Scyborg Designer: The Ghost in the Machine

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In a world on the verge of collapse, it becomes critical to rethink the education of designers, usually trained to reproduce and maintain the capitalist machine. Here, Advocating for a political praxis that avoids universality and understands itself as situated and located, I bring La Paperson’s concept of scyborg to think about how design academia can reflect and become a practice of decoloniality. As someone that collects scraps, components that no longer present value for the system, the scyborg can appropriate and reorganize them, acting like a virus in the system. By creating a mess in the apparatus using its own structures, the scyborg could disassemble the machine from within, in order to decolonize the University. Learning from the scyborg’s strategy, designers can become this ‘ghost in the machine’, responsible for the dismantling and reorganization of secular colonial structures, thus helping to break the cycle that left the planet damaged.

decoloniality; scyborg; design pedagogy; design academia

1. Introduction
Design has been contributing to Western modernity logic of oppression, productivity and extractivism. For a long time, designers refused to understand modernist design as situated, located and restricted, rather than timeless and universal. Design is intrinsically linked to capitalism and to a liberal conception of politics: we are generally involved with reproducing and maintaining the status quo (Escobar, 2018) and uncritically serving the capitalistic consume machine (Foster, 2002). Leading design practices remain based on productive and economic processes that left the “planet damaged,” taking us to a horizon of collapse. I bring the author La Paperson, the avatar of professor K. Wayne Yang to think how designers can get out of the position of executor and maintainer of that harmful cycle of production and consumption. It is common to hear that capitalism co-opts all kinds of resistance and transgression, turning them into commodities that are quickly discarded and turned into garbage. Is it possible to reverse this logic? If it is difficult to see from the outside because we are totally immersed in the
capitalist perspective, how can we imagine other practices within the system? How can we create room for maneuver?

2. La Paperson’s Proposal

In “A third University is possible”, La Paperson suggests that colonial structures, especially the University, can and should be dismantled, scavenged, retooled, and reassembled in decolonial contraptions. She understands that, regardless of its colonial structure, “because school is an assemblage of machines and not a monolithic institution, its machinery has always being subverted toward decolonizing purposes” (La Paperson, 2017, pp. xiii). Defending that universities are spaces for world-making, she divides them into three types of worlds. So what is the difference between them, and what kind of world are they creating?

The first-world university is the mainstream, aimed at mass consumption and corporate profit. It is the machine that is interested in keeping things the way they are: degrees, fees, expertise, the publication system. It is a piece of “machinery commissioned to actualize imperialist dreams of a settled world” (La Paperson, 2017, pp. xiv).

The second world university is independent, critical; it is within the system but offers some level of criticism; it is a system more concerned with aesthetic / language issues than with the market. Second world university “desires to humanize the world, which is a more genteel way to colonize a world that is so much more than human” (La Paperson, 2017, pp. xv).

The third world university is a type of machine interested in bringing conscience, or promote a change in society’s values, a revolutionary political project. It is a decolonizing university. It already exists within the first and second-world universities. La Paperson describes the University as an amalgamation of first, second, and third worlds formations. None of the modes of University is completely distinct, autonomous; each mode appropriates or contains within itself elements of the other two. There is a third world university in every first and second world universities and vice versa.

The decolonizing university needs to teach first-world curricula and second-world criticism because only through criticism the colonial code can be deciphered and hacked. However, it does not incorporate these elements. It reinvents and appropriates itself to build a coherent discourse and create a project of radical transformation.

To become an effective decolonizing action, we must try to think strategically about the apparatuses of power’s permeability and the fact that the neo-colonial systems inadvertently support decolonization agendas. They take over the speeches, institutionalize them until they are absorbed and silenced by the machine.

La Paperson presents a theory of action in agency: the scyborg. We are all probably used to the term cyborg, which means a body that has integration with some technological component and that dismantles our understanding of the body as something only natural.

La Paperson’s scyborg (with s and c) is the person who has picked up colonial technologies and reassembled them for decolonizing purposes by creating a mess in their apparatus. Like a mutant code, “the scyborg is the agency of creating a system-interference or a system-witchcraft” (La Paperson, 2017, pp. xiv), the agency of machine dedicated to decolonization formed by the assemblage of pieces of scrap of colonial technology. Being the ghost in the machine is a viable strategy for the existence, development, and maintenance of the third-world university.
The author provides us with the image of scraps coupled and assembled to an existing structure, which gradually interferes with the system. Scrap is something no longer useful. The scrap is Stengers' witchcraft; it is the counter-spell that will diminish capitalism's power (Pignarre & Stengers, 2005). Now it's our job to discover which scraps to collect, where to reuse and how to reactivate them.

Excavating, separating, reusing, and reassembling what the Anthropocene and capitalism understand as garbage – what is discarded by them and cannot be reappropriated as a value – may be the way for design schools to be able to imagine themselves beyond the current existing structures.

Designers can strategically take on the role of being the ghost in the machine, like the computer virus that confuses and disorganizes the system, without the need to wait for a radical breakdown of it. Designers could be defined in the future as someone who contributes to the des/re/organization of the material world, someone who destabilizes and reassembles structures. Someone who takes existing structures as their material. Inspired by La Paperson, who suggests the possibility of decolonizing the university by taking advantage of the scrap from its own colonizing machine, I suggest here that design can also be reassembled through its catastrophic and failed gears as well as those that still work.

3. Discussion
La Paperson’s scyborg brings to the individual the responsibility of dismantling the oppressive university’s structures. Although important to bring to conscience that students have agency in the change of the university apparatus, it is impossible to ignore that even progressive institutions have processes to avoid change as bureaucracy or lack of transparency. Students are not in the position of decision-makers. The agency concept of the scyborg is the main interest point of La Paperson’s proposal because advocates that many individual actions can collectively disassemble secular oppressive structures from within, leading to change. However, the author also reminds us that these agency processes and the projected strategies’ effectivity are temporary – “It is timely, and yet its usefulness constantly expires” (La Paperson, 2017, pp. 52) –, as the dominant system usually decodes the transgression and the forces of resistance, incorporating them into the system to silence them.

So, for the scyborg to be able to exist, I consider it is necessary to take into account two factors. The first is that students and teachers need to be aware and critical of the oppressions that surround them: those they suffer and those they promote. As the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire defends, pedagogy must be a practice of freedom, where no one sets anyone free; people are set free in communion. Freire defended a pedagogy for emancipation, where students and teachers act as autonomous agents and seek to overcome oppression in a dialogical exercise of practice and reflection (Freire, 1970). bell hooks, which has Freire as a theoretical reference, defends an engaged and enthusiastic practice of critical learning from an anti-racist, feminist, and anti-colonialist perspective. It reinforces the importance of enthusiasm as well as the recognition of everyone’s presence in the room, recognition of individuality, of listening to each other’s voices, being affected by the presence of the other. For hooks, in her radical pedagogy, the enthusiasm is generated by collective effort, by transforming the class into a learning community. She defends a way of teaching that allows transgressions – a movement against borders and beyond them (hooks, 2017).

Second, we cannot avoid collectively and publicly fighting for structural changes to take place within academic communities, as a form of class fight and representation. La Paperson suggests that the scyborg acts like a hacker, promoting deviations and defects in the established system, which I understand to happen surreptitiously. In my opinion, however, tensions, if made invisible, will be silenced. The struggles, causes, and propositions, in my view, need to be announced, so that they can be debated and matured collectively and later negotiated and disputed.
I can cite one significant event that points to a slow and gradual movement of structural change in the Brazilian context: the institutionalization of the policy of quotas for black students and/or students coming from public education. Implemented at the state level in Brazil from 2003 and nationally in 2012 through federal law, the affirmative policies, given their extension, promoted a sensitive change in the representation of blacks and the poor in public institutions of higher education, which in Brazil are the institutions of excellence, until then mostly occupied by the descendants of middle and upper-class families. The percentage of blacks and browns who completed graduation grew from 2.2% in 2000 to 9.3% in 2017. Although it is still half the number of undergraduates in the white population, the admission of the black population to university has increased four times after the implementation of the quota policy (Brito, 2018). To build knowledge through other voices which have had their space denied historically is a fundamental step to the process of decolonizing academia because it is only possible to dismantle the system from within if you are in.

4. References


About the Author:

Clara Meliande is a Brazilian graphic designer, researcher, and educator living in Rio de Janeiro. She is interested in working in design from a curatorial perspective, whether proposing exhibitions, publications, or educational projects. After working for several years in cultural and editorial sectors, went back to the academy to dig into the political dimensions of exhibition design looking to thematic museums in her master’s thesis. She believes that design, design research, and teaching are complementary practices, that inform one another. She has been a design lecturer at the Architecture and Urbanism Undergraduate program of Santa Ursula University since 2017. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Industrial Design – Rio de Janeiro State University (ESDI/UERJ), where she is a fellow researcher at the Design and Anthropology Lab (LADA). Clara researches the political dimensions of design practices and discourses.