1. Exercises in alterity: nurturing alterity for a design ethic

Salvatore Zingale

1.1 Alterity in the project culture

The question of alterity, especially because of globalization process-es, migration flows, and the push to overcome discrimination and inequality, has become fundamental for understanding multicultural societies and their possible development. The focus on alterity is increasingly present in both philosophy and the human sciences, and among the disciplines that study forms of communication and cognition that are *other* than human (Vallortigara, 2000; Marchesini, 2016b), including the debate on posthumanism (Baioni *et al*., 2021). From these fields of study, we have learned that interest in alterity lies between the *ethical* dimension (*how we should act*) and the *episte-mological* dimension (*how we should know*). In the first case, alterity leads us to the encounter with subjects who are inevitably *other than us* and, for this reason, requires us to recognize each other as well as the assumption of reciprocal responsibility (Lévinas, 1961; Jonas, 1979); in the second, alterity is driven to the exploration of what lies beyond our limits, in *other territory*.

In each case, playing on the grammatical double attribution (first as a noun, then as an adjective), we define the Other as that which is *other* than what we think it is. And it is not a question of opposing *alterity* to *identity*, because the latter is a cultural construction that derives from mutual recognition: it is not the individual subject (nor even a collective subject, such as the nation or a company) that possesses an identity, because the identity of a subject derives from the network of relations in which it finds itself (cf. Remotti, 1996).

However one considers and studies it, the question of alterity presents itself as a field within which one can find unexpected resources. Its manifestations are diverse. For science, it is the unknown to be known – the universe of possibilities. For the human and social sciences, it is the progressive discovery of human complexity – of the interiority of the person and the dialogue between cultures – that cannot be rigidified in unquestionable forms of thought. For the life sciences, biological and biosemiotic, it is the realization of how much *other minds*, such as the animal world, can teach us once we abandon all pretensions to anthropocentrism.

This is particularly evident when we move from the inevitable and necessary theoretical reflection to transformative praxis, when critical thinking helps to change mental and behavioral habits, when culturally negated othernesses burst onto the social scene and, over time, undermine mental constructs and systems of ideas, even to the point of revising legal, political, and religious systems.

Today, it is legitimate to think that even the design dimension can undertake research paths that highlight the need to recognize the Other in different social and cultural contexts: from migratory flows to gender cultures, from social fragility to mental health, from cultural distances to the difficulties of social integration, etc. Design, in fact, possesses the appropriate tools to promote innovative and open visions of relations between individuals, peoples, and languages. Moreover, in the design culture, it is increasingly evident that the production of artefacts and services does not end with the satisfaction of a need; artefacts contain much more than what enables them to perform the services for which they were conceived: they are also vehicles for worldviews, including distorted or deliberately distorted images of the *Other than oneself* (Bucchetti, 2021).

The culture of the project is therefore precisely such because it can undertake research paths that involve a broader *thought of alterity*, that is, that perceive the need both to *recognize* the Other as a social and anthropological subject but also to *know* alterity as a field of inventive possibility. In other words, the ethical dimension requires a passage through the epistemological dimension to have an effect on social reality. Here the question becomes more complex: *To know how to act, how and what must we know?*

We are not interested here in finding an answer, but in highlighting how to engage design research on alterity means to urge the designer's mind to reflect on what tools and actions need to be elaborated to cultivate relations with the alterities of the contemporary world and to seize in this alterity universes of meaning that would otherwise not be explored. It is not a question of defining methodologies or drawing up guidelines, but rather of thinking about some *alterity exercises* in the training of the designer.

1.2 Exercises

I would like to focus on two topics that we can transmigrate from sign science into the design sciences. These are dialogicality and overcoming the obvious. Hence two exercises, or if we want, the acquisition of a basic awareness, i.e., a mental habit that in turn becomes a design habit.

To introduce the two exercises, let us start with a passage by the anthropologist Marco Aime, who at the end of the first chapter of his book *Classificare, separare, escludere* [To classify, separate, exclude] writes:

> **This is where racism stems from: from the unwillingness to know and the anxiety to classify, to pigeonhole, but in the simplest and most reassuring way, just as we classify plants, animals, and rocks. A preventive apartheid, which distances us without knowing us and at the same time makes us feel close and similar, equally without knowing us (Aime, 2020).**

The unwillingness to know and the anxiety to classify can be defined as two psychological blocks, even before being regarded as ideological. It is the inability to cross boundaries in defence of one's identity beliefs, the inability to overcome an obstacle that inhibits the mind, preventing it from encountering possible senses and values. Referring to other studies on the political issues that such a blockade entails, we can observe that, in many cases, what applies to the ethical field (e.g., criticism of racism or gender inequalities) also applies to the scientific and, as far as we are concerned, design fields. This is, on the one hand, a kind of *resistance to exploration*, which in design culture becomes a ruinous brake. On the other hand, it is a matter of *retreating safely* into a pseudo-classificatory order: sometimes this manifests itself in a constantly fixed gaze on the well-functioning canons of tradition; at other times, in adapting to market trends and current tastes.

Venturing into what is *other than what we know* requires an effort, a tension towards alterity. Or perhaps precisely a series of exercises, in order not to waste what the Other must show us and tell us: its explorable infinity, which instead is often reduced to a predetermined finite. The aim is to build a *design habit* that can only be formed and developed within a culture of alterity.

1.3 The exercise of dialogue

The first is the exercise of dialogue, because the disposition to dialogue constitutes the main way of accessing that which presents itself as *other* than us (Bonfantini and Ponzio, 1986; Bohm, 1996; Jullien, 2016; Zingale, 2023). Knowing how to efficiently engage in dialogue is not always a correctly employed practice. Often, the illusion of knowing how to dialogue prevails; or, rather than research, the confrontation is oriented towards dialogizing to make one's own assumptions and beliefs prevail. The will to obtain prevails over the disposition to reflect. Every dialogical act, on the other hand, should be a questioning of knowing and an exposure to not knowing (Bohm, 1996).

In his book *On Dialogue* (1996), the physicist and philosopher David Bohm observes that collective thought is larger than individual

thought, and that, for this reason, everyone can only draw on collective knowledge in order to expand his/her own. Collective thought, he says, is like a vast storehouse of notions and beliefs, often contradictory and inconsistent. He calls it a *pool of knowledge*, a metaphor reminiscent of Umberto Eco's Encyclopaedia (1984). Bohm further observes that our sense of knowing is in fact the awareness that we are in relation to other minds that draw from this vast reservoir:

> **We have the sense that we "know" all sorts of things. But we could say that perhaps it is not "we", but knowledge itself, which knows all sorts of things. The suggestion is that knowledge – which is thought – is moving autonomously: it passes from one person to another. There is a whole pool of knowledge for the whole human race, like different computers that share a pool of knowledge. This pool of thought has been developing for many thousands of years, and it is full of all sorts of content (Bohm, 1996, p. 52).**

However, precisely by analogy with the concept of the Encyclopaedia, collective thought can not only be seen as a *pool* but also as a *labyrinthine thicket* – as Eco (2007) would say – where each of its elements can be seen from innumerable points of view. The problem arises when one has to decide which point of view to favour; perhaps more than one, perhaps none. It is not a question here of espousing relativistic theses on truth but of identifying the way in which we can make use of our communication tools to enter into a relationship with the Other. We repeat, however much it may instill fear or stun us with wonder, it should be considered an infinity that can be explored.

This is where Bohm's proposal, his way of understanding dialogue, comes into play. He argues that it is precisely in *bringing into dialogue* these innumerable points of view and the conflicting visions that can result from them that we have some chance of being able to clearly see the nature of a problem, or at least to have a better grasp of it.

If we are not in search of total or totalitarian truths (cf. Lévinas, 1961), and if the search by means of dialogue is conducted heuristically, dialogicality is the basic access route for the formation of all knowledge (Zingale, 2023). This is where the ethics of dialogue comes in (Fabris, 2011), i.e., the search for the most appropriate way

to act in view of an end. Dialogicality in fact entails the assumption of certain mental habits that we can define both as *openings* towards the Other, thresholds of access that the dialoguers prearrange, and as *expectations* of what can be derived from the dialogical relationship.

Starting with Bohm, but also considering what has been said about the philosophy and semiotics of dialogue, here is a summary of some aspects of an alterity-oriented dialogical praxis (Zingale, 2023). First, one must suspend one's own assumptions and beliefs. This does not mean renouncing one's own opinions or interpretations, but that whatever one expresses, one leaves open to others without defending it or bringing it up for discussion to gain sympathy or credit: reflective dialogue does not aim to display cognitive superiority but to enter a relationship with the minds of others. Consequently, it is necessary for everyone to refrain from judging the positions of their interlocutor to grasp their points of view as deeply as possible. In this way, dialogue becomes a place of access, a place of barrier-free thresholds. Indeed, it is good to try to *enter* into the minds and interpretations of the interlocutor and to make sure that we understand the reasons for his or her points of view, even if we do not share them.

Dialogue thus becomes a space for mutual action. It may take the form of a struggle, but one where we fight for a common goal. In this space of action, the unexpected and the surprising will also have a chance to manifest themselves. If a dialogue wants to be heuristic, one must, in a certain sense, wait for the unexpected to appear. The unexpected can arise either from within the dialogue through associations of ideas or sudden new hypotheses, or from outside through accidental events that are, however, relevant to the theme of the dialogue. The unexpected and the surprising can appear at any time, by chance and in unexpected combinations. This is why dialogue – even dialogue with oneself – is fertile ground for abduction and inventiveness.

In any case, the conclusions of the dialogue must come from the dialogue itself and from the way it is conducted. No conclusion can be defined before the dialogue (for that would be a preconstructed thesis), nor can it be added after the dialogue, as if it were a shortcoming to be remedied. In both cases, the dialogical action

would present itself as a pretextual fact and not as an instrument of research and knowledge of the Other.

1. 4 The exercise of seeing beyond the obvious

In the essay *The Third Meaning* (1977), Roland Barthes proposes the well-known difference between the *obvious* and the *obtuse meaning*. The essay is inspired by some stills from the film *Ivan the Terrible* by Sergej M. Ejzenštejn, but the reflections on the difference between these two *senses* can also be extended to the topic we are dealing with here. Learning to look beyond the obvious is the second exercise I want to focus on. But let us first see what Barthes means by the two adjectives – *obvious* and *obtuse* – and why he favours the third sense. Bearing in mind that the first sense is that of communication, which he understands as merely informative.

> The symbolic meaning (the shower of gold, the power of wealth, the imperial rite) compels my recognition by a double determination. It is intentional (it is what the author has meant) and it is selected from a kind of general, common lexicon of symbols; it is a meaning which seeks me out – me, the recipient of the message, subject of the reading – a meaning which proceeds from Eisenstein and moves *ahead of me*. It is evident, of course (as the other meaning is, too), but evident in a *closed* sense, participating in a complete system of intention. I propose to call this complete sign the *obvious meaning*. *Obvious* means: *in the way*, which is precisely the case with this meaning, which seeks me out (Barthes, 1977, p. 54 eng. translation).

Although these are very different fields and topics, a thematic consonance with the previous quotation cannot escape us: Bohm's *reservoir of knowledge* here becomes the *general lexicon* of symbols from which the symbolic meaning is *taken*. Barthes refers to the ritual of baptism by means of gold in one of the film's frames, but we can glimpse in this general lexicon every other form of signs that tend

towards the stereotype: the already seen, the already codified. Much of our social life draws on this symbolic and general lexicon, but it is exactly the *obvious* recourse to it to deal with communication or innovation projects that we must learn to avoid.

The obvious sense is that which invites us, out of indolence or unreflective habit, to think of following models of reasoning already applied, like walking always and only within a furrow dug by continually passing through the same places, as if the *convention* necessary for understanding images and symbols was not itself historical and not idealistically universal. This is what happens, for example, when we associate a hue of colour with a certain value, according to the inertia of tradition, or when we expect a certain behaviour from someone according to their geographical origin.

Moreover, this automatism of convention is structurally connected with the encyclopaedic semantics we have been discussing. As Anna Maria Lorusso observes,

> **In short, with Eco semantics becomes topological and stratified: topological because it is based on "organised regions of relations", and stratified because it is based on repetitions and regularisations in time of certain associations. That of "Encyclopaedia" is, according to Eco, the best metaphor for to express this relational and stratified conception of meaning, in which the most frequent and regular associations sediment and assume a central role (Lorusso, 2022, pp. 46–47, my translation).**

The problem arises when these sedimented associations become a wall beyond which one has no intention of looking because one lacks the curiosity to expose oneself to other worlds. This is, for example, the reticence towards alterity that is spreading in several European nations because of migration flows. But one does not need to evoke racist or warlike tendencies to realize how our social life is dominated by mistrust of what appears to be foreign, as well as a slimy attention to what presents itself as exotic.

The culture of alterity, on the other hand, is a stimulus to seek a ladder to look beyond any barrier, which is, on closer inspection, a sign barrier. Psychologically, it can be difficult to detach oneself from

the obvious because it is still a reassuring notion to which it is always convenient to return. For design culture, on the other hand, the obvious sense should provoke an act of healthy insolence and strategic diffidence, i.e., not giving in to the thought that the sense presented before us constitutes all possible sense.

Knowing how to see beyond the obvious also invites one to develop a vision beyond pre-understanding, which, although inevitable as an indispensable pre-structure of any interpretation (cf. Gadamer, 1960), if not questioned it becomes rigid to the point of excluding any view beyond an obstacle or problem, like the hedge in Giacomo Leopardi's poem *L'Infinito*. In the inevitable pre-understanding, it is therefore necessary to make breaches to look beyond the ramparts that obvious sense constructs, for example, through the uncritical legacy of tradition. This also means conceiving design from the perspective of abductive and inventive semiosis (Zingale, 2012; Bonfantini, 2021) to glimpse the Possible beyond mere phenomena.

1.5 Passing through alterity

In dealing with the issue of alterity, we have privileged its ethical and epistemological aspects. But the study of alterity also concerns other philosophical fields, such as the psychological and socio-historical dimensions, the dialectical and ontological dimensions, and even the theological dimension. Here we have selected the aspects that, we feel, have most to do with the idea of design seen as also responsible for the shaping of cultural beliefs and habits of behaviour, as well as leaning towards critical and inventive knowledge.

The exercise of dialogue, which certainly requires more development than the one outlined here, has more to do with the ethical dimension as well as with anthropology and semiotics; that of seeing beyond the obvious sense, instead, has aspects of a cognitive and epistemological nature. But these two dimensions are by no means separable. Dialogue is also the gateway to scientific reflection, and looking beyond the obvious is what prevents views of those outside the circle of our supposed identity from becoming fossilized: beyond the myth of the nation and the rhetoric of tradition; beyond suspicion

of what is foreign and alien; beyond the inertia to accept what is deviant and transgressive, when it is nothing more than a demand for recognition of diversity.

In the course of history, the emergence of other realities, deviant and transgressive with respect to the known, has more than once reconfigured the scene of cultural and social values, also affecting legislative systems and social policies. But it also brought about extensive changes right down to taste and sensibility; one case in point is that it was the alterity of the African American slaves that gave birth to jazz and thus to all the popular music derived from it. Innovation can be found even where no one thought it could lurk, even in the pain of deported people.

This leads me to the conclusion that the passage through alterity causes thought to reach a possibility of transformation, a greater self-awareness, which necessarily translates into ethical and political praxis, affecting the conditions and life choices of social subjects.

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