming the relationship with the imaginary.

When in 2019 Lovelock envisioned a society strongly focused on Artificial Intelligence and its impact over culture, the extraordinary effects of the democratisation of artificial intelligences in the production of images were not yet visible. Instead, today, in 2022, we are on the threshold of an epochal change: images of objects, products, and environments are easily synthesised through tools such as Dall-E and Midjourney, that can convert texts and keywords into images that mirror the databases they have been trained with. These powerful tools will undoubtedly enter into the design and production of cultural imagery by posing questions not only about the aesthetics of the future, but also about the possibility of divergence from its dominant narratives.

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