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Design & Ethics

Good, bad, innocent or ignorant?

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Leni Riefenstahl was a tragic artist. In 1936 she was at the top of her career. An extraordinary talented photographer and filmmaker. Her film about the Berlin Olympics was even nominated for an Oscar. Her photography of Jesse Owens could count among the best photographic portraits in history if ... yes, if Adolf Hitler would not have admired her and vice versa. After the defeat of the Nazi regime, the Germans looked for somebody they could blame for having seduced them and they found poor little Leni. Whatever she created in her 50 years of artistic life after the Second World War, her role within the time of the 3rd Reich was held against her. Other artists of this time like Arno Breker called it their “traditional period” and got around.

What was it she could be blamed for? Her photography is extremely well made. Her subject was the human being, the erotic expression of power. Some say she created this mass hysteria about the Nazis, but did she create it or did she just visualize the spirit of this movement? She made the ugly Nazi regime look beautiful. She made aesthetics available for non-aesthetic purposes.

Professor Peter Stebbing once called aesthetics a tool for surviving. Our aesthetic sense helps us to identify food as eatable, environment as liveable and sexual partners as genetically suitable for sustainable surviving. Plato defined aesthetics more philosophical: “If it is good and honest, it is beauty.” Inverted this means that if it is beauty it is good and honest. If Peter Stebbing’s presumption is right this would mean that creating beauty artificially for dishonest purposes confuses an existential human sense and leads to a crisis of sense.

The example of the 3rd Reich might look like a dramatic exception. But if we look at the problems of our society today, designers are involved in much bigger cases. Victor Papanek said in his book ‘Design for the Real World’ in 1975: *“There are professions more harmful than design – but only a few”*.



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The brainless mass consumption with the effect of an overconsumption of valuable resources needed talented designers to seduce people to buy things they don't need with money they don't have to impress people they don't like.

"The entirely marketing oriented development process is captivating design and deprives the designer of their ability to think and act visionary along the lines of an ethical value system."

Hajo Eickhoff / Jan Teunen Form:Ethik 2005

This statement maybe a precise analysis of the reasons for the situation but it implements a dangerous attitude: The designers are the victims, not the culprit: *"Obligation to obey orders."* This excuse was very popular at the Nuremberg trial. Too easy a way out.

Our overheated industries did not only produce masses of useless goods but also giant ecologic problems, not to mention the effects on our following generations. John Thackara stated in his remarkable book 'In the Bubble' that if we have designed us in our problems we could as well design us out of the problems. Research shows that our society can reduce its consumption drastically without reducing the standard of living just by thinking a little bit more. To find ideas to do less but get more it takes creativity and the capability to break rules – characteristic attitudes of designers. We can design higher consumption – and we can design lower consumption.

A project with students at the University of Rovaniemi to identify non-ethic design showed that most of the design around us is somehow non-ethic. At first the students saw the dilemma that if we don't do what we are supposed to do we don't get work. But during the project the opposite became obvious: There is no more market for unethical design. The future trend is honesty. Good design is ethical.

At first the designers have to understand their responsibility towards the environment and society. What is ethical?

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Kant, Categorical Imperative

The Philosophy of Ethics seeks answers to the question how we are supposed to act as human beings. It is not a question of morality; it is a question of values. What are the guidelines in our life towards ourselves, towards others, towards the society, towards the nature and environment, towards future generations?

Today we love to talk about sustainable design. But we often think that printing a brochure on recycled paper or designing products that look environmentally friendly has something to do with sustainability. In most cases sustainable thinking has ecologic positive effects but ecology and sustainability are two different strategies.

In 1713 the German Carl von Carlowitz proposed a new way of foresting to solve the shortage of wood at that time. There should be more trees planted than harvested so that



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following generations could have the same if not a better economic situation. The question was and is *“what effect have our actions today for the following generations tomorrow?”*

The Brundtland Commission of the United Nations defined: *“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

Today’s marketing oriented development processes are focussing on short-term shareholder interests. Our production is planned for short life cycles. We increasingly develop goods with embedded failures to force the consumer to replace their products in a defined time. This devastating attitude covers all areas of products. Even architecture today plans and builds buildings with a lifespan not longer until they are written off. Using environmental friendly material does not make these buildings more sustainable. Our society doesn’t create values anymore, neither financial nor ethic. We waste them.

Faster than expected we are faced with the bill for our irresponsible behaviour. The financial crisis of 2009 could be seen as a chance to break this vicious circle and reconstruct our entire economic system. The role of the designers and the Creative Industries will be to generate ethic values that will turn into financial values.

Ten years ago, a project to reduce the use of plastic by adding renewable ingredients produced fascinating new materials with extreme good aging qualities. The idea was simple and innovative. Grass cut from the garden or fibres of old blue jeans were mixed with plastic granulates. But the marketing department stopped this project with the argument that a. it did not look shiny and b. it would last too long.

“Marketing as such is ethically blind”

(Peter Ulrich, Institut für Wirtschaftsethik Hochschule St. Gallen).

So why do we continue listening to the blind when we have to look into the future? As long as designers accept to be ruled by short-term marketing strategies, shareholder interests or administrative restrictions, visionary innovations have no chance to come to life. As long as designers understand their task as to make things look good instead of making things good, there will be no change. Good design looks good, but good looking does not make good design.

There is an increasing number of New Designers looking for creative and innovative ethic design concepts. The design students of the University of Lapland added 25 new projects. The astonishing learning is that behind nearly every ethic project idea there are promising new business ideas.

One project took the starting point in a campaign for unethical behaviour of Nestlé, selling milk powder to uneducated customers living in environments with reduced hygienic possibilities. Human right activists blame Nestlé for being responsible for the death of thousands of children caused by wrong portioning and the use of dirty water in application of this milk



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powder. Nestlé defend themselves that they give all necessary information but cannot be held responsible if these prescriptions are not followed. They praise the product as ethical because it helps babies to survive. The discussion showed that the campaign against Nestlé itself was not ethical, using false or unilateral arguments. Legally Nestlé is not responsible for the death of babies in relation to the use of the powder. But instead of understanding the ethical responsibility Nestlé hide behind the legal state. It could be so easy: If the problem results of wrong portioning and unclean water, Nestlé could make sure that this mistake cannot happen. The student came up with several possible solutions - each one additional business for Nestlé.

As unethical considered the students high calorie chocolate bars where the packaging design persuaded fitness, slimness and health. The idea to create products with low calories is not bad as such, but branding high calorie as low calorie is simply a lie. Here the students proposed either to tell the truth or to fulfil the advertised promise.

Advertisement and packaging of alcoholic products was also seen as very critical. But regarding the results of the Prohibition in the United States in the 20ies of last century, forbidding alcohol was not seen as an appropriate method. The solution for alcohol misuse problems is not NO alcohol but LESS alcohol. It could be so easy: Dosing devices (a used in pubs) and clear advices that the consumption of more than x-units per hour is not smart.

The students concluded that ethics should be a must in the design education. The international designers organisations should develop a code of conduct for ethical behaviour and implement means to protect their members against attempts from clients to force the designer to create unethical designs.

Nearly 40 years after Papanek's critical remarks about the design profession we should start to change it that one day we can say: *"There are ethically better professions in the world, but not many."*