Forms and Politics of Design Futures

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The future is not empty.[1] The future is loaded with fantasies, aspirations and fears, with persuasive visions of the future that shape our cultural imaginaries. The future bears the consequences of historical patterns and current lifestyles, deeply rooted in our embodied skills and cultural habits. The future will be occupied by the built environments, infrastructures and things that we produce today. Many of the 'images, skills and stuff' (f.ex. Scott, Bakker, and Quist, 2012) that endure and matter long after are designed, and design, more or less intentionally, takes part in giving form to futures. Some design practices take this on intentionally and explicitly – among others, genres of 'concept', 'critical' and 'persuasive' design. I have (re)positioned my own practice-based design research in relation to such genres over the years, and, increasingly, in relation to futures studies, thereby inquiring into the dilemmas of futurity. This prompts me to ask, what is at stake as we take on the future in design?

In this text, I argue that design must take on temporal politics. Design futures and futures studies are typically preoccupied with questions of 'what' or 'which' future, or 'how' to get there, which are often reduced to methodological issues and a turn to some familiar approaches from the social sciences. However, if futurity represents an outside to the present, this may not be sufficient. Instead, I have been considering further questions and approaches. If the future represents a possibility of formulating an outside, of giving form and intervening a different socio-economic reality, it becomes a political act. From this perspective, 'the future' is not a destination that might be defined and reached with the right methods, but a 'supervalence' (Grosz, 1999), an outside to an experienced present. As such, futurity represents a possibility to establish critical distance, a distance established temporally. Critical distance may not only be established in order to reexamine the present but also to imagine, materialize, intervene and live particular alternatives.

This perspective on the future changes the questions that we must ask of design and how we might do design. I trace some preliminary thoughts about the temporal politics of design futures here, pointing at some examples, to (re)frame

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questions at stake in my own work that may also have wider relevance for design research. This text is the draft of an introduction to a longer forthcoming paper.

Some Political Dimensions of Design Futures

The role of design in formgiving to futures is articulated in several genres of design, which I refer to here with the shorthand 'design futures'. In some modernist design histories, the political dimensions of design and futurity were perhaps more explicit. Time, memory and futures were themes in *acceptera*, the first manifesto of Swedish Modern design (Åhrén et al., [1931] 2008). Distributed by the publishing arm of the Social Democratic party in 1931, it is also political propaganda, evoking in text, image and form a modern, or future, 'A-Europe', "The society we are building for", and 'B-Europe', or "Sweden-then", fragmented spatially and socially, but also temporally. Differences in values, cultures, families and customs are portrayed as regressive and stuck across multiple past centuries. It is a manifesto for development in a predetermined direction, creation on the basis of time, a specific arrow of time leading to a particular, and singular, social, as well as technological and design, future.

The future is also at stake in contemporary genres of 'concept design', 'critical design' and 'persuasive design',[2] which aim to project, challenge and steer future images, skills and stuff. In these genres, the political dimensions are not typically articulated or addressed.

The genre of 'concept design' has flourished in trade shows and world expositions, for example as prototypes of the 'ideal home', 'future city', 'concept car', and 'The World of Tomorrow'. In a similar vein, Philips Electronics' *Vision of the Future* (Baxter et al., 1996) and other industrial and strategic design programs fuse forecasting, sociology, and high-tech research in concept designs. Concept designs have become central to business strategies building shared values and commitments, expanding and marketing the 'corporate imagination' (Hamel and Prahalad, 1991) within a company, an industrial sector or a target group. Foresight may be essential for industries that depend on a 20-year lifespan (Gabrielli and Zoels, 2003), however such genres go well beyond technical questions of lifespan to induce desire and (re)produce cultural imaginaries for particular industrial futures.

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Some 'critical' design genres in industrial and interaction[3] design ally with art to produce artifacts that challenge industrial futures. Rather than materializing the "dreams of industry" (Dunne and Raby, 2001), critical design practices borrow from strategies of defamiliarization and estrangement from modernist aesthetics to evoke 'alternative nows' or 'speculative futures'. Critical designs are intended as 'material theses', physical rather than written critiques, of existing models of production and consumption (Seago and Dunne, 1999). Placed carefully in settings ranging from art galleries and media outlets to homes, critical designs should stimulate skepticism and provoke debate about current norms. While opposing the mainstream, many such projects nonetheless seem politically neutral or blind (c.f. Prado, 2014; or, I would suggest, perhaps a enact a covert form of power). From an obscure political position, alternatives and futures are elaborated and multiplied.

Design for behavior change, as a genre of 'persuasive' design, aims at changing norms. In the area of sustainability, for example, ideals, consequences or futures around energy and water consumption are monitored and visualized in forms intended to educate, persuade, incentivize, or even coerce change in perceptions and 'good' behavior (f.ex. examples in Verbeek and Slob, 2006). Designed to 'fit' people's bodies and sensory capacities, or cognitive and emotional ergonomics, such approaches steer behavior change in more or less explicit and conscious ways. Persuasive designs induce self-discipline, regulating, affirming and governing particular behaviors in forms intended to be internalized and reinforced in an ongoing manner in everyday life and social practices (Mazé, 2013). While perhaps not always aware or reflexive about the ideologies and policies (re)produced, persuasive designs oppose present conditions and propose quite particular alternatives and futures.

Concept, critical and persuasive design point to distinct ways of approaching 'the future', which I characterize here in perhaps rather over-generalized terms in order to articulate potential political dimensions. By 'the political,' here, I do not refer to state sovereignty or party politics but, rather, philosophical uses of the term in the social and political sciences. In a general sense, these design futures evoke not only different perspectives but different realities, and the 'ontological politics' of (re)producing, multiplying and choosing between different realities (f.ex. Mol, 1999). Further, enacting, intervening and establishing one reality over another can be understood as a political act, in which a particular social order is priviledged or

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subordinated to another (f.ex. Mouffe, 2001). Design can be understood as a political act, whether reflexive or intentional about this or not, in which a particular reality or order may be confronted with others (Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013).

Turns in Design Futures and Futures Studies

Design futures are about more than what the future holds and more than just how to get there, thus, but about the political dimensions. However, focus in concept and critical design tends to be on 'what' the future could or should be like, and attention in design for behavior change often quickly shifts to methodological issues, of 'how' to narrow the gap between possible or desired futures and how to get there. These questions have become acute as such design enters into academic and industrial settings concerned with the reliability, reproducibility and replicability of the design proposals. Questions of 'what' and 'how', however, have preoccupied design with issues of epistemology and methodology. Discussions in design futures often circle or get stuck, for example, around questions of what can be known, the limits of knowledge and issues of uncertainty and indeterminability, and around what strategies, tools and instruments can be applied to understand future phenomena.

These questions have generated particular responses within the design genres, which parallel some responses in the field of futures studies. Such genres do increasingly look to futures studies, and its methods, but not necessarily to its contemporary currents of ontological or political questioning, which I point at here.

Many responses in design futures and futures studies to these questions is to reframe futurity in terms that can be methodologically studied in terms of the present. Concept and critical designers argue that the point is not to know or understand the future, but to stimulate reflection and discourse in the present. Such responses are also present in futures studies, for example in arguments that the purpose is to better understand a current situation, to expand mental horizons, to enhance anticipatory consciousness, or to stimulate change in the present (f.ex. Glen and Gordon, 2003). Further, persuasive design emphasizes experimental probing processes combined with learning loops conducted within 'niches' (such as living labs), in which propositions are made and adjusted incrementally to (co)develop or steer towards a desired future (c.f. Vergragt, 2010). Futures-oriented transition studies, similarly, may combine forecasting and backcasting, in which future visions or concept designs are

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formulated, but they are also released, tested and adapted in experimental or participatory settings.

Methodologies that become relevant to design futures and futures studies, thus, may include approaches to discourse analysis, ethnography and participatory action research. Such approaches are already present within mainstream design and design research, representing a turn to the social sciences for these genres of design (c.f. Halse et al., 2010 ; de Jong and Mazé, forthcoming). Such approaches may also be seen as part of a 'designerly' turn in the social sciences reflected in a range of mixed and hybrid approaches such as interventionist and 'inventive' methods (f.ex. Lury and Wakeford, 2012). In this questions of 'what' and 'how', along with convergence upon certain methodological issues and developments, 'the future' is folded into more general and larger approaches to study and change the present.

However, these questions and responses are not the only way to consider futurity nor its political dimensions and potentials. Some futures studies scholars argue that the epistemological and methodological basis of many social sciences, which have been geared toward understanding the past or the present, are not conducive to fields in which futurity is at stake (Malaska, 1993). Such arguments are also part of a move away from the predictive-empirical and techno-deterministic varieties of futures studies, along with related concerns for scientific method, which have dominated since the post-war period. Such futures have tended to imagine the future as empty, into which possible and normative images (whether fiscal, scientific or cultural) may simply arrived at as distinct realities through linear transition pathways. Other and emerging varieties include those oriented toward 'prospective-action research' and also 'cultural-interpretive' and 'critical-postmodern' traditions (c.f. Gidley et al, 2009), which explore different questions.

Temporal Politics of Design Futures

This turn in futures studies traces some relations to theories of history and futures, representing a shift from diachronic (linear) thinking and arguments that causality itself might be understood as an essentially narrative category (Jameson, 2005). In such theories, concepts of 'the future', 'the new' 'innovation', 'progress' and 'nextness' are queried not as givens or ideals, but as lenses through which to reflect upon issues of stability, control, determinism and power in the sciences (c.f. Grosz,

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1999). Power relations, for example, can be understood in the ways that a regulating institution, instrument or body is directed at containing unpredictability and the emergence of singularities. The future, thus, is arguably a 'supervalence', a concept, or set of concepts, through which ideas or ideologies are manifest. Indeed, the hegemony of rhetorics of futurity can be discussed, in terms of whether or how they determine what is possible to imagine or do in the present (Wakeford, 2014). Through this turn, we can ask other questions, philosophical and political, of design futures.

From a philosophical perspective, thus, inquiry into temporal concepts such as futurity becomes a way of reflecting on ontologies, assumptions and normativites behind scientific methodologies and, I would argue, underpinning forms of design futures. For example, in relation to the *acceptera* manifesto, it becomes possible to discuss the theories and ideologies embedded in the rejection of multiple times in favour of a singular arrow of time, in the envisioned movement towards a singular and universal future, 'A-Europe'. We can examine the ontological politics behind the differentiation of different times, or realities, and ask questions such as how they relate to one another, how choices are made between them, and the political reasons for preferring one reality over another. Further, the consequences of A-Europe future can be traced, in which the design act of materializing and publishing the manifesto can be seen as a form of politics, literally shaping a particular social-economic reality of the particular consumer culture of the Swedish welfare state (Mattson and Wallenstein, 2010).

From critical-political perspectives, such temporal lines of inquiry open for discussing the in- and exclusions implied by different futures. Universal and singular notions of time are refuted in neo-vitalist theories, and power relations of singularity refuted in feminist and post-colonial theories, for example (c.f. Grosz, 1999; Harding, 2011). Multiple times and diverse durations, the untimely and difference may be identified and articulated in order to explore how things are for others, or how things may be otherwise. Such perspectives open for exploring how concept designs continue or contain, produce or reproduce, particular socio-economic and techno-scientific futures that may only be imagined from and for a particular time and place, particular parts and groups in society. The alternative nows and futures produced by critical design may be examined not only for the particular ideals that are critiqued but also what, or who, is left out or remains invisible. Both the alternatives of critical

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design fail to articulate propositions and the normativities of persuasive design can be discussed in terms of how difference can be articulated, and whether others, or otherness can intervene or take over.

Concluding thoughts

These political questions reframe what is at stake in these genres of design futures and how I may think about and do my own practice-based research, and how that relates to other practices (f.ex. those collected or studied in Ericson and Mazé, 2011 ; Mazé, forthcoming). While I cannot dwell on this here, these are lenses through which I would like to reflect further on the particularities of and different approaches to temporal form and politics within projects such as:

- *Switch! Symbiots* by Jenny Bergström, Ramia Mazé, Johan Redström, Anna Vallgårda at the Interactive Institute with Olivia Jeczmyk and Bildinstitutet (Mazé, 2013b)
- *Switch! Energy Futures* by Ramia Mazé, Aude Messager, Thomas Thwaites, Basar Önal at the Interactive Institute (Mazé, 2013b)

In this text, I have argued that the future is not empty, as an open and infinite realm, into which any number of possible, probable or desirable futures may be projected. The future is already occupied by images, skills and stuff that design, more or less intentionally, takes part in (re)producing. Genres such as concept, critical and persuasive design orient explicitly toward the future or, rather, particular futures, in which concepts of time, duration and difference are materialized in ways that have power. Identifying, imagining and intervening particular realities, over others, entails political questions. While some epistemological and methodological questions entail a turn to familiar approaches in the social sciences, I argue for a further turn to political philosophy and critical-political theories in order to articulate such questions, and to identify lenses through which I may reflect upon and do practice-based design research in design futures.

If futurity constitutes the remaining critical 'outside' to the present (Grosz, 2001), futurity represents the most radical potential of design. The many genres and genealogies of design perhaps call for anthropologies or, perhaps, 'archaeologies' (Jameson, 2005), of design futures.

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[1] This is the subject of a lecture and workshop by myself and J. Wangel for a course at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in 2011, Contents from the course will be published in Schalk, Kristiansson and Gunnersson-Östling (forthcoming 2014).

[2] I have written more extensively about these elsewhere (Mazé, 2007), along with relations to my own practice-based design research.

[3] Here I frame 'critical design' narrowly, as a specific genre within industrial and interaction design. Elsewhere (Mazé, 2007 ; Ericson and Mazé, 2011), I articulate this genre within a much wider spectrum of practices and forms of criticality across design and architecture.

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