

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS
OF INDUSTRIAL AESTHETICS

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN AS A POPULAR ART-FORM IN
A TECHNOLOGICAL CIVILISATION

Among the elements in our contemporary civilisation which stand out because of their novelty in comparison with past epochs one must definitely remember the vast field which goes by the name of "industrial design," which is also connected with the field of graphics (in its various incarnations of advertising graphics, traffic signals, lettering, etc.). Actually the advent of an industrialised society such as our own has brought with it the presence of an "industrial aesthetics," of a will and an instinctive need to "aestheticise," to make the "natural" world more pleasant and acceptable since today it is almost turned upside down and subverted by the products of a technological civilisation.

Translated by Sally Bradshaw.

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Even these preliminary observations bring us to a symptomatic conclusion: nature (or rather "Nature") which was once all-powerful, and was something into which the works of Man fitted themselves spontaneously and naturally, has been violated and often marred and destroyed. The same destructive force which has brought ruin and deformity can, however, be employed towards a healing end, and can be turned into an object of practical and artistic satisfaction.

Another corollary follows these last considerations closely: today it is no longer the single individual with his spontaneous and autonomous work (of the artisan type) who can collaborate in this aestheticisation, but it is a few specialised individuals, or even, more often than not, single teams of technicians who are involved in realising the projects (whether it be objects, systems of objects, or urban developments) which are provided or usually *imposed* upon the indifferent masses.

Here is the real beginning of my argument: the products of product design, of graphic design, of traffic signal, of urban equipment, are usually *imposed* upon the public, which accepts them with a good grace because it has to accept them, because it has no choice but that of "enduring" them. Thus the public is dominated by the supply of a whole chain of elements and instruments which society imposes upon it and from which it cannot escape, against which it cannot rebel...

It is, of course, true and I have had to stress it often,¹ that industrial aesthetics, (and I mean by this expression here industrial design, according to international terminology, as well as graphic and product design) constitutes, in the long run, one of the few "artistic" elements with which the man in the street comes into contact, and through which his taste is formed and moulded. And this is an undeniable and certainly advantageous fact (provided that such design be placed in the hands of people of "good taste," and not of incompetents or manipulators of outworn styles). And it is also true that in a certain sense and up to a certain point, industrial design is today perhaps the only

¹ See my book *Il divenire delle Arti*, Einaudi, Turin, 1967, and the one devoted to industrial aesthetics: *Il disegno industriale e la sua estetica*, Cappelli, Bologna, 1965.

example of a "popular art-form:"² thus of an art-form which is not aimed right from the start at the cultural and economic elites, but at the whole population; an art-form which is capable of arousing interest in the peasant as much as in the workman, in the housewife as much as in the student, precisely because it fulfills certain practical needs and because it is based upon modern methods. And it is also true that mass interest is usually engaged by products of industry (cars, motor-cycles, domestic electric devices, jets, machines of all kinds, furniture, televisions, etc.) and certainly not by the so-called "art-works" exhibited in refined and mysterious private galleries, entrenched and kept under lock and key in museums, placed under glass cases, locked away in the impenetrable houses of rich collectors...

And yet, for all that, it is also unfortunately true that this kind of popular art, in a certain sense the only "aesthetic" factor by which the masses of our time may feed or satisfy themselves, possesses almost always and exclusively, a *unipolar direction*: in other words, its informative course can go in only one direction: from the producer to the consumer, from the source of distribution to the users, just as the other products fundamental to our time, television, radio and in general those products transmitted through mass-media, do.

It is here, indeed, that we find the most peculiar and dangerous aspect of modern mass-communication (among which we can certainly include design, in its various forms): the unipolarity and inexorability of the compulsive character of mass-media, and, in what at present concerns us, that of industrial design.

And it is here that we must embark upon our attempt to find a possible solution to a condition which is definitely very serious, both as regards the taste of the masses and as regards freedom of judgment and the "consumerism" of the masses. The establishment of mass-consumption objects in countries which have reached an advanced level of industrialisation, should

² A likening of industrial design to popular art has been attempted for the first time by Reyner Banham in the essay "Industrial Design and Popular Art," in *The Machine Civilisation*, 1955, 6. This article had a wide response. In it the English critic claims, among other things, that "the aesthetics of consumer goods is the aesthetics of popular art, or rather it is directed at that group of the public which is most susceptible to stimulation by the symbolic iconography of industrial objects." For a discussion of this problem see also my book *Le oscillazioni del gusto*, Einaudi, Turin, 1970, p. 122.

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be aware of the dangerous process which is under way; a process which could be completely irreversible tomorrow, and which could lead to the loss of all creativity and of all discriminating capacity in mankind.

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We find ourselves today—as never before in the story of mankind—at the beginning of an era which is usually called “technological,” but which would be more accurately described as “artificial.” Until a few decades ago, Man possessed instruments, created by him, of course, in order to control nature better, but which were, nevertheless, still fairly near to his own natural constitution: extensions of his own limbs, and as such, capable of performing actions and creating products altogether similar to those obtainable by his own limbs. Today, conversely, Man finds at his disposal instruments which in most cases bear no relation to the natural character of his previous manual or handicraft labour, and whose mechanisms are moreover unknown and incomprehensible.³ This leads, on one hand, to the establishment of an *unmotivated* technology (one, i.e., which lacks a “telos,” and which has become a “myth of itself”) and also to the fetishisation of technology itself, and to the dangerous establishment of a “*banausic*” labor (from Greek *banausia* = servile work) which tends more and more to separate Man from the fountainheads of his work. But here I would like to refer less to technology itself, and more to the products made possible only by the process of industrialisation, and to the particular modifications in artistic techniques which have placed the means for making a reality of those “falsifications” into man’s hands without his being aware of it; such “falsifications” of nature as could lead to results of extreme danger from an ethical as well as an aesthetic point of view.

(Anyway, much has been said recently about the danger of some artificial products deriving from modern scientific and industrial technique—products which are not decomposed and thus cannot enter into normal natural cycles; much has been said

³ On this problem see also my *Artificio e Natura*, Einaudi, Turin, 1968, and particularly the chapter called “Artificialità degli oggetti e degli eventi, nei rapporti tra *physis* e *techne*.”

latterly about atmospheric and general ecological pollution: and this is only one example among many, of how difficult it is to fit any artificial product into the natural environment if it is not easily created and degraded.)

Therefore it is up to us today to redeem the artificial, the unnatural, which surrounds us, and transform the artificial elements and events through an act of will and consciousness, and prevent the unnatural from dominating so despotically and irrevocably.

We find ourselves now, more than anything else, in a phase in which the cycles of production and consumption run their course almost to completion without any understanding on the part of the user. This has gravely detrimental effects upon the autonomy of judgment and taste of Man in general, and equally bad effects upon the possibility of any influence by the user over the products which are offered him and imposed upon him.

Already some years back⁴ I had to deal with a situation which at that time was hardly outlined, but which has become more urgent recently. In that article I showed the need to individuate new systems of design, which should, in a sense, be "auto-produced" or "autogenous;" these were to provide the consumer with polyvalent objects, apparatus, or systems, so that they could be modified, at least partially, according to what the consumer wanted.

Such an hypothesis might then have seemed sheer fantasy; however, certain recent studies (for example, some research carried out at the Turin Polytechnic by the architect Mosso, and his collaborators⁵) demonstrates these researchers' intention to arrive at a kind of selfcreative autogenous planning: thus of *self-regulating production* and *planning*. In reality, Man desires to differentiate himself from his neighbour (notwithstanding the levelling which technological society has imposed upon him) and if he cannot do it by buying a Rolls-Royce or a Jaguar, he will do it by hanging a dog with a nodding head behind the wind-screen of his car, hoping that it will be bigger or smaller than the one owned by the proprietor of a car identical to his own.

⁴ See my article "L'oggetto industriale modificato e il rapporto uomo-macchina" in *Edilizia moderna*, No. 85.

⁵ See the reports at the Biennale of Planning Methodology, "The Forms of Human Ambience," Rimini, September 1970.

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There is a need to differentiate that pricks and stimulates Man, and it is that need which is in danger of being frustrated with the advent of industrial design and, in general, of a technological mass-civilisation.

To this extent it is necessary to take into account a remarkable transformation that has taken place in the field of industrialisation and in the relationship between industrial and technological civilisation and the way of life of individuals.

Before the First World War technology was the greatest aim of the civilised world, and the bourgeoisie was able to enjoy the new commodities offered by scientific and mechanical research with a light heart, and a feeling of progressing towards a more perfect kind of society which would afford only joy and wellbeing to Man. Today, after only half a century, we are beginning to realise the true aspect of the civilisation to which we are subject: the irreversibility of pollution, the indestructibility of plastic products; and already today we are beginning to clutter the streets, the seas, the mountains. A pall of artificial materials produced by Man for an illusory wellbeing is converting the planet into a immense rubbish dump.

This is why we must find the just mean between the justified technological enthusiasm of yesterday, and the present, and equally sacrosanct, contempt for industrialisation and consumerism. We must find out how to recognise where the weak point of our economic system lies, and we must make efforts to restore to Man that freedom to create which the ancient artisan culture allowed him, and which today is almost entirely destroyed. (This, obviously, does not imply an exact return to the economic-social forms of the artisan period!) The great aspirations of our forefathers towards a kind of life in which poverty and hunger would be excluded, need to be integrated through a better knowledge of the dangers of consumerism, excessive productivity, and artificial advertising campaigns.

Let us turn again to the case of advertising: as I said at the beginning of this article, it is true that advertising, like industrial design, constitutes one of the most powerful media today for directing Man's taste, not only in relation to the advertised product, but in relation to that "artistic language" (that is to say, graphics, plastic, architectonics) which is used to publicise the product; it is true, therefore, that these means are an extra-

ordinary lever in the hands of the dominating classes: they can bring constraints of taste to bear upon the lower strata of the population which would otherwise be ignorant of them. And it is also true that graphics and design constitute perhaps the only means of overcoming the barrier between "high" and "low" brow⁶ and of thus "imposing" the "good taste" of the elite culture. But: I have used the term "imposing" again. We are again dealing with a process which takes no account at all of the desires and aspirations of the masses. And, "other-directed" as they are, they end by losing all their originality. So it is advisable to realise exactly what the positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon under examination are. On one hand we must recognise that the lack of any graphic-, design-, or even advertising-apparatus (as can be seen in certain countries in Eastern Europe) deprives those areas of one of the few elements of "ornamentation" (in the good sense of the word) which, from now on, grace our urban landscape: since the abolition of ornament as it was preached in the rationalist period of architecture, and in certain of the Bauhaus canons (*Ornament und Verbrechen* by Loos), the good part of those graphic and plastic structures which were at one time reserved for the "applied arts" have been assumed by advertising, lettering, and industrial design. If we had to eliminate these superstructures from the medium (as many think we should), a very sad picture would remain, and one very monotonous to our eyes, which crave for images. (One has but to think of how important billboards on street walls are, or neon-lit night-time advertisements, etc.) On the other hand, one needs to make an open denunciation of the negative aspect of advertising: the way it continuously imposes a product or service which is usually superfluous and unasked for; the way it conditions the consumer's taste in every aspect of his life. This constant intervention, whether of the state (in "socialist" states) or of the great monopoly companies (in neocapitalist states) in the life and taste of the citizens is definitely dangerous, and cannot be ascribed to an effective

⁶ Insofar as it concerns the problems of mass culture and of its implications see the by now classic work by Dwight McDonald (*Masscult and Midcult*) and the other essays included in the anthology *Mass Culture*, ed. B. Rosenberg and D. M. White, The Free Press, Glencoe, and *Diogenes* No. 68, Winter 1969, devoted to "Mass Communication and Culture."

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preoccupation with their wellbeing, but only to the will to bring about an increase in consumption, and a dizzy growth of "induced needs." In this way the population comes to lose that impetus towards imaginative creation which it once possessed. The presentation and imposition of products which are already formed and finished to the last particular robs Man of any possibility of bringing his own influence and invention to bear. The recent *miniaturisation* of many consumer products (domestic electrical goods, transistors etc.) means that the attention devoted to them is lessened, and leads to that phenomenon known as "*atelia*" which I referred to before.⁷

At this point we should ask whether it is possible to restore creative activity to men in an industrialised society? Can mass-production be compatible with autonomy of imagination, of judgment, or of taste? And is it possible for a movement (in taste, in style) to start from the bottom rather than from the top, from the consumer rather than from the middleman or the producer?

(And here I must again recall that the process of marketing, the induction of needs in the consumer, usually takes place at the level of distribution, and not at the level of production; in other words, at that last link in the chain of the productivity cycle where there is not even a real responsibility towards the execution and planning of goods: it is enough to think of how diverse advertising campaigns for completely identical products can be, or of the presentation of very different forms for objects destined for the same use.)

One of the principles that I would like to develop in relation to this subject is in some ways paradoxical: industrial production should cease to unfold and proceed exclusively according to the "market laws," as they appear or are considered to be today, that is to say, the laws of supply and demand. This is because those laws have been artificially created by capitalist society to the exclusive benefit of the establishment, rather than of those who are often only victims of that system. In this way the laws

⁷ By the term "*atelia*" I refer to a technique that is void of "*telos*," an aim, and therefore unintentioned, which almost invariably leads to serious consequences because it deprives Man of any real interest in his work and diminishes his consciousness of the actual mechanisms involved in the work he is doing.

which appeared to be certain and constant in the first phase of industrialisation have been in part subverted with the advent of induced needs and frenetic consumerism. However, since it is improbable that Man could manage to "save himself" unaided, it is necessary to employ the same instruments which have led to the present tragic situation to induce in men a sense of the need for a change in attitude towards certain aspects of industrialised civilisation. And even if the increase in individual well-being is a positive factor, which brings with it the possibility of easier work and more leisure, one must be aware of the danger concealed in an incessant increase in productivity and consumption, if these are not followed by an analogous increase in autonomously creative activity on the part of the individual. Just as unchecked economic increase can lead to a loss of balance in our whole ecological system, so an incessant supply of graphic, cinematographic, or televised images unanswered by an equivalent on the part of the consumer, may lead to a total sterilisation of the fanciful and imaginative quality of the individual. For example, it is not enough that a child should have his head stuffed with pictures offered by television, to which he passively submits; on the contrary, it is necessary to give him the chance to create such images by himself, maybe through the supervised use of a camera, with which he can learn to express himself. (Incidentally, this has been done in recent didactic experiments in some Italian elementary schools.)

Another ploy which could be of great importance consists in the restoration to the object or product of industrial design of its "personal" value, drawing forth one of Man's fundamental aspirations: to differentiate himself from his peers and neighbours. This is the opposite process from the one which led to the levelling of the masses, and the creation of "mass man."

The past century saw a rightful battle against class-privilege, hereditary caste-systems, and the unjust socio-economic diversifications in humanity. We concluded by holding the equality and levelling of Man to be sacrosanct, without realising that what was indubitably an indispensable social justice could become an equally serious ethico-aesthetic injustice in the future. Thus the equalising of tastes and needs was transformed into a tendency towards monotony and non-differentiation.

And the most prestigious "well-designed" object becomes

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unsatisfactory if it does not permit the user to differentiate himself from others. I think, however, that only by managing to restore to Man a will to distinguish himself which is not economico-social (through the well-known mechanism of the "status symbol" which are embodied in the new car, in luxurious yachts, or in more expensive objects of use, as the case may be) that is to say in the aesthetic-cultural field, could we begin to see a braking action on the consumerist flood of induced needs and of a continual race towards change.

(Incidentally, something similar is already manifest in another equally nightmarish feature of mass-consumption and of neocapitalist consumer enterprise: the world of films and television. After seeing world-wide transmissions of cinema and television films, which represent an absolute flattening of taste, we are now witnessing today an attempt towards autonomous creation in films through the various movements in "underground" cinema, and we will soon witness the "personalisation" of those televised programmes with the advent of the "video-boxes." It is possible, and to be hoped, that with the aid of that very mechanism we will reach some limitation of that massive fructification which television is in search of.)

At this point I cannot help but hint, at least in passing, to the importance, even in this field, of the semiological factor. Many objects, dissociated from compositive patterns semiologically codified, have lost any connection between their form (their quality as "signs") and their "meaning" (the semantic value they possess) and this fact has led to a need to resume some awareness of their effective semantic charge to anyone who wishes to determine their *raison d'être*. Today we are witnessing a constant degradation of many consumer objects and of their relative meanings: insofar as the objects are "alphabets of signs" destined for a quite special intersubjective communication between their users, they tend to dissolve or change completely, losing their authentic value, and acquiring a new but exclusively formalistic one. I refer above all to a recent tendency towards "informality" in the design of many objects (furniture, utensils) where the authentic link between form and function (between appearance and meaning) is lost, and where only an appearance loaded with false metaphoric meanings remains. When the same ergonomic investigation is turned towards a study of the relation

between Man and Machine it ends by obscuring the semiotic value of the object and concentrating on the functional value without realising that even the semiotic quotient is an intrinsic part of a proper relation between Man and Machine, and between Man and objects of use which have been mechanically created.

In this way many objects which had acquired a precise symbolic meaning in other times (or which bore conventionally institutionalised meanings which were gradually enriched with a multiplicity of associative values) are today disappearing. Their form tends towards anonymity, and often even loses all iconic value. It is only through a new process of semantisation that we can enable certain values to be reconquered by the objectual panorama of our environment. So it is necessary for the individual to be capable of restoring a significant value to objects through a process of autonomous creative differentiation, and not merely through imposition from above by a producer or designer.

This does not mean that one wants to create new "artists" from the population (one has only to think how ridiculous the phenomenon of American programmes for "adult education" is, or courses in painting and sculpture for old-age pensioners or ladies of high society) but merely to stimulate a sensitivity in everybody which leads to the conscious choice of a determined object and to a conscious limitation of consumerism and of obsolescence resulting from advertising campaigns and the skilful manipulation of marketing methods.

At the turn of the century we witnessed a schism between "pure" art and what was once called "applied art." The former has become more and more alienated from any social interest, while the latter (now represented by graphics and design) is usually ignored or despised by artists who consider it to be a derivative of the market economics.

In actual fact it would be fair to reverse the terms of the problem: to take away pure art's excessive prestige, which is too often artificially induced by sellers and gallery owners, and reinforce the value and prestige of the experiments in industrial design, freeing them at least in part, from their subjection to commerce and advertisement. The way to ameliorate the conditions of objects of industrial design and the attitude of the masses is certainly not through a return to decorative forms, but by enabling the consumer to carry out his choice in a manner which

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is less dominated by the advertising factor; even in such a way that his choice need not be exclusively conditioned by the desire (or compulsion) for change, but rather by a will to stabilise the product; by an attempt to "isolate" a product whose aesthetic value seems to possess a certain stylistic stability, corresponding in its turn to a stability in the taste of the user.

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In other words it is a matter of convincing Man of the durability—even if it is a relative one—of his personal attitudes towards nature and objects, a matter of convincing him of the importance of retaining a personalised attitude towards objects, the house, the environment, in short, the "ecosphere," rather than a mass-made attitude which is subject to suggestion by advertisers and the mass media.

We must ensure that every individual, therefore, is different from Man as he appears in the statistical evidence which computers and market research constantly show us.

If statistics and market research—dangerous methodologies of our time—are precious and indispensable guides for the managerial process, marketing, economic predictions, etc., they are also more misleading in proportion as they are or appear to be uncompromisingly accurate and honest, as far as the problems of taste and individual personality are concerned. If, therefore, statistical calculations were placed in a lower position, at least occasionally, than the calculations which revolve around the fantastic, creative, and evaluatory element in Man, maybe we would be able to see that many of the woes which afflict humanity might still turn out to be reversible and redeemable.