THE EXPERIENCE AND DESIGN OF STEREOTYPE

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ABSTRACT
Our everyday life is influenced by an overproduction of images and by an iconogenic surplus that is connected to the proliferation of media. These contribute to both the quality and quantity of communication, but simultaneously amplify the knowledge gap between an audience that is able to critically process messages and another that is affected uncritically by prejudices and stereotypes. The need for a critical "media education" (Bellino 2010) is required to address this gap by encouraging the development of students' critical thinking and social awareness.

In this paper we will discuss the results of a didactic experiment in which visual communication design students explored the potential of metaphor to critique the role of media in perpetuating cultural stereotypes. Where stereotype simplifies reality, metaphor extends beyond the simplification of reality toward the discovery of new communicative opportunities; here the link between ethics and esthetics is reinforced.

To support the learning process of the participating students we assumed that the model of experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and the appeal to experiential metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) are the best way to deal with reality, its comprehension, its representation, and its transformation. Students were required to explore the potential of metaphor through the development of viral / guerilla communication campaigns that highlighted the role of the media in perpetuating stereotype.

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INTRODUCTION

The following paper is based upon a workshop "The Experience of Stereotype" in the MA Course in Communication Design at Politecnico di Milano. At the outset of this workshop we made it clear to students that we understood that cultural stereotypes could not be eliminated, only transformed, and that developing alternative cultural representations would only generate new forms of stereotype. We made it clear that this project was primarily concerned with them as emerging media practitioners, and hence cultural mediators, and their development of critical insight into the role of the media in co-opting cultural representation and prepetuating it in stereotypical form. As such students were to design a campaign that made the role of the media, and indeed the consumers of media, explicit in this process. In this regard the project is ideological.

THE OVERPRODUCTION OF IMAGES

We live in a cultural space - the semiosphere (Lotman2005) - where we experience ideas, messages, signs, and artefacts that ciruclate within it. Analogous, as it is to the biosphere, it is subject to evolution and transformation, but also involution and stiffening (Volli 2000, p250). The dimension of the semiosphere is limited and its structure is inflated by an overproduction of messages and images that, responding to the logic of consumption, are losing their intelligablity. The semiosphere operates in the "ecology of the artificial" (Manzini 1992), that is the complex environment of the human made world. Manzini argues that in this ecology we have a "system of production that is strongly geared to the ever accelerating production of worthless goods" (Manzini 1992, p8). It is self evident that we now live in an age where the rate at which we produce and disseminate images exceeds our capacity to view, let alone comprehend, more than the smallest percentage of them. The resultant "semiotic pollution", as Manzini (1992, p7) calls it, that has accompanied this shift indicates to us then that the system of

reproduction is geared towards the ever-increasing reproduction of worthless images. Such images are worthless in that we take them for granted because of their ubiquity. Simultaneously their ideological underpinnings are concealed through this ubiquity. While we may consider ubiquitous images as worthless it is wrong to assume they are not powerful.

The contradictory nature of worthless images being powerful has a number of consequences. Firstly the overproduction of images, means that we can never consume, or conserve, all the images diffused by media. The risk is to be overwhelmed by the iconogenic surplus resulting from the dross of visual hyper-production (Smargiassi 2012). Secondly the overproduction of images is incompatable with the image's ability to create differences and oppositions (Volli 2008, p112): the surplus of image production is not content oriented but promotes an imaginative space seemingly detached from reality. Perniola (2004) highlights one of the problematic aspects of this communication landscape: the transformation of the audience into a 'tabula rasa', sensitive and receptive to media communication, but largely unable to be cognate of content beyond the moments of transmission and reception. This enables communication in which "making and unmaking according to the momentary self-interest" (Perniola 2004, p108) stages a substitute reality that serves the economic interests and political consensus of those commissioning the communication (Chomsky 1989, p8). Such a substitute reality is linked to the persistence of image stereotypes. According to Zingale (2012) a stereotype is a "connotation ideologically oriented" that creates, in public opinion, arbitrary simplifications, social sharing and semantic stiffening[1]. The essential cognitive function of stereotyping is to systematize and simplify information from the social environment in order to make sense of a world that would otherwise be too complex and chaotic for effective action (Tajfel 2001, p134). Hence our earlier claim that stereotype cannot be eliminated, but it can be critiqued. It is little wonder that in an era characterised by the overproduction of images that the stereotype dominates for they are a simple response to dealing

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[1] See also Lippman (2004[1922]).

with complexity. However, to simply accept them as a pragmatic response to this complexity is to underestimate the profound impact they have upon how we see, experience, understand and - most importantly - act within and upon the world.

Merleau-Ponty explores the role of the image in our perception, understanding and transformation of reality. He examines the relationship between mental images - or the images of our imagination - and visible images - images that we conventionally regard as some form of visible representation of things seen. The visible image, Merleau-Ponty (1964, p164) argues, is not a "a tracing, a copy, a second thing" or representation of the world separate to our perception of it. Nor is it a design that just shows us objects or events that are absent from our field of view. Rather the visible image is a part of the horizon of our embodied perception and is as much a part of the reality we perceive as the object it purports to represent. Merleau-Ponty elevates the image's epistemological and ontological status to that of what is commonly called material reality.

Merleau-Ponty also examines the significance of the images of our imagination, and sees them not as "belonging among our private bric-a-brac" but as "the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside" that makes possible "the quasi presence and imminent visibility that make up the whole problem of the imaginary" (1964, p164). Merleau-Ponty turns to painting, and the artistic vision behind it, to clarify the relationship between the images of the imagination and visible images and the manner in which they constitute and transform reality. He argues that the painter "sees the world and sees what inadequacies (manqués) keep the world from being a painting" and sets out to rectify these inadequacies by producing a painting and that such "vision in any event learns only by seeing and learns only by itself" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p164). So the visible image, as a part of the horizon of the broader reality we perceive, informs the images of our imagination that in turn result in further visible images that become part of the horizon of the broader reality that we perceive[2]. Merleau-Ponty calls the manner in which visible

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[2] See Roxburgh 2013 on the implications of photographic images in this scenario.

and mental images transform reality, the "image sensitising itself" (2010, p 53). Diprose argues that the transformation "of the lived world" in this manner "is not an extraordinary event" but "the dynamics of ordinary perception" (2010, p33). Where Volli argues that the overproduction of images creates an imaginative space seemingly detached from reality, we argue that as the visible image - no matter how ubiquitous or stereotypical it is - is a part of the landscape of our preception then it shapes our understanding of reality, even if at times it contradicts our experience of the reality the image puports to show us.

The visual communication design industry is largely responsible for the overproduction of visible imagery that populates the commercial media landscape and consequently plays a pivotal role in imagining and transforming the horizon of our perceived reality. The dominant visible image is photographic and more often than not it comes in the form of the stock photograph, making the stock photography industry "a powerful force behind the culture of the image" and a "principal site for the production and distribution of photographic images in culture as a whole" (Frosh 2001, p628). The reality depicted in stock photography "is the optimized version of a common global reality" (Bruhn 2003, p374). In short stereotype and cliché reign supreme, with the cliched image having significant "iconological currency" (Bruhn 2003, p373). This currency is not directly determined by the audience that these images are designed for but by the complex network of actors responsible for their production and dissemination within media communications. This network includes visual communication designers who, by imagining the kinds of images which consumers will respond to, assume the role of "cultural mediators" in that determination (Frosh 2001, p 634).

Although Merleau-Ponty is dissmissive of the photographic image's capacity to inform perceptual transformation Diprose contends that the photograph does indeed inform it but does so in a very specific way arguing that "realist photography" expresses the world "by lifting the viewer above the lived world to the position that tends to sediment the significance of relations between things and the possible paths for living these relations

allow" (2010, pp37-38). We argue that a further sedimentation of the significance of relations and paths of living occurs through the overreliance of stereotypical image content. The ideological consequence of this is that we become increasingly constrained in how we imagine the world, and our relations to and within it, can be.

THE PRODUCTION OF CRITICAL PRACTICE

Given the central role visual communicators play as cultural mediators, and the manner in which they shape the landscape of visible images that are a key part of the horizon of our perception, it is crucial that emerging practitioners in this field are educated about the ideological power they exercise. In short we are advocating the development of a critical attitude towards their practice, something sorely lacking currently in industry.

Baule (2012) argues for the presence of a critical culture inside the communication design project and the development of what he calls 'communicative antibodies' to challenge the dominance of stereotype or prejudice in media communications. These 'antibodies' are the actions that critical practitioners put into place - through their consideration of the content, language, technologies, design methodologies, and media formats used in the communictions they are designing - that extend beyond stereotype. Baule (2012) argues that by training communication designers to be more aware, more critical and more sensitive in the exercise of respect of others they can spread their 'antibodies' in all systems of communication design production and promote a different culture of communication. Research, and in particular the research conducted at University level, can be oriented towards the developemnt of new possibilities of language starting from the strategies of deconstruction, decontextualization, and emphasis suggested by the avantgardes[3].

In our attempt to develop such an attitude "The Experience of Stereotype" workshop represents a didactic educational experiment where a research dimension, structured around

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[3] Baule suggests, the concept of détournement of Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, Metodi di Detournement, "Les levres nues", 8, Bruxelles. 1956

formalised methodologies, has been implemented through student work. This workshop is linked to the research activities of the group dcxcg (communication design for gender cultures) of Politecnico di Milano, Design School (Design Department), whose goal is to offer a critical view of the forms of representation of society (in particular of gender through the media). dcxcg also supports the proposal of new models of communication and new opportunities to raise awareness in everyday life (private and public) about issues of representation. The educational objectives of dcxcg are to develop the professional experience and competence of students whilst encouraging a critical attitude and inquisitiveness about the norms of visual representation.

Students have explored the issue of stereotype in different projects and from different perspectives (Stereotypes in the media, Sexist stereotypes, Stereotype deconstruction, Stereotype experience). The experimentation of visual languages, codes, and forms of persuasion gave students the opportunity to reflect on common prejudices, but also to define new challenges for the creation of new ways of looking at reality and interacting with it. The value of these experimentations is a constitutive part of the basic research, but it also has a double purpose: the intention of provoking change and iterative and imaginative steps forward (Sevaldson, 2010), and the will to create an experiential dimension of learning, that integrates theory and practice, tacit and explicit knowledge (Niedderer and Imani, 2008) with a final design output. The goal of the experiment to overcome the most common expressive codes (a persuasive and inviting rhetoric) and move to a type of communication which is more sustainable and more responsible. The output is represented by a series of visual campaigns (poster and audiovideo animations) that critique the nature and presence of stereotypes in contemporary society and media.

THE EXPERIENCE OF STEREOTYPE WORKSHOP
At the outset of we acknowledged to students that given how the media industry rapidly consumes emerging forms of representation that their task was not to try and design alternative representations of gender, race or sexuality but rather

use media to interrogate and critique the mechansims through which stereotypes come into circulation. Therefor the project was not a typical industry project responding to a client need or brief, nor was it conceived to solve a specific design problem. Rather the project was conceived as a from of critical intervention into visual communication itself, much along the lines of the sorts of projects advocated by Dunne and Raby (2001). Yee calls problem solving design "affirmative design" because it "perpetuates the existing norms of societal expectations" and affirms the ideological status quo (2012, p467). On the other hand "critical design challenges the norm by expressing alternative values and ideologies" (Yee 2012, p467). As such the students in this workshop were required to take on the practices of guerilla / viral communication in their projects. In keeping with the open nature of the brief students were not given specified media to work in, nor was an audience typology provided to them. Media choice and the prospective audience was determined through the research and the development of the communication objectives of each project, as determined by that research.

The research dimension of the project was shaped by four framing questions.

1) What do I know?

- The researcher explicitly identifies what they 'know' about the subject of stereotype.
- This values their pre-existing knowledge and experience as 'expertise' AND lays bare their assumptions and bias.

2) What does someone else know?

- The researcher looks to the knowledge and experience that others have of the subject of stereotype in the form of - theoretical writing, conversations with experts or novices, observing objects, activities or phenomena.
- This exposes the researcher to the wider field of knowledge of the subject.

3) What do I know now?

- .It also requires the researcher to outline what they 'know' **now** as a consequence of comparing (1) and (2). How has

their knowledge and experience of the subject of stereotype changed and why has it changed?

4) What can I imagine?

- In a theoretical sense this would be a proposition about the 'state of affairs' of the topic or area they are researching.

- Importantly for design this is about imagining a design response or outcome as a result of the knowledge they have developed from this process.

This approach is similar to that used in a grounded theory in that it builds knowledge from the ground up. Grounded theory, developed by constructivist social researchers, entails collecting, analyzing and interpreting 'data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks' in order to 'focus further data collection' that in turn informs and refines the theoretical analysis (Charmaz 2003, pp249-250). Bryant and Charmaz (2007, pp44-46) and Reichertz (2007, pp214-228) argue that grounded theory privileges abductive reasoning. As abductive reasoning is privileged by designers (Kolko 2011, Lawson 2006[1980], Louridas 1999) using a theoretical framework that requires similar thinking patterns means that the research task does not feel overly foreign to students more typically used to working within the tight constraints present in affirmative design approaches compared to the more open ended and speculative nature of critical design approaches. Given that students were not building a middle-range theoretical framework of the nature of how media promulgate stereotype but were turning that knowledge into some form of critical design response, a research methodology that was framed by abductive reasoning was essential to ensure there was not a disconnect between their theory and practice.

In keeping with the critical nature of the project inquiry, the students were aware that producing a polemical piece of communication - that spoke of the problems of stereotyping - would be as closed and ideological as the systems that propagate stereotypes are. The most successful projects, therefor, took an educative approach that encouraged audience members to participate in the generation of meaning when

figure 1 image from the project "You Are Not A Label": example of the application of stickers near the doors of a bus.

figure 2 image from the project "Mirror on the wall".

engaging with the final communication platforms. For example both the "You Are Not A Label" and the "Mirror on the Wall" projects provided opportunities for the public to see themselves, or others, in the work through either their reflection in the work itself (Mirror on the Wall) or the overlay of semi transparent labels on members of the public (You Are Not A Label). Both campaigns used the simple, but successful, metaphoric strategies of reflection and juxtaposition to enable members of the public to reflect upon and question their own assumptions and experiences of stereotyping.

"The Hobson's Choice Campaign" project team designed a web-based interactive video campaign that enabled audience members to determine the structure of the story by choosing from pre-set scenarios at various points in the video. It used humour and audience expectations of stereotype to infer that stereotyping is a social choice, but as we all do it appears not to be a choice we actively make. The audience helped determine the meaning of the message through the appearance of choices built into the narrative.

figure 3 image from the project "The Hobson's Choice Campaign"Against Homophobia and Transphobia.

The "Towers of Babel" project team took audience interaction one step further by designing a campaign that encouraged audience members to shooting and upload short videos where they discussed their own experiences of being stereotyped.

figure 4 image from the project "Towers of Babel": storyboard for Mobile Application

These videos were available on a purpose built website but more significantly, from a guerilla campaign perspective, to be screened on towers of television screens installed in public locations throughout Milan. Apart from being a clever means of displaying the work to the general public the use of the television screens was strategic in that the work was simultaneously critiquing the role of televisual and screen based media in perpetuating stereotypes.
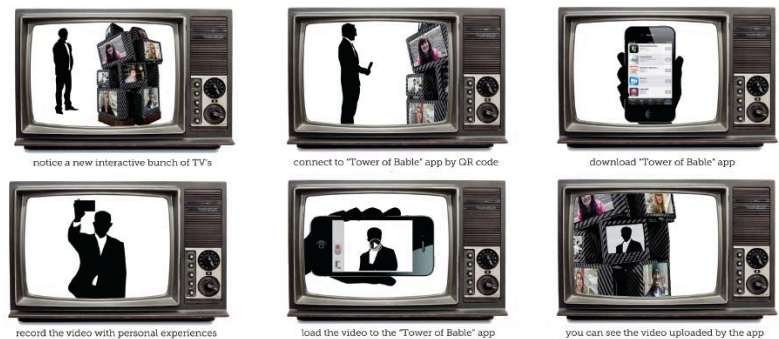

figure 5 image from the project "Towers of Babel": storyboard for TV installation

CONCLUSION

In critiquing the dominant visual image - the photograph - used in modern media communication Flusser (2007[1984]) argues that as photography is the product of conceptual, as opposed to imaginative thought, and is shaped by analytical and instrumental paradigms then it is futile to challenge the self replicating ideology underpinning it through critical theory, itself the product of conceptual thought. Rather, Flusser argues that the best way to challenge the constraining dimension the photograph has on our imaginative capacity is through critical

practice.. As stereotypical representation more often than not comes in some form of photographic based image, be it still or cinematic, then the constraining dimension, or sedimentation of lived experience, of the photograph and the stereotype is amplified into our lived reality. This in turns effects how we imagine any alternate reality. In "The Experience of Stereotype" workshop it has been our aim to use the kind of embodied learning Kolb (1984) describes as accomodating - that is learning through feeling and doing - to encourage the next generation of designers, that our students represent, to grow their own 'antibodies' to the dominant ideologies of contemporary media and develop such a critical practice. In turn this enabled campaigns to be developed that had the potential for audiences to develop their own critique of individual and societal attitudes towards stereotype as well as an understanding of the role of the media, thus spreading these 'antibodies' and hopefully developing a more critical audience but more importantly provide a less constrained imaginative space to imagine the kind of world we want.

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