Design and the Politics of Fear
an auto-ethnography on design education

by Mahmoud Keshavarz and Vijai Patchineelam

This text articulates doubt over design discourses and practices. This doubt comes from personal experiences of two former Master students in the 'Experience Design' program at Konstfack University College of Arts, Craft and Design in Stockholm, Sweden. Both graduated in the spring of 2011 from the two-year program, one coming from a background of design and visual arts and the other from design research. They shared interest in thinking and doing design differently. Their doubt was based on a gradual understanding of how design education and its practice imposes and reproduces a homogeneous and dominant form of action, which they came to see as being complicit with the dominant form of politics in our societies: the 'politics of fear.'

The paper argues how and why the politics of fear functions in design practice and education. It does this via an auto-ethnographical text and the particular case of designing a 'better death', a design course on the 'aesthetics of dying' focused on the last days in a palliative care center. The authors question why design education teaches designers to perpetuate their own habits, and develop an inability to accept what is foreign and why in seeking to solve problems it imposes itself on the other, instead of opening to alternative forms of action and life.

Introduction: design as a child of progress

Design as a child of progress and modernisation relies on the discourse of making things 'better'. But this meaning of 'better' is closely related to the values and aspirations of those in positions of power, and is highly dependant on their economical, cultural and a political agenda. The meaning of making things 'better' promises development, which in turn encourages design to actively attempt to forecast the future, through its administration, simulation and ultimately, manipulation. In much the same way, crisis management faces potential problems designing, packaging and serving solutions within a mechanism of capital's exclusion and domination.

Such contradiction embedded in design practice, has triggered earnest attempts to find alternative approaches. The attempt to broaden the definition of design, and to make its practice more 'inclusive' for example, has given permission for the status-quo of design to impose in areas where previously it had not gone. Few scholars and practitioners consider this problem as a fundamental figure of design itself, and rather than erasing the question, perpetuate it in the form of 'new' trends in the discipline towards new areas for activity.

It has been argued that Bio-Politics is the dominant form of politics in our societies. There is no surprise that the 'best' definition of design overlaps with the bio-politics that deals with administration of health, safety and making a better life for individuals. Those who believe that private lives can be made better through designation of interior and exterior spaces are not so much designers as those who sit in governmental buildings. In turn, designers become the applicative arm of such administration. In this context, design, like politics, is reduced to administration and managing the realm of non-politics/post-politics and the space of "actual benefits" related to lives, enjoyment and happiness.
Fear and design education

"When politics is reduced to the "private" domain, it takes the form of the politics of FEAR - fear of losing one's particular identity, of being overwhelmed. Today's predominant mode of politics is post-political bio-politics - an awesome example of theoretical jargon which, however, can easily be unpacked: "post-political" is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration, while "bio-politics" designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives as its primal goal. It is clear how these two dimensions overlap: once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life... almost only that. That is to say, with the depoliticized, socially objective, expert administration and coordination of interests as the zero-level of politics, the only way to introduce passion into this field, to actively mobilize people, is through fear, a basic constituent of today's subjectivity." 3

Fear comes from the unknown. We know we are afraid of 'something', but we do know what that some by claiming to push boundaries, cross borderlines, bring frontiers into the centre and so on. Yet the very problem here is the assumed centre of design: it should not be something that we feel any ease with or coziness about. Yet, if as designers we do not know how to deal with the practice of 'designing a better death'- the rationale of the project under discussion - then we will seek refuge in our own discipline. The fear of knowing that we do not know about 'a better death' instead of provoking us to dismiss 'design practice' will result in legitimizing the design practice itself. Therefore an institution with the task of educating designers will fall down since any fearless attempt to engage such a project would result in some violent reaction against design. The institution of design, as part of other socio-political institutions in our societies, will manage such fears, as Zizek argues:

"It resorts to fear as its ultimate mobilizing principle: fear of immigrants, fear of crime, fear of godless sexual depravity, fear of the excessive state itself, with its burden of high taxation, fear of ecological catastrophe, fear of harassment. Political correctness is the exemplary liberal form of the politics of fear. Such a (post-) politics always relies on the manipulation of a paranoid ochlos or multitude: it is the frightening rallying of frightened people." 4

The consequences of managing and mobilising design students into the sphere of fear characterises the current scheme of design education today, where design is based on the task of forecasting potential errors, delivering enjoyment and comfort, and of making things accessible in the shortest time. It operates without addressing problems and deviates attention by enforcing its task of frightening. Design education in order to thrive needs to educate designers who are afraid of the future, afraid of 'others', afraid of 'aliens' and 'unknowns'. Designers need to be afraid in order to contribute to the 'symbolic order' of signs and meanings. A designer who is unable to be frightened — if there is any — cannot stay in the loop of production, in the reproduction of newness, innovation and excitement. It is precisely because of such a profession of crises management – namely design – through the endless mode of entertainment as a form of distraction, that a designer faces the future as the maintenance of benefits to particular well-identified groups.

In our story, the proposal to a group of design Master students to design a 'better death' could be one of those moments when design could face its fundamental and existential problem without reducing this to a moral-romantic contribution to specific moments of lives by designing 'a piece'.

Ars Moriendi: to design a better death

'To design a better death' reminds us how the concept of torture is linked to happiness today, where there is no sign of punishment on the body of 'homo sacer' 5 but an eternal enjoyment of a human being who is not a human being anymore but a set of organs living together with the help of entertainment. The course Ars Moriendi was scheduled to take place between November 15th to January 21st 2011, it prolonged itself till 28th January. It aimed 'to create a transdisciplinary research platform to develop concepts in experience design and palliative care to optimise sensory experiences in patient-centered dying environments, with special emphasis on patients but also their families, and the care-givers in these centers.' It was to involve collaboration with two external research projects from the
Department of Learning, Informatics, Management and Ethics, Karolinska Institutet, and two sites where field research would take place at Stockholmssjukhems and Axlagården hospice in Umeå.

In the initial stage of research two smaller groups of students representing the class, visited each site where they had access to the staff nurses, doctors and the facilities themselves. Making contact with patients was not allowed due to privacy and ethical issues. This stage looked to audit the existing sensory experiences in patient-centered dying environments in order to establish criteria for avoiding a bad death. After this, the course would run along similar lines to any basic design academic project: an initial research phase, followed by brainstorming sessions, the development of different concepts, decisions and trials with prototypes to choose one concept to develop further and present to peers.

The professors developed this course based on the thesis proposal of a fellow classmate that regarded rituals of different cultures and the role of sound in the last days of dying. The contact and the possibility of collaboration with the Karolinska Institutet researchers had previously been established by the student for her project. This same student two months before the course commenced contacted the department on behalf of the class, stating that there was consensus between the students that a course based on one individual project would not be equally beneficial to the whole. The professors responded in an email by stating that it was a ‘normative reaction in the second year class, but I think you’ll agree with me that this work is hardly a single-theme project. It is in fact an opportunity to test something none of you have ever done and that is to create a transdiscipline… It’s quite rare to have the chance out in the “real world”. Two months later the promise of a real world experience and Ars Moriendi took its course.

Transdiscipline: The real and the symbolic order

One of the reasons the design discipline is weak in terms of critical discourse is the tendency of practitioners to interpret 'the reality' in their own works and thoughts. Whether their approach is from commercial or sustainable or 'critical design', they start from the facts they see/feel. Rarely do they question these facts as perceived facts, as a conditioned perspective belonging to the established social order. In Lacanian terms, they are entangled with the 'symbolic order' more than 'the real' and this happens because design practitioners stay in the 'fictional order'. As Jan Van Toorn argues:

'[design] legitimizes itself in the eyes of established social order, which, in turn, is confirmed and legitimized by the contribution that design makes to symbolic production. It is this image of reality, in particular of the social world that, pressured by the market economy, no longer has room for emancipatory engagement as a foundation for critical practice.'

What has been argued as 'the real' in the mentioned email by our professors precisely matches with fictional and factual understanding of the reality. Design is stuck in a fictional order, where industry becomes a model for academia to (re)produce knowledge in the most symbolic power relation. A designer, who sees suffering of 'the others' due to hunger for instance, thinks of designing a better situation by such understanding of the reality. While the main task is to question and challenge the foundation of power that has created such suffering situations, academia in its obedience to industry, market and media demands, ends up by managing and administrating biopolitics through the language of design, a language of entertainment and commodification. The academy as a source of trust for students and researchers creates a magical power, which makes the student see and believe in this reality and therefore act, think and respond to it. As Pierre Bourdieu says of symbolic power in the social order, what we understand of power relations not only defines what – even knowledge – has to be produced, mobilised and consumed, but also acts as a pedagogical instrument to force students to sit back and follow the path of reproducability:

'Symbolic power - as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization - is a power that can be exercised only if it is recognized, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary. This means that symbolic power does
not reside in 'symbolic systems' in the form of an 'illocutionary force' but that it is defined in and through a
given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it.\textsuperscript{8}

The consensus from the group – a normative reaction

The first email sent by the students, rather than being what the professors perceived as 'normative reaction' from a
second year class eyeing for more time to concentrate on their own individual thesis projects, stemmed from a
growing resistance from part of the class against the idea of the course culminating in projects that looked to engage
the proposal through forms of distraction and entertainment. During the development of concepts, time and time
again it was stressed by the Faculty that 'distraction' was a key aspect of the project. It was also stressed that the
outcome of the project be something graspable, in other words something practical that looked to solve the
designer's perceived scenario of a patient's last days.

Although the course promised a 'transdisciplinary studio' – it did not differ much from the traditional roles of client and
designers, with the professors in between taking the role of design managers. After the initial stages of literature
review, fieldwork and interviews with practitioners, the stages of the development of ideas and concepts did not
include an active collaboration with the outside researchers; they remained within reach for enquiries, but would only
appear in the final stages of presentation, much like a client would. The structure of the course and the type of
development it allowed hindered the possibility and promise of a 'transdisciplinary' approach in which the creative
process would include a much more active and rich collaboration with the outside researchers, opening the
possibility of the de-compartmentalisation of the designer's forms of action.

Some of the students resisted not the difficulty and weight of the theme; rather they were skeptical of this
collaboration. There was a common understanding between part of the class that a subject of this magnitude, the
expected results from the collaboration with the 'strategic partners' and what that would mean to the future of the
'Experience Design Program', did not proportionally equate with the means of the program, the capability of its
structure, and the balance of benefits for both sides: the student and Faculty. It seemed that a design solution that
relied on distraction in the form of sedative entertainment would not be sufficient.

The possibility of de-compartmentalisation of design?

The argument for the creation of a transdiscipline comes from two fundamental and conservative management
techniques of academia which have emerged from the dominant form of understanding reality. The first is to create
new vocabulary and literature in order to market education and knowledge as fashionable. Students will believe in
texts and trends because of their willingness of doing and acting differently. Of course, managers of education
still think in terms of the same politics when introducing new buzzwords, but students will believe in new terms and
start a constant struggle to define and configure what this 'new thing' could be. A struggle that, according to
management, should not go too far. It should 'stay within the framework'. And to prevent dangers that threaten this
new trend – in this case, the transdiscipline of designing last days of death – a politics of fear learned from the
discipline of design itself will be adopted. Therefore we – as students – will be warned by 'experts' to not go further
since such a move could lead us to other fields and territories that are not ours, or could be unethical, or could lead
to our future unemployability or a weak portfolio. One can say today the task of design schools becomes the
management of creativity and fear in order to prepare a 'strong portfolio' as the basis of employability.

As Jan Van Toorn says:

'\text{Design has become imprisoned in a fiction that does not respond to factual reality beyond the}
representations of culture industry and its communicative monopoly. In principle, this intellectual impotence is
still expressed in dualistic, product-oriented action and thought: on the one hand there is the individual's\nattempt to renew the vocabulary – out of resistance to the social integration of the profession; on the other\nthere is the intention to arrive at universal and utilitarian soberness of expression – within the existing\nsymbolic and institutional order.}'\textsuperscript{9}

The second management technique of design academia is the affirmation of the value of design as an appropriate
and proper practice for every singular moment. The idea of uniqueness lets design educators enter into any moment
without considering what that moment is. It can sanction the imposition of their discipline, thoughts, skills and knowledge into other disciplines and contexts, while the main task of interdisciplinarity is meant to be questioning and challenging territories by migrating to them. What has been argued as 'Interdisciplinary' or 'Transdisciplinary Studies' frequently operates in academia as another tool to reproduce and sustain power relations.

The prospect of ‘designing the last days of life’ in an inter/transdisciplinary context could have provided an opportunity to critically engage the limits and potentialities of design. Instead, design was delimited to the task of ornamentation of last days, now with the help of technology and the experience economy. While the situation of the last days of life is a shocking and true one, design thinks of expanding its discipline and field in a positivist and post-critical way. Last days of life could be a moment for design to face its fundamental problematic and paradoxes such as fear. Design could be thought instead, in terms of an indisciplinary approach where the interest is not about expanding or merging disciplines at all but on how to go beyond each discipline in order to see the ‘potentiality’ of the act of design. Such an approach of indisciplinarity can happen by de-compartmentalisation of each discipline relevant to the situation. By de-compartmentalisation of each discipline, we mean creating from a 'non-specialised' work, where the admixture of praxis and knowledge (non-hierarchised) combines with the contributions of local inhabitants and figures to collectively prompt a temporary experimentation with what Campement Urbain describe as 'treasures of nothings'.

Design practice instead of coming up with a new category could de-compartmentalise itself and examine the potentiality of design actions, but once again, design practitioners and educators missed this opportunity by inventing new terms and tools, new trends and policy which perhaps in near future it will shape into another Master program devoted to design of last days of life or worse, a design competition.

Potentiality in design and academia

Can design or design institutions themselves become that hope of criticality? We might look at the concept of 'potentiality' to see how much design and institutions of design have the potential of creating other realities through a critical and negative engagement.

As Giorgo Agamben argues, potentiality, following an old Aristotelian argument, is the opposite of actuality, so that it inhabits the realm of the possible without prescribing it as a plan. Agamben says he might characterise his subject as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb "can", "What do I mean when I say "I can, I cannot"?" He continues:

"In an exergue to a collection of poems she called 'Requiem', Anna Akhmatova recounts how her poems were born. It was in the 1930s, and for months she joined the line outside the prison of Leningrad, trying to get news of her son who had been arrested on political grounds. There were dozens of other women in line with her. One day one of these women recognized her and turning to her, addressed her with the following question: "Can you speak of this?". Akhmatova was silent for a moment and then, without knowing how or why, found an answer to the question: "Yes" she said "I can". Did she perhaps mean by these words that she was such a gifted poet that she knew how to handle language skillfully enough to describe the atrocious things of which it is so difficult to write ? I do not think so, this is not what she meant to say…. For everyone a moment comes in which he or she must utter this "I can" which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity; to be able to write, or paint, or forecast the weather, but is nevertheless absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this "I can" does not mean anything – yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality".

Agamben explains, based on Aristotle, that there are two kinds of potentiality; there is generic potentiality, as when we say, for example, that a child has the potential to know, or that he or she can potentially become the head of state. The other sense of potentiality belongs to someone who has knowledge or ability. In this sense we say of the architect that he or she has the potential to build, of the poet that he or she has the potential to write poems. One of the most interesting aspects of potentiality is that it is as much the potential for not doing as it is for doing, and radical evil is not this or that bad deed but the potentiality for darkness which is at the very same time the potentiality for light. 'To be potential' says Agamben 'means to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-being. In potentiality; sensation is in
relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness."12

Irit Rogoff takes this notion of potentiality and explains what this means in academy:

'So thinking "academy" as "potentiality" is to think the possibilities of not doing, not making, not bringing into being at the very center of acts of thinking, making and doing. It means dismissing much of the instrumentalising that seems to go hand in hand with education, much of the managerialism that is associated with a notion of 'training' for this or that profession or market. Letting go of many of the understandings of 'academy' as a training ground whose only permitted outcomes are a set of concrete objects or practices. It allows for the inclusion of notions of both fallibility and actualization into a practice of teaching and learning … which seems to me to be an interesting entry point into thinking creativity in relation to different moments of coming into being. In thinking "academy" through "potentiality", we exit the realm of generic potentiality – we are not interested in the production of skills and knowledge, we do not think about the liberation of someone's deeply buried creative possibilities nor do we think romantic moments of self expression or moments of analytical and investigative exposure of the grim realities of our world. Instead 'academy' becomes the site of this duality, of an understanding of "I can" as always, already yoked to an eternal "I can't".'13

Where 'design' does not happen?

'I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing. […].

[...] A space without a function. Not 'without any precise function' but precisely without any function; nor pluri-functional (everyone knows how to do that), but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to 'release' the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space, I repeat, that would serve no purpose at all.'14

These words of George Perec remind us of a need for emptiness, the need for void or cracks as potentiality for emerging new (non)knowledge. A potentiality of doing nothing. What design education avoids is exactly the task of revealing such emptiness. Design education tries to fill the cracks and gaps, tries to fill the emptiness and absurdity of the symbolic order, which ends up in creating a set of fictions that looks dangerously real. Then, design education should be considered as a potentiality in duality.

As the deadlines for final presentations came closer, the more pressure the Faculty would place on the class in order to have a graspable outcome, meaning that ideas for methods of further research on the subject were not welcomed. Something within the scenario of the theme had to be addressed directly, the presentations following the different steps of the development were faced by sessions of experience prototyping, which often included the outside research collaborators as actors. These sessions often raised a set of new questions and opened up further the discussion with the researchers. The sessions of experience prototyping were criticized by the Faculty because to them they did not mean progress; the doubt on how to address the question at hand by the students, and their effort on how to resolve the type of approach that would be suitable for the subject was seen by the Faculty as a lack of assertion in the design process.

The Faculty in its double role of educators and as a design management team demanded performance and efficiency from the class, while the education and the inquisitive aspect of an experimental approach rarely played a front role. The argument of a 'real world experience' was repeated as a form of stimulation based on the fear of each student's professional future, and the theoretical questions raised by course's proposal were not to be reflected upon, but used mainly as controversial promotion for the program. There was a lack of effort from the Faculty to reflect and put into question the ethical issues raised from this difficult theme; at no moment was the presence of design in such occasions questioned.

Doubts and questions surfaced from the students through resistance against dealing directly with the patient position and resorting to gimmicks of distractions. This turned the project more into a theoretical and philosophical discussion, which was dismissed as something that had been dealt with in the early stages of the course and had
been already discarded just like poor concepts that are discarded during a brainstorming session. As though critique, ethical issues and doubts regarding the intent of such a theme were part of the 'black hat' that once taken off is discarded as a needed step in order to clear the conscience of any harmful doing, but ultimately irrelevant in the development of a project. The emergence of these critiques in the later stages hindered what the Faculty expected of the development of the project. The students were met with emails stating, "EDG 2 [Second Class of Experience Design Group] has been consistently late, unprofessional, disappeared or otherwise disappointing to the entire EDG Faculty and our strategic partners. EDG is NOT built for mediocrity". What is more curious is that while stating the underachievement of the class and its incapability these emails ironically resorted to guilt as a form of motivation when stating the potential of the class to "do the work because from where I sit I really haven't seen it in most cases. In many respects I would say you are our best class yet and at the same time our most disappointing." Finally ending with again with statements such as "...It's your game to lose. See you soon, all best..."

The space was filled again. With another apparatus of disciplinary production of design, we as students remained alone with the grades in our hands and not so much challenged and/or experienced. It is difficult to discern the moment where the diverging opinions of the class regarding the course Ars Moriendi, evolved to a sort of resistance against performing and into a more conscious critique that lead a majority of the class to the Dean's office in a formal complaint against not only the course Ars Moriendi but a harsher critique of the program itself. But we learnt one thing for sure, that is, the question would not be either to accept or refuse such proposals, but rather to insist on not choosing either this or that, and to discuss the duality of such situations head on.

Eyal Weizman explains such dilemmas based on ancient Greek myths:

>'The ancient Greeks thought of dilemmas as one of the elements of tragedy. Each option that a "tragic hero" faced necessarily led to different forms of terrifying suffering, and the dilemma was presented as a choice between the two horns of an angry bull. But the dilemma, if we are still to think in its terms, must not only be about which of the horns to choose, but whether to accept the terms of the question and choose at all. Robert Pirsig suggested several ways to subvert this complicity of the opposites: one can "refuse to enter the arena," "throw sand in the bull's eyes," or "sing the bull to sleep."'\(^\text{15}\)

REFERENCE


2 Bio-Politics or the exercise of Bio-power can be defined as a complex matrix of strategies used to create docile bodies. The term, as it was coined by Michael Foucault, refers to a complex network of methods and strategies aimed to subjugate and control bodies of populations, peaked by the developments of science, technology and most importantly biology in mapping the human body. For more information see Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality Vol.1: The will to knowledge, London: Penguin, 1990.


5 If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of zoë, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the bios of zoë. Hence, too, modern democracy's specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place – "bare life" – that marked their subjection. Behind the long, strife-ridden process that leads to the recognition of rights and formal liberties stands once again the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed.: Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, Stanford University Press 1998, 13.


10 Look at an interview with Campement Urbain, available at: http://www.netwoedcultures.org


12 Giorgio Agamben, Potentiliales, 182

13 Irit Rogoff, ‘Academy as Potentiality’ in Academy, edited by Angelika Nollert et al., Frankfurt am Main: Revolver 2006, (P.16)
