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Puppet and design: a daily theatre

Things, objects, subjects



At the intersection of the two fields of investigation - puppet and design worlds - we, first of all, meet objects. Of the many presences that crowd the so-called puppetry, the "theatre of objects" is by definition that subset which immediately comes to meet us in reflection and practice. In the economy of our discourse design (and production) of objects is undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of the vast application of the concept of industrial design. But what kind of *objects* are puppets? And can - in what sense, to what extent - kitchen utensils, lamps, certain appliances, certain furnitures and all is it currently defined as a "design object", be seen as *puppet*?

The term "object" itself raises some basic questions. In a real sense, the objects are simply what is opposed to subjects, what resists man and his will. A definition that, clearly distinguishing what is thought (the object) from the thinking subject and from the act in which it is thought, it may perhaps apply to "design objects", but that is not appropriate to the object on stage, animated by a human being, involved in one live relationship. A presence that escapes, which would seem rather one

thing. Remo Bodei reminds us that things are what we invest in affectively. But on the other hand, we get attached to "household things": to that old teapot that bears tannins stains; to the chipped cup that remained the only one in an entire service; to the watch that belonged to my father; to the oak cutting board worn by the thousand rhythmic strokes of the knife, by the oscillating smile of the mincing knife. Each of these objects is full of emotional meanings, each bears the marks of time and tells us about who used them, when and how they were picked up, used, washed, carefully stowed away, accidentally dropped, thrown with anger. Not to mention those objects that have been given to us and carry within them the intention and memory of the donor, or of the objects that we have lost, of the objects that we await and seek (La Cecla).

So it is enough to understand each other: from now on we will talk about objects and things using these words as synonyms overcoming the theoretical opposition from which we started, because objects of the "object theatre" would actually be things, and because there is also a strong emotional component in the way that everyday objects are designed and used¹. In short because objects - of theatre as well as design - live in relation to subjects, they wear out and change with them, they are charged of meanings, and therefore they talk to us about themselves and they also tell us about the subjects. Sometimes, as Maurizio Ferraris pointed out, they do it even better than the subjects themselves, because they do not know lies and mystification. "Anthropologically - wrote Roland Barthes - things mean immediately, always, and in full right".

¹ See Donald A. Norman, *Emotional design*, Apogeo 2004

Waste puppet theatre

Objects can live much longer than us, or at least *last* longer than us (Ferraris). We, who are alive, can finish before them that are inert (dead) but they will continue to talk about us to those who will inherit them, to those who will establish new functional and affective relationships with them. Of course this occurs less frequently and less intensely in the era of immediate technical reproducibility and planned obsolescence. But theatre can take charge of objects gaze, of their emotional significance, of their *presence*, can listen to them and answer them. To grasp the tiny, laughable aura that sometimes emanates even from the most serial of the artifacts. An old discolored plastic ball preserves the childhood of the child who played with it. My industrially produced pillow is my pillow, I sleep better on this than with an hotel one. Andrea Zanzotto also took his pillow on a journey. Theatre can help develop a new sensitivity, a different perception of objects, even the most banal and neglected, even those discarded and abandoned.



This is why our project takes its first steps around the suggestion of a *waste puppet theatre*, involving a group of artists and designers in a laboratory, open to students and professionals from the world of theatre and design, aimed at developing sensitivity and skills in the field of recycling and creative reuse of waste materials. The workshop it will be made starting from the recovery of objects, tools, appliances, waste materials with which to create dramatic and plastic elements in the perspective of one performance/installation. An opportunity to reflect on the limits of the consumer society, on planning the life cycle of products, but above all on our hasty relationship with everyday objects, discovering that they often retain within themselves, even when they have exhausted their function, the memory of their past and the past of those who used them, even of a generation or an entire society.

In this sense we can speak of a memorial tenacity of objects. They are subjected to wear, fatigue and aging like humans, but, best of them, can resist the passage of time, oblivion, disappearance. A resistance that (again Ferraris) sometimes becomes dramatic: let's think of the planetary problems linked to waste disposal. In this case we find ourselves having to deal, literally, with the removed of a system of production and consumption of goods and products that at the same time violates nature and denies any living relationship to objects, pushing them dangerously into the background of our sphere of interest.

Non-things and daily theatre



This removal characterizes also the useless junk that accumulates in our houses, the cheap junk that Vilém Flusser calls *non-things*. They are not objects, because we can't cling to them, they can't be held in our hand. There is nothing to "comprehend", nothing to handle: the hand has become superfluous - apart from the fingertips that the new being, glimpsed well in advance by the Bohemian philosopher, uses "to press the keys and thus playing with symbols"².

The hands of puppeteer, the hands of animator instead come into contact with the object up to blend in, they caress it, penetrate it, move it, just manipulate it, but at the same time they allow themselves to be enveloped and contrasted, they listen to the touch its forms, history, experiment with possible creative functions. As Alfonso Cipolla writes about the theatre by Gyula Molnár, "the object moved by man is not

² V. Flusser, *Filosofia del design*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2003, p. 97.

transformed into a simple means used to tell or represent, but it's rather the man who becomes the *puppet* of the object in space, amplifying himself to become a possible consciousness open to more fascinating suggestions."³ Subject and object are no longer distinguished, relationship comes to the fore. A show of object theatre is always also a small experiment of exit from anthropocentrism. And therefore a reflection, through things, on the "ultimate things". Design has always been a field of investigation on ways of being in the world that intersect the most different disciplines. Precisely by virtue of their inherent marginality, the practices of puppetry can offer to designers a different perspective on the world of objects: rethinking of the perceptive system, performativity, playful functionality, overturning ironic, creative reuse ... In short, they can promote dynamic and relational strategy, which always considers the - human and non-human - focused subjects as participants of a daily theatre. Moreover, this is the only perspective that can save the human during the transition process towards the *internet of things*.

Functions, emotions

In his successful essay dedicated to *emotional design*, Donald A. Norman distinguishes three design levels: visceral, behavioral and reflective. The first is based on immediate emotional impact; the second only thinks about use, function; the third has to do with what the object represents for us (memories, meanings), with the image we have of ourselves and with the message that the object transmits. What often determines the success of a design product is the interaction of the three different levels. But the conclusion the American scholar reaches is that "the best kind of design is not necessarily about an object, a space or a structure: it is a process - dynamic and adaptable"⁴ - in which each of us intervenes by choosing, arranging, modifying, anthropomorphizing the objects which, in turn, change over time. In this sense Norman can affirm that "we are all designers" and suggests a design that knows how to arouse emotions, which favors the personalization of product and that creates objects capable of "aging gracefully".



A dynamic and adaptable process: isn't it a theatre? As long as he considers each object like an individual, not as a specimen, as it happens in puppetry.

Functionoids and iconoids



Denying an emotional relationship and memorial legacy to things, means denying them the possibility to go beyond their function, reduce them (reduce us) to emotional inertia. As a result we can see objects that Gillo Dorfles called the "*funzionoidi*" (functionoids), because they are characterized by a relationship almost exclusively opportunistic with those who use them, as Chiara Alessi explains: they exist only for their function and "loosing that they have no reason to persist over time". Theatre, as well as design, acts on things by suggesting further meanings to the collective imagination. Each of us in front of a puppeteer who plays with the shape of

³ A. Cipolla, *Introduction to a G. Molnár, Teatro d'oggetti*, Titivillus, Corazzano (Pisa) 2009, p. 6.

⁴ D.A. Norman, *Emotional design* cit, p. 222

things, as well as in daily experience in front of kitchen tools or furnishing accessories, bells, a door or the front mask of a car, recognizes bodies, faces and movements in things, anthropomorphizes or zoomorphizes objects, invents, thus exercising through imagination, a relationship with the world less flattened on routine, less interested in domination over objects. The *puppet theatre* presents the object in an alienating way, captures its potential life, it reactivates a cognitive sensitivity and a curiosity that support "the understanding of meaning of things before habit and function take over" (Bodei). Sometimes design has the ability to perpetrate this abandonment to the object life (Hegel), this discovery and acceptance of its "secondary or tertiary function in a new time or space", according to Alessi's analysis, "to be able to guarantee that relationship with the new time which is an attestation of iconicity". Icons, in fact, "produce anterior futures"⁵.

It is a perfect definition. But we must avoid that the secondary or tertiary function outclasses or cancel the primary one, that is the functionality, the use of the object. When designer loses sight of the function, it precludes our relationship with the thing, designs an inert thing, that is dead. The *Juicy Salif* juicer designed by Philippe Starck is one of the most popular iconic items of contemporary design and a fantastic object of seduction. What does it make it so cold and distant? The fact that it appears as an object made more to be looked at than picked up and used. Those who do so, quickly discover that it is unusable as a juicer. The designer himself confessed it, saying: "My juicer is not made for squeezing lemons; it is made to initiate conversations."⁶ As Norman says it's true that an excellent capacity for "visceral" and "reflective" attraction compensates a deficit from the point of view of a behavioral design, but, as it happens, the manufacturer (Alessi) to advertise its product presents it "in use", that is, with a half orange as a tilted hat and a half-full glass of juice under his paws. It came alive in a (fake) relationship. In short, *Juicy Salif* has found, by heterogenesis of ends, its secondary function, and "starting conversations" basically is not an irrelevant goal, however the absence of relationship, the failure of the performative plane transforms this splendid object into a sort of luxury "no-thing". It's too easy to revive the spider in him if you bring him on stage. Its fluted body and long legs immediately lend themselves to a fairy tale invention and even a child would make him the protagonist of a kitchen theatre. But without juice.

For a biography of the objects

Between the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century it occurs a sort of rediscovery of the "Biography of objects". Semiologists and philosophers, designers and planners (Eco, Baudrillard, Munari, Maltese, Dorfles, Maldonado ...) abandon "classical empirical functionalism in the name of a symbolic vision of objects and their respective uses"⁷. It was a reaction to that process of marginalization of objects which in previous decades had relegated them to the role of commodities, erasing the narrative and emotional components, according to a typical character of modernity, in



⁵ Chiara Alessi, *Le caffettiere dei miei bisnonni*, UTET, Turin 2018.

⁶ This at least writes Norman, confessing to having used his *Juicy Salif* "once" (moreover in the gold foil version) even to squeeze citrus fruits! Cit. p. 114

⁷ Vincenzo Maselli, *Le "Storie" dei puppet. Il designe degli strumenti narrativi del cinema di animazione in stop-motion*, in Lorenzo Fabian and Mauro Marzo (edited by), *La ricerca che Cambia. Atti del secondo convegno nazionale di dottorati italiani dell'architettura, della pianificazione e del design*, IUAV University of Venice 1-2/12/2016, LetteraVentidue editions 2018, p. 723.

which “things, from active presences of our life, become consumer goods, whose characteristics are no longer linked to the use practices, but to attractiveness in increasingly large markets”⁸. It’s not a coincidence that this reaction coincides, historically, with the birth and development of puppetry, interested in experimenting practices of dramaturgical use of objects and often starting from a performativity of “Little things”⁹.

Moreover, as Franco La Cecla points out, things of the world do not cease to mean other than their own pure and simple material presence, even when they are debased as commodities. Marx grasped the perversion that decontextualizes them and alienates them from their nature, hiding economic and social relationships of which they are the fruit, transforming them into fetishes. In the symbolic function, as well as in alienation, things are loaded with meanings and enter into a relationship with us. La Cecla: “It is as if objects have an irrepressible vocation to come alive”¹⁰.

All the more the design objects call us into question, being the result of a projection of our will that progressively affirms itself on the resistance of things (Severino: “thing is the resistant; there is a thing only as there is resistance”).

Again, therefore, a narrative approach to design is a way to tell our relationship with the world, a biography of objects is a collective autobiography. The design - which gives “shape to the perceptions with which we understand objects”¹¹- for the performer it’s not just an infinite archive of potential and prototypical puppets, but an interpretative tool of the material forms of a culture. The theatre of objects - which makes explicit and stylized the continuous theatre of our lives surrounded by things, in relation to them - is a critical device available to designer, a test case of the imaginary hold of the object, of its own narrative potential, a performative system of deconstruction and reconstruction of forms, uses, archetypes.

⁸ Stefano Follesa, *Design & identità. Progettare per i luoghi*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2013, p. 23

⁹ In Italy, the term “Teatro di figura”(puppetry) was established at the end of the 1970s; the birth of a specific theater of objects dates back to the early Eighties: in 1984 it was written: *Piccoli suicidi* by Gyula Molnár, with the famous scene of suicide of an Alka-Seltzer tablet

¹⁰ F. La Cecla, *Non è cosa. Vita affettiva degli oggetti*, Elèuthera, Milan 2013, p. 41

¹¹ Deyan Sudjic, *Il linguaggio delle cose*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2015, p. 37