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**Industrial Design: Aesthetical Dynamics and Visual  
Alphabetization of Material Culture – Redefined**

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**Abstract**

The emergence of industrial Design and Designers in postmodern Europe obviously changed the Aesthetical Dynamics and visual redefinition, reordering or the visual alphabetization of the man-made environment and material culture forever. Hence the need and trust for this paper. The focus of the paper is an attempt at broadly describing or defining what visual Alphabetization means which could be put thus: Visual alphabetization is that skilful ability of the designer to carefully and logically arranged the visual elements or design elements (in a given product) like colour, material, form, branding, or the degree of the play of light and shade or lighting to generate maximum visual impact, in its uniqueness and differentiation from other products. In the body of the paper it was established that, Visual alphabetization represents that ability of the designer to come away from the Notion that a “Loud design” is “Good design”. Rather nowadays there is a reordering of thinking of the contemporary designer

that have begun to explore or look out for designing objects that recede from our attention, rather than attract or command/demand attention. From its findings, the paper recommends the application of contemporary techniques and material in products design which would create that almost “ghost-like” feeling about any given product that in effect will exhibit such mystique that seems to draw/drag the consumer /user to that subtle allure of the products structure and obscurity all at once but in a much less forceful manner.

**Key words** – Aesthetic differentiation, Cultural Dialectics, Ephemeral, Mimesis, Man-made/Built Environment, Visual Alphabetization.

### Introduction

Postmodernism and postmodernist influences and tendencies brought about profound and phenomenal challenges to the Post War World of products/consumer goods patronage. This perhaps has been necessitated by the changes in the craft and material means of production coupled with the environment of the crafted/Designed object on the one hand, and the introduction of new and improved materials science and technology put against the abundance of an unending stream of Smart Art and Cutting edge technology and a thriving/booming world Economy on the other. The post war era ushered in a craze in consumerism of household items/products ranging from the Refrigerator to the Washing machine, Gramophone player to the Telephone, and so on (Lyotard, 1984).

After the Second World War, the world experienced, profound/phenomenal changes in the standard of living viz-a-viz the “appetite” and “desire” for manufactured goods/products. There was not only the obvious experience of a changed material environment of designed objects being more abundant, influenced by the availability of the introduction of new technologies, there was also the experience of intense privatization in the manufacturing industry. So the private sector and mass produced/manufactured goods also saw a proliferation of factory produced goods. The role of Advertising and the advertising process cannot be overemphasized in all of these. The immediate post-war years saw the interface between sharing the experience of the advantages of new products like the automobile, the washing machine, the gramophone player, telephone, and the refrigerator and so on and the urgent need for marketing and sales of these products. But perhaps most importantly all through the years of post war manufacturing, the whole concept of quality dramatically changed for good. So the essence and need for Design (industrial Design) took centre stage in the production and manufacture of consumer goods/services. So saw the birth of a new profession and industry, called industrial design (Dant, 2005).

The emergence of industrial Design and Designers on the verge and eve of this huge appetite for consumer goods and household appliances presented a huge and enormous challenge that obviously changed the Aesthetical Dynamics and visual redefinition, reordering or the visual alphabetization of the man-made environment and material culture forever.

### **Design and Visual Alphabetization of Material Cultural: The Phenomenon**

An attempt at broadly describing or defining what visual Alphabetization means would be put thus: Visual alphabetization is that skilful ability of the designer to carefully and logically arranged the visual elements or design elements (in a given product) like colour, material, form, branding, or the degree of the play of light and shade or lighting to generate maximum visual impact, in its uniqueness and differentiation from other products. Visual alphabetization is that ability of the designer to come away from the Notion that a “Loud design” is “Good design”. Rather there is a reordering of thinking of the contemporary designer and have begun to explore or look out for designing objects that recede from our attention, rather than attract or command/demand for attention. This can be done by the skilful manipulations of an objects colours and materials to create an ephemeral quality. E.g. the use of transparent plastics or glass for example allows the background to blend through a given product. Fine wire mesh membranes that flows and blends with the lightness of solidified smoke, gauzy translucent fabrics that floats and diffuses light, reflective panels that blend into the surrounding skies. All of these techniques and materials create an almost “ghost –like” feeling about such a given product.

They exhibit a ‘mystique’ that seems to draw/drag the consumer/user to that subtle allure of its structure and obscurity all at once, but in a much less forceful manner. The visual alphabetization using the Ephemeral theme produces objects or good designs that are felt/sensed before they are seen physically. They are almost like a “mirage” (Hassenzahl, 2008).

The above is a good example of that Redefinition and Reordering or better still of the Visual/Aesthetic Alphabetization of our Contemporary/Ephemeral material world and culture, our man-made and built environment – the Earth.

Putting that in a much simpler perspective however, it is common knowledge that everything in human society that does not come directly from nature is designed or made by man. Many man-made products are normally presented in special packaging and display containers with specially designed brand names and logos. It is inevitable that both the designer and the person who commissions these design where the latter may be a company or some kind of public or private organization, do ultimately influence the dynamics of the production and creation of the intended communicable visual images. These organizations or persons will always make certain

to pass across their belief systems and corporate culture, bearing the identity/practices of such an organization.

In this case culture may be defined as those set of values, beliefs/belief systems, attitudes and ways of life that is shared by the individual/corporate members of such an organization. In the same vain a product according to (Frankenberger, Badke-Schaub, 1998) could be defined or described as a set of objects that serves specific functions. They also possess particular / specific aesthetic qualities that embody symbolic representation and significance. The functions of design, aesthetics, symbols/symbology and semiotics coupled with what they represent, are deeply cultural and particularly utilitarian in content and context. So it is clear to see how aesthetics and visual symbols can be deeply cultural, although the set of functions they offer can vary from culture to culture. Furthermore, a product's functional elements are intimately related to its aesthetic and symbolic elements. Thus, sometimes the aesthetics of a given product can be determined by its shape, which derives from the object's function, along the lines of the three 'Fs' principle: "Form Follows Function". (Wilson, 2002).

Design has great potentials to create, develop and communicate such socio-cultural values and holds much of the responsibility for forming the future of the man-made, material culture and the built environment, and seemingly making our complex world become more humane/ comfortable thus helping to shape a new visually aesthetic and dynamic world for the future.

### **Design and the Aesthetical Dynamics of Differentiation**

At a time when the technological gap of the developed and developing countries is rapidly closing, the differentiation of products, services and brands in general through innovation and improvement in their functions, has become practically non-existent. Any technological novelty or innovation can easily become, obsolete or outdated within a few months. The issue of differentiation has to come from the brand's cultural value, represented by its aesthetics, its significance and, to a lesser degree, its functions. It is these cultural values that arouse emotions, help the consumer relate to the product and form emotional links between the consumer of such a product and the brand. Moreover, cultural values as dynamic as they get are hard to imitate.

According to Wilson, J. (2002) who stated that "In a globalised world in which there is an abundance of objects that are simply indistinguishable from one another, the opportunity therefore now exists for us to try and incorporate design into the creation of goods and services with profoundly unique identities". Such uniqueness according to him will succeed in making people identify products and brands with unique cultural traits that bears the designers socio-cultural values through design that can achieve a sustainable and competitive advantage, that is, the real strategy for success in the future.

### **Influences of Visual Alphabetization on the Cultural/Aesthetical Dynamics of Society**

Today's world is undergoing such fundamental transformations like those of the industrial and manufacturing sectors of the societies that marked the turn of the 20th century which is rapidly giving way to the transformation in information and the acquisition of knowledge of the people and society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This presents a different dynamics and process that promises to bring about fundamental changes in all aspects of our lives, including knowledge dissemination, social interactions, economic and business practices, political engagements, mass media, and its practices, education, health, leisure and entertainment. These changes will be immediately felt and will be so pronounced, it will be reflected in the exteriors and interiors of our homes; including fashion, home appliances, means of transportation, utilitarian and other utensils of daily necessity, food and environment, will form the core of all objects created through design and by designers, that will present new materials for a new visualization experiment that has caught on, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer experience/habits for the consumption of Smart Art and high tech. gadgets.

In his submission Saffer, D. (2007) stated that, "A New Visual derivative and Narrative has emerged with the upsurge in the use of high tech gadgets such as videophones digital satellite video, conferencing. Smart phone, and (CGI) computer generated imaging, taking into account the visualization of audio-communication, visual simulation in science and research, the graphic/visual abilities of mobile phones, the World Wide Web (internet) multimedia, and a universal mobile telecommunications capabilities all leading to the beginning of a new visual alphabetization or a reordering/redefinition of our of cultures, our material and built environment". In other words, this represents a visual presence and a re-evaluation and re-engineering of our values and belief systems from and on every corner of our Home – the Earth.

A new visual and material culture is replacing the world of linearity (or one dimensionality). The global material consciousness of society is evolving at breakneck speed. The accelerating convergence between telecommunications, broadcasting, multimedia and information/communication technologies is driving the production and manufacture of new products and services, as well as ways of conducting business and commerce. Never before in the history of mankind have so many people had access to such tremendous wealth of both economic, and material wealth propelled by the availability of information for data rendering and application. Industrial designers are the communicators in these processes of changing paradigms through the introduction of innovative designs and new cutting edge/Smart Art technological innovations and breakthroughs which will totally change the aesthetical Dynamics of industrially produced goods and services.

Design has become a worldwide phenomenon. It has become more and more significant over the past few years in all areas and fields of industry, commercial, cultural, ecological and social activities. Industrial Design or Design as of a necessity has become multi-faceted and multi-dimensional in nature. There abound excellent examples of the influences of Industrial Design in every household today than ever before in the History of mankind. Design and Designers are expressing and communicating thereby registering and establishing every typical cultural and characteristic values of civilizations of the past as well as that of the present, to create that of the future.

### **Design and Aesthetical Dynamics of the Concept of Quality**

In today's world, the concept of quality seems to have been stretched beyond its elastic limits. Most people after buying a product no longer bother to check whether the products they have bought or are using actually perform the role and function they are meant to perform. That has become a "given". You buy a house without checking whether the tap water runs or not. You buy a car without checking whether there is an engine in it or not, "it is given". The car must, or is supposed to have an engine, if not; it will not be called a car in the first place. So today the daily basic needs of life like basic safety and comfort are being met, thanks to Advancement in Technology, and there is a safety net of the quality of products that protects and reassures all.

According to Forty (1998), who says that "quality is often measured in terms of wants and desire, rather than need". Against that notion we tend to judge the designed objects that we surround ourselves with, depending on whether they please us, seem elegant or beautiful, and contribute to giving us a desired ego, social status or identity, thereby giving us an image as it relates to the world we live in. We are concerned with the story of what the object or the designed environment is telling us with its branded products or goods. Long ago, the world stopped selling cars/automobiles for transportation, rather they started selling lifestyle.

So deducing from all of the above therefore, the concept of quality and the place of function become interlaced with aesthetics and styling which completely helped changed the face and concept of industrial design professional practice of the 1940s-1960s. In those days, quality and functionality go hand in hand with the product having to do what it was manufactured to do. But today, in the new millennia, the concept of quality and aesthetics have surpassed even expectations of the "die hard" critics of industrial design. Nowadays, most people don't bother to check whether what they buy or use are expected to perform the task/role and function that they were meant to perform. It is expected or assumed that the product should and must uphold the manufacturers/designers' confidence in his manufactured goods. Quality and aesthetics are "part and parcel" of a desired whole, the epitome and achievement of a new perfection in excellence in our ephemeral world of material culture.

### **The Theory of Mimesis: Influences on Design and Aesthetics of Material Culture**

According to Papanek (2009), whose study revealed that the theory of mimesis is very relevant to design and that it could be said to mean, “the imitative representation of nature or human behaviour as expressed in Art/Design”. So it could be established that most Iconic Designs follow this or are directly influenced by the practice of the theory of mimesis, which also is directly related to the principles of “BIONICS” – which is said to connote “Art Imitating life” or works of Art and design that are executed to look like or resemble the “flora and fauna” of nature e.g. the wingspan of an aircraft resembles a bird in flight and so on.

#### **Design as Material Cultural Dialectics**

According to Goldschmidt (1991) whose analysis of the dialectics of visuals echoed the view that:

- (1) “Dialectics is that rationale used for looking at situations based on change through the conflict of opposing forces”. Continuing it was also said to mean.
- (2) “Any formal system of reasoning or thought that arrives at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments” it concluded.

Stretching that analysis a little further it could be deduced that material culture is a direct derivative of the Design process and therefore the idea of Dialectical materialism could be said to be the discourse that relates to the materialistic philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Drawing from the aforementioned, therefore Design as a material cultural discourse (and Dialectics) could be reasoned out to mean the analysis of Design as the progenitor of our material culture/world or of our man-made/built environment. The outcome of Discussions or intellectual exercise emanating or resulting there from will definitely contribute, influence or Negate the ultimate Design environment desired by the culture of the people of that given environment.

So from the cultural point of view, there are different parameters for understanding the changes that is taking the global/world economics from modernity to post-modernity. Since the industrial revolution, the major contribution of Mass production, large factories, centralized production, business and economics has been the contemporary factors that changed human standard of living from the situation that lasted for thousands of years since the Neolithic age, in which agriculture and cattle farming were predominantly what the world economy were used to. (Shove & Watson, 2007).

People tried to better their lives and fulfil their needs with everyday objects and brands and therefore wanted manufacturing companies to come-up with and create

that impetus of positive demand/urge for these products. In the light of the above and in the final analysis therefore, design tends to move from being a dialectical process of manufactured objects only to being a dialectical process between people and their cultures that creates a homogenous contact and relationship with nature, manufactured or otherwise. Design has to take cultural roots into account and transmit them, as that is what consumers want. Consumers demand something more than just functions, they ask for quality, beauty (Aesthetics) and values as it relates to their cultural and aesthetic needs.

### **Aesthetical Dynamics of Good and Bad Design: A Redefinition of Material Culture**

In this context, what is a good or bad design? It is not bad if it does not function, but it is bad if it does not suit the customer, if the customer does not like it. Quality here has been placed or positioned in a more objective rather than subjective context, while the designed object is placed in its larger environment, where it influences this context in which it is placed, and in return the object is influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which it functions. A lamp is not just a lamp, it changes according to the nature of the room in which it stands and the walls and furniture on which it sheds its light (Berman, 2008).

The goal and focus of the industrial design profession/discipline has always been that of mass production and the production of aesthetically functional standardized objects for millions of people. A good example of this was manifested during the era of the Qin dynasty 221 -206 BC, first Emperor of China, who whenever they went for their war campaigns, would instruct his warriors that arrows used in battle should be reused over and over again. But he soon discovered that each arrow that was made was designed specifically to suit/fit specific bow/archer, so an individual arrows base would not fit into another bow, so the Emperor had to come up with the idea of standardizing the design and shape of the arrow so they could fit into all types of bows. So began the Age of standardization and mass production which can trace its origins to imperial china.

So as we wake up each morning in our modern world, we discover that almost everything around us has been designed to make our lives much more comfortable and easier. Sometimes, these things (objects) even become part of our family as even our children can inherit them. So, design or industrial design is a cultural reality that is contextualized in the culturality and functionality of the given designed object.

### **Basic Characteristics of a Good Design**

Basically, consumers react positively to designs that are explicit/clear and straight forward and understandable without the arbitrariness as exhibited by some manufactured goods, which are simply dumped onto the market, hoping consumers will

just buy it. So according to Brooks, F.P (2010) in his modulated studies in “design of designs”, he proffered a few of the characteristics of a good design and they are as follows:-

- A good design therefore (would mean or) should be very innovative, with salient features of originality and ingenuity built into it.
- A good design should make a good product, technically and technologically useful and functional enough to sell the product.
- It should be aesthetically functional, beautiful and appealing enough to attract consumer appeal and purchase.
- A good design should be simple, honest and appealing even to the unschooled/untrained in the know-how of how the product works or should be utilized.
- A good design is unobtrusive, that is, a good design should possess salient qualities that does not stick out in an unwelcome way or become undesirably noticeable to cause distraction.
- A good design should/must be durable to guarantee the value for its purchase.
- A good design must be consistent in its details and quality delivery for every model/or brand produced or made.
- A good design must (satisfy or) be compliant with the Eco-friendly/renewable energy and climate change realities of the times by having features that are not harmful to the environment and to nature.
- A good design’s features must not be “over embellished, exaggerated or too complicated” for “just design” sake. It must reflect some of the minimalist philosophy, of “little or minimal is best”.

In most good designs, sometimes everything defers to the very essential and primary quality that the designed product intends to highlight or accentuate. Which means the designer must try to actually get the notion of “design for design sake” out of the way, to make room for the products inherent qualities to come to the fore. With an attempt at trying to make the product look “undersigned”.

In the era of the industrial revolution the belief that Form Follows Function” may have been the norm, but today in the 21st century all of that notion has been annihilated by the discovery of the microchip” and the “digitized” and “digital” age and world of Computer Technology (IT). So the practice of design has moved from the once cultural tangible objects of the post-modernist era to the intangible world of contemporary 21st century designs.

The contextual scenario of looking at quality and aesthetics in design in a much bigger, larger and wider scenario seeks to:

- buttress the fact that “design is like creating harmony in music”

- give beauty and essence to the designed object is as important a component as the overall make-up of the designed object itself.
- Ensure that component of individualizing or personalizing a design for example is one of the factors that makes a perfect/ideal design

(Multon, 1995).

The above Design/aesthetical dynamics influences or plays a major role in the Design outcomes of most if not all manufactured products today. This new reality therefore has made the work of designers more attractive for the user interface and participation. It has given it more exposure; roles have become individualized, vague and flexible rather than prescriptive. This dynamism and change in the professional roles of Design/Designers coincides with the pace and development of industrial production systems and methods and that of market forces and infrastructures. Production processes/outputs are now made in smaller and smaller series, they are now individualized and sometimes customized. In the New Millennium almost anything can be ordered from almost anywhere, produced and delivered to customer specification within 24 hours. This inclusion of the consumers in the Design process to actually participate in the design and production exercise has brought about that individualized and personalized aspect of Design that makes the consumer become involved in the decision making process of the evolution and birth of a new product (Thielsch, 2008).

This is the reality of today's world of technological marvels and giants like Apple, Sam-Sung, etc. Such new roles for designers, like that of direct interpreters of personalized and individual wishes and desires, of consumers carries with it a very significant and dynamic change in the traditional balance between designers on the one hand and manufacturers of Industry on the other. Over the years, we have been taught that good design is good for business and, therefore, should be initiated by the manufacturers of these products. That designers are supposed to work under their corporate leadership as an activity integrated in corporate strategy.

It is clear to see that the opposite or the reverse is now the case. Where designers communicate directly with the consumer because they (the designers) understand the full range of the product's socio-economic and cultural environment, and also the market forces within which the product's competitiveness will be called to question.

According to Bayer, H. and Karen, H. (1998) who collectively state that the significance of the role of the consumer's wishes (his likes and dislikes) in all of these, scenarios tends to a great extent impact/influence the attitudes and professional position and practice of the designers who ultimately will strive to come up with the right/adequate concepts and ideas for the eventual production of the prototype of the new product, that will satisfy the consumer's desires and appeals.

As the industrial design profession and practice moves from object to concept, from mass market to individualized and consumer centric/personalized markets; as they move from functional consumption to products that tells people stories that entrenches cultural values and belief systems of various cultures, the designer becomes better able to look at the needs and wants of people and society directly, not only through the eyes of industry, or commerce but also for the enhancement and upliftment of society thereby making our everyday life easier and more comfortable (Dant, 2005).

### Conclusion

Design today has become an integral part and tool in shaping the world's economies/societies, and their ways of life, be it cultural, social, economic, ecological, communicative, Aesthetic and Technological aspects thereby helping society to get to achieve that high quality sense of value in our everyday life activities. The flexibility and dynamism in production techniques together with a combination with innovative expertise in Design of high end products and services has provided the world community of the 21st century the possibility of infinite choice of perfection and excellence.

Therefore it is safe to say that innovations through quality design and smart technological breakthrough has endeared the world to a generation of ground breaking Trail blazers of high end "chic" product's and designers brands that has become the hallmark of the Digital Age of the New millennia. Thus ensuring and establishing a Redefinition of our material world and culture that has heretofore engendered a reordering and permanently changing the visual and aesthetical alphabetization of our man-made and built environment.

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