

Design Fiction is Not Necessarily About the Future

Keywords: Design Theory, Aesthetics, Fiction, Philosophy, Epistemology

Discussions about fictional approaches in design are often centred on the Future or the New. These discussions mainly treat *fiction* in design as *science fiction* or *future speculation* within the context of technological products. Since designing, however, is always a projection into the future and since the outcome of the design activity is most likely something new, it is justified to ask if this discussion of fiction in design tells us something new or if we are only dealing with new labels for something that design has always been about. Another way to think about fictional design has been described as *value fiction*, which aims to investigate alternative uses of products and technology, which are less situated in the future but in an alternative present. If realised in terms of prototypes these design objects could be understood as heterotopian objects or *real fictions*. In this paper I would therefore like to suggest a different way of thinking about *design fiction*. Fictional design should rather be understood in the sense of poetic design, which aims to explore possibilities of human existence in relation to artefacts

without being exploited for future speculation or future studies. In understanding fictional design as poetic design, we may also think of design as a form of philosophical inquiry.

Design is an activity that is fundamentally concerned with something that does not, but could exist. It is an inventive activity, which deals with imagining alternative worlds rather than investigating the existing one. Therefore, it is concerned with the possible rather than the real. The investigation of the real and the possible are fundamentally different activities of inquiry, a distinction famously been by Aristotle. He distinguishes between the historian, who is concerned with what has happened (the real and particular) and the poet, who is concerned with what could happen (the possible and universal). Because it deals with universals, for Aristotle, poetry is an activity similar to philosophy.¹ The distinction between the possible and the real, or fiction and reality, is one of the most common ways to classify something as fictional. Common design activity is not only concerned with possibilities but also with realising these possibilities. In other words, it is concerned with making the possible real. Design as a fictional activity would therefore need to remain in the realm of the possible without entering the realm of the real (although it can, of course, influence the realm of the real as fictional literature does). Following Aristotle, fictional design objects, would be concerned with universals rather than particulars, such as general problems of the human condition or the human relationship with artefacts. Fictional design could be understood as poetic design and thereby taking the form of a philosophical inquiry. The value of fictional design objects would be their poetic quality and their quality of enhancing our understanding of human existence in a material world.

Fiction in design, however, has often been understood as projecting the future. Possibility is thereby understood in terms of temporality and is equated with the future, or rather futures. In this sense, design is understood as an activity that deals with fiction in terms of envisioning possible futures and the things to come. The fictional design object, understood in this sense, is the thing to come in form of models and prototypes. These objects, however, are very different from poetic possibilities. They often lack the critical and aesthetic distance of fiction since they are often understood not as fictional or poetic explorations of human possibilities but as proposals for the future. They are not possibilities but proposals and are therefore perceived as real rather than fictional. They can probably be better described as visionary design objects, such as concept cars, automatic home appliances, or alternative furniture landscapes. They are promoting particular ways of living rather than investigating or questioning the present one.

Visionary design objects are portrayed as desirable and mask out ethical and social consequences of their existence. After all, these projects are about selling rather than investigating. They are bland propositions of things to come, promoting the propositions as desirable, but they are not poetic design objects, through which the audience can realise the impact, these things may have on their lives. These design objects are promotional rather than reflective media

and the fictional element seems to be reduced the future and the new. The visionary design object is about itself, whereas the fictional or poetic design object is only a medium for articulating a possible world. Fictional or poetic design objects are reflective media, in which social conditions are articulated, rather than models or prototypes for possible futures.

The fictional element in design has thus been described very differently. Bruce Sterling, for example, understands fictional design as forward thinking design. Although, he opposes design fiction to science fiction, he involuntarily aligns it again with science fiction since he excludes understandings of fiction, which are not future-directed.² Julian Bleicher on the other hand aligns design fiction with science fiction and future speculation in a straight forwards sense. For him design fiction is speculation about the future, or futures, through models and prototypes.³ Both conceptions of fictional design exclude possible understandings, which are not future-directed, since they use the term fiction equivalent to future. Design fiction could therefore also be called design future. The future, however, is something that design has always been about, or as Victor Margolin has said, «As creators of models, prototypes and propositions, designers occupy a dialectic space between the world that is and the world that could be.»⁴

Another way to think about design fiction could be to distinguish between real and non-real objects. Anthony Dunne, for example, has opposed conceptual design to commercial design, the former being fictional, the later being real. The fictional design object is thereby understood as a design object, which is not commercial or mass-produced and therefore non-real. What he calls *real fiction*, however, is a space between the real and the fictional, in which alternative uses and conceptual products can be articulated outside the marketplace.⁵ He has also used the term *value fiction*, which refers to design as a form of cultural thought experimentation. Value fiction is thereby understood in opposition to science fiction, the later being a way of imagining impossible technologies in traditional cultural settings, the former being a way of imagining alternative uses for existing technologies and thereby different cultural values. The aim of value fiction is thereby to encourage the audience to question the mechanisms, which define design objects as fictional or unreal.⁶

Most of these conceptions of fictional design, however, do not seem to investigate what the fictional quality of design might be. They either use fiction in opposition to reality or use fiction equivalent to future. In my opinion, only the concept of value fiction may open a space for fictional design as inquiry. In the following, I will investigate fictional design in terms or poetic fiction, which is an explorative design activity and should be understood as an inquiry in its own right. Fictional design should therefore not be exploited as a tool of future speculation or future studies but should be understood as a poetic and therefore philosophical inquiry.

Reality, Possibility and Fiction

In order to understand fictional design we first need to have a better understanding what fiction actually is. Fiction can be understood as something being fictitious or fictional. Fictitious refers to something, which is not true. It does not necessarily aim to deceive but to play with our perception of truth. To characterise something as fictitious has a negative connotation. It is revealed in

hindsight and is a judgement about our knowledge of something. To characterise something as fictional, on the other hand, has a positive connotation, as it is to accept its fictional status from the outset.⁷ Therefore, the fictional status of a work cannot lie within the process of its reception but has to be determined in the process of its making. This act of fiction making is an intentional act, which does not have deceptive but fictional intentions.⁸

Fiction is not only in design understood in opposition to reality. Reality, however, can only be understood if the real is separated from something non-real, as the term real would otherwise be meaningless. But whereas the separation from the non-real defines the real, the separation from the real does not necessarily define the fictional.

If we understand reality as the physical and material world, we understand the real in terms of materialism, and in this sense we think of reality in terms of materiality.⁹ Following this understanding, fictional entities are non-physical entities and therefore non-real entities, such as characters in a novel. The character is not real and therefore fictional since he does not exist physically. This understanding of fiction, however, is problematic for two respects. First, the fictional character is somehow physical, since he exists in the physical world; in form of a text or in the mind of the reader, which are both physical objects. This definition of fiction is also problematic, since a fictional character cannot only exist in a novel, but also in form of a sculpture, in a film or enacted on stage. Sure, the objects are only vehicles for the character but they are clearly physical. Second, this understanding of fiction is not helpful to understand fiction in design, since design objects are almost by definition material objects. Of course one could doubt that there is a «real world» and that the actual world is a fictional world created through fictional objects – not only in the arts but also in the sciences and philosophy. Immanuel Kant has introduced the term *heuristic fiction* in order to describe the abstract concepts of the mind, which do not have any relation to direct experience. For Kant the mind develops these fictional concepts in order to think rationally. These fictional objects have therefore a productive role in the thought process.¹⁰ For Hans Vahinger these productive fictional objects are understood *as if* the were real. Particularly in scientific inquiries, fictional objects should be understood as provisional and useful qualities. They do not have relevance for reality, but in their transitional function, fiction allows something to be realised or to happen, which would not be possible without.¹¹

It is through these fictionalising acts, through which worlds are created. As Nelson Goodman has observed, we do not live in a single and coherent world, but in many different worlds. We can therefore not really speak of the real world since there are many real, actual or parallel worlds. No world, however, exists as a self-contained entity since worlds are created out of other worlds. For Godmann, worldmaking is remaking existing worlds through strategies such as composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation or deformation of certain elements of these worlds. The description of a world is always dependent on the frame of reference for the particular world. It is not possible to describe a world without any frame of reference, as it is through this frame, by which the world in question is accepted as an actual world. Therefore different worlds can exist as actual worlds for different people with different frameworks of reference.¹²

*The physicist takes his world as the real one, attributing the deletions, additions, irregularities, emphases of other versions to the imperfections of perception, to the urgencies of practice, or to poetic license. The phenomenalist regards the perceptual world as fundamental, and excisions, abstractions, simplifications, and distortions of other versions as resulting from scientific or practical or artistic concern. For the man-in-the-street, most versions from science, art and perception depart in some ways from the familiar serviceable world he has jerry-built from fragments of scientific and artistic tradition and from his own struggle for survival. This world, indeed, is the one most often taken as real; for reality in a world, like realism in a picture, is largely a matter of habit.*¹³

Reality becomes relative, as a world that seems fictional in one framework might seem perfectly real in another. These worlds, however, are not necessarily based on personal preferences, but are worlds for different purposes. To combine everything into single frameworks of reference seems impossible, or as Goodman writes, «we do not welcome molecules or concreta as elements of our everyday world, or combine tomatoes and triangles and typewriters and tyrants and tornados into a single kind.»¹⁴

In his analysis of worldmaking, Goodman does not distinguish between the real and the non-real but between the actual and the possible. Possible worlds created in fiction are routed in actual worlds, to which they refer back. What might seem fictional at first may eventually become actual as it has been the case with many scientific inventions such as «vitamins,» «bacteria,» or «radiation.» In this sense fictional or possible worlds can become actual worlds.¹⁵

The possible however should not be understood as something that precedes the real. As Henri Bergson has observed, something real only seem to have been possible retrospectively when it has become real. In this sense it is a fallacy to think that it is possible to conceive something as possible beforehand, as it only becomes having been possible once it is realised. For Bergson it is an illusion to think of the reality of tomorrow as already being contained in the actual present. It is only tomorrow, when tomorrow's reality seems to have been contained in today's reality.¹⁶ According to Bergson, it is the artist who is creating both the possible and the real when realising a work and thereby a world. It is through the creation of this world that the real makes itself possible rather than the possible making itself real.¹⁷ In this sense, Bergson argues against determinism and the unfolding of a pre-defined plan. Thereby he points to the possibility to create something, which does not seem to be possible.

Another way to think about fiction is in terms of what Niklas Luhmann has called *doubling reality*. Fictional realities are not unreal since they exist in some way. To understand these fictional realities as doubled reality allows distinguishing between the «real reality» and realities of other kinds, such as the apparent realities of fictional literature. Fictional or apparent realities are realities besides the real reality.¹⁸ As Hans Blumenberg has observed literary fiction is not fictionalised reality but fictionalised reality of realities. Literary fiction creates conditions, which normally cannot be observed in reality; that is, they create conditions, in which something seems to be realistic. But in order to be realistic literary fiction cannot be real.¹⁹ Fiction serves as a mirror to see the world and ourselves from a different and distanced perspective.²⁰

Besides the opposition of the real and the fictional Wolfgang Iser introduces a

triadic relationship between the *real*, the *fictional* and the *imaginary*. In this model the fictional is realised in a fictionalising act, through which the real can become irrational or the imaginary real. The fictional can be understood as a transitional space or as a transitional object between the real and the imaginary, which only exists to allow transitions between these realms.²¹ In this system the real refers to the world outside the fictional work, which is basis and reference for the work. The fictional is understood as an intentional act of creating the fictional in order to distinguish it from the fictional in the sense of non-real, lie, or deception. The imaginary is understood as an abstract and neutral entity, which should not be confused with imagination or phantasm.²² Whereas artistic fiction, such as literary fiction, shows itself as fictional, fiction, which is embedded in our understanding of reality, such as epistemic, heuristic, or social fiction, normally conceals its fictionality. Fiction that does not disclose its fictionality, however, does not necessarily aim to deceive, but needs to appear as non-fictional in order to fulfil its function. It therefore becomes reality.²³ The fictional world is a world but into brackets, which we understand as if it were a real world. The fictional world is not an empty play of imagination, but it is a world, which serves a practical purpose of describing an imaginary case.²⁴

Strategies for Fictional Design

Most works, which are described as fiction, are linguistic works, such as literature or film. Language seems to be the medium, in which fictional worlds can be created in form of a narrative. Design objects on the other hand are usually understood as objects belonging to the actual world rather than a possible or alternative world. They are present as material objects in the actual world and their presence is often amplified through their functionality. Design objects can be used in the actual world and therefore we experience design objects mainly as actual objects rather than as possible objects.

As we have seen in the analysis of fiction, the fictional status of a work or objects is created through a fictional intention. In this sense a fictional design objects needs to be presented as a possible objects rather than an actual object. The fictional design object, however, presents itself as if it were a real object in order to create a fictional reality. These fictional realities can be described as: (1) alternative or doubled realities, which, in spatial terms, have been described by Michel Foucault as heterotopias²⁵; (2) possible realities, not in terms of a temporal possibility but in terms of the universal possibility; (3) a meeting ground, following Iser's triadic model, where the real and the imaginary meet and alternative realities are negotiated; (4) as a strategy to bracket the world in order to serve as a mirror for realising something about the actual world.

An object, which is merely «not real» or «not real yet,» is therefore not necessarily and fictional design object. The fictional design objects needs to create an alternative or possible world, which appears as if it were a real world. Fictional design can achieve this in two ways. First, design objects can be used to *present* a fictional world, in which they are used as props in order to render the alternative world as believable. This fictional word and the embedded artefacts appears as if they were real and the audience can judge the quality and implications of the propositions put forward in this world. Second, design objects can be used to *imagine* a fictional world, that is, the fictional world is

imagined or enacted by the audience. Design objects are used as catalysts for, or as gateways into the alternative world by showing, for example, uncommon uses or by embodying alien values.

Presenting Fictional Worlds

Design objects, which show fictional worlds, are often embedded in other media, such as film or photography. These media support the creation of alternative worlds as they allow creating a narrative, through which fictional design objects are rendered believable in their use or cultural implications. Fictional design that is following this strategy, presents a predefined narrative or perspective, which can be judged by the audience in terms of their functional, social or ethical quality.

An example to illustrate this strategy is my project *Traces of an Imaginary Affair*, which is a collection of nine tools that allow the user to create marks of sexual activity on his body. These tools can be used to leave marks, such as bite marks, carpet burns, bondage marks, love bites, scratches and bruises. In addition, probes of perfume, lipstick and hair can be applied to either the body or clothes. The design object acts as fictional props to think about moral behaviour in relationships, such as intentionally instigated jealousy. In this possible world the protagonists use these tools to simulate sexual marks of an affair. The clear aim of this activity is left open, but the audience can imagine the potential consequences of these uses and reflect on the moral and social implications. The design object not only presents the possible world as a closed entity but also allows the audience to imagine to be part of the world and use the objects themselves. The audience can thereby gain a perspective on the issues at stake, for example, the relationship to one's own partner. The object furthermore occupies an ambiguous space since the tools are functional and could be used.

This design object has a clear resemblance to the actual world and almost is an object of the real world. Fictional design, however, can also create worlds, which are more imaginary. A classical example for this strategy is Superstudio's project *Supersurface* as part of their *Fundamental Acts* series. A «magic surface» covering the entire planet is presented, which renders all material objects superfluous. It functions like a «material virtual reality», which instantly materialises wherever the person needs at any location on the surface. This fictional world is interesting because spaces are created, in which the protagonists of the world can pursue «useless» activities such as cleaning up or doing the laundry. Through this twist, the project does not portray a visionary scenario of a perfect future but a narrative, in which the human condition and the longing for a «simpler life» and «irrational activities» is revealed. The audience need to be able to relate to this possible world and their characters in the same way as they can relate to a fictional world presented in a novel or film. The presented world needs to be sufficiently defined in order to be understood as if it were a real world; but it also needs to be open enough to allow an imaginative inhabitation by the audience. It is therefore not enough to portray a novel technology and potential uses, but fictional design needs to create worlds, into which the audience can immerse themselves. Design objects could otherwise be misinterpreted as product proposals and visionary design objects and thereby loosing their fictional quality.

The possible world can show moral and social dilemmas, tragedies or comedies and the design objects are the media, through which these narratives are articulated. Fictional design objects do not only present themselves, they also represent issues of the possible world. They are not only objects-in-the-world but also objects-about-the-world.²⁶ They refer to the fictional worlds, to which they belong, but they also refer back to the actual world, in which they exist as a material objects. This gives fictional design objects and ambiguous character.

Imagining Fictional Worlds

Another direction for fictional design is to create design objects that provoke the creation of a fictional world through imagination by the audience. In this sense the fictional design object acts as a catalyst and opens a fictional world rather than presenting one. The aim is to open a space, in which the audience can imagine possible worlds including the actions, uses and values that these worlds involve. The audience thereby becomes co-producer of the possible world.

An example that illustrates this strategy is Anthony Dunne's and Fiona Raby's project *Park Interactives*, which is a collection of adult furniture for the Medici Gardens in Rome. The furniture is very abstract, but suggests sexual misbehaviour in the garden. The artefacts stimulate the audience to imagine the possible acts of sexual misbehaviour and the resulting consequences and implications for a society, which allows such activities to take place in public spaces. Even though the design objects are functional furniture-like objects, they act as fictional props to think about sexual conventions and moral values in society.

This approach, however, should not be confused with conceiving design as a «vehicular medium», through which the ideas are presented in such a way that the audience can agree or disagree with the presented scenario. Rather, the issues are presented in such a way that the audience has to form their own views and judgement by decrypting the potential world that these artefacts suggest. The key difference is to exploit the ambiguous status of the objects, instead of showing clear-cut statements, and thereby forcing the audience to form their own judgements.

Another example, which forces the audience to imagine a possible world and their implications, is Hans Hollein's project *Architekturpille (Non-Physical Environment)*. The pill, probably containing a psychotropic substance, suggests that through the use of the pill an architectural environment is created. The audience is asked to imagine taking the pill and to picture the world, which would subsequently be experienced, as an architectural environment. The designer of the pill becomes the architect of the non-physical environment, which the user of the pill would enter. The pill as a fictional design object is a medium, through which we can think about what architecture is and what we consider as architecture.

Fictional Design as Inquiry

Fictional design either presents possible worlds by showing a world, in which fictional design objects serve as props, or it presents fictional design objects, which allow the audience to imagine a possible world. The possible worlds,

which are created, are not only entertaining but also allow the audience to widen their intellectual disposition. Fictional design creates possible worlds, which are based on the interaction with artefacts. Through this imagined interaction the audience can judge the social, political or ethical quality of the particular world. This is true for both imagining possible worlds based on design objects and perceiving possible world presented through design objects. By imagining a possible world we also imagine how the design objects may be used and what kind of social implications they may have. Thereby we make moral and ethical judgements about these objects and the world, to which they give rise. By imagining a world we also imagine experiencing this world emotionally. Thereby we can judge the quality of the world based on the quality of our emotional response to it.²⁷ By imagining a world, we mentally create and inhabit it. Imagining this world is a kind of thought experiment, in which we ask, what kind of world would arise from the fictional design object and what the personal, social or political consequences and implications would have. In this sense the design object is the catalyst for the thought experiment, both for the designer and for the audience. By imagining to interact with the fictional design objects we imagine a possible world, in which the interaction with these object is possible. Since the design object is the catalyst for the possible world it appears as an object from a different world sitting in the actual world. It is precisely this ambiguity of the material existence of the possible in the actual, which defines the fictional design object.

Fictional design can also present a possible world together with the social and ethical conditions, which are caused by the design objects populating this world. Similar to fictional literature the audience imagines inhabiting this world and thereby interacting with the presented design objects either directly or through the protagonists of the possible world. The designer of the fictional world uses design objects and their embodied values to construct the world. Since every design object embodies ideas and values, the difference to fictional design is that the designer of a fictional object uses the embodied values in order to create a certain social situation in the fictional world. The possible world shows alternative forms of existence and experience. By reflecting on these issues the audience gains an understanding of the moral and ethical conditions of the possible existence. Particularly through fictional situations, which are existential, tragic, and upsetting we can gain ethical and moral knowledge.²⁸ Fictional worlds may also challenge and even subvert our moral concepts and values. Thereby social, economic, ecological, intellectual, architectural, religious and moral values as well as scientific and technological limitations are open for exploration and reassessment. The aim thereby is not necessary to shock but to provide the audience with alternatives to think about the social conditions of the actual world. Fictional worlds are not self-contained, but also contain features of the actual world, which may have existed unnoticed in the real world. Fictional worlds make the audience look anew at certain situations and may lead to the reconsideration of moral concepts. In this sense the fictional world can be understood as an inquiry into alternative value systems both for the creator of these worlds and their audience. The fictional world can act as laboratory to explore these values in a way that would not be possible in the actual world.²⁹

The fictional world serves as a mirror for the present condition of the actual world. In this sense, not the fictional condition is challenging, but the fictional

condition is challenging the actual world. Fictional design objects are therefore media for inquiry into the conditions of possible forms of human existence, whether social, moral or technological. Fictional worlds produced through design objects can be understood as thought experiments, which place the process of argument and analysis into the mind of the audience, rather than presenting arguments and conclusions to the audience.³⁰

Conclusion

Fictional design objects are different from other fictional objects. They are objects of a possible world, which exist as material entities in the actual world. Although they are fictional objects they inhabit an ambiguous space between reality and fiction. They are hybrids, which infiltrate the actual world and thereby open a door to a possible world. Fictional design can use objects in two ways: as objects, which render a possible world believable or as objects, which open a space for imagining possible worlds.

Fictional design can be a form of philosophical inquiry into moral values and forms of existence and interaction. By rendering alternatives to the present world possible, they question our current material landscape and the values, which our artefacts embody. It can also open a space in, which alternative forms of existence, values, or political systems can be negotiated through fictional design objects. The fictional space, however, is different to the fictional world of, for example, literature since the world of fictional design objects is the actual world. They blur the boundaries between the actual and the possible and can create a space for negotiating the imaginary. Design objects are particularly useful for this negotiation, since they immediately relate to the actual world and are understood in terms of use. They relate to the comedies and tragedies of everyday life.

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