Exploring Tomás Maldonado

EDITED BY

Pierfrancesco Califano

Fondazione
Giangiacomo
Feltrinelli

Exploring Tomás Maldonado

Edited by
Pierfrancesco Califano

Exploring Tomás Maldonado

Follow our activities:

 facebook.com/fondazionefeltrinelli

 twitter.com/Fondfeltrinelli

 instagram.com/fondazione.feltrinelli

Summary

Introductory Note

The idea for this book originated from the inter-doctoral course "The Legacy of Tomás Maldonado", promoted by the Doctorate in Design and the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano, with the support of the Feltrinelli Foundation. The course, curated by Luca Guerrini and Raimonda Riccini, involved approximately 60 doctoral students and 11 doctoral programmes.[1]

From February to April 2021, through the reading of texts and meetings with experts, the doctoral students were confronted with the thought and work of Tomás Maldonado on six themes: the training of designers, the role that artistic practice has in the design process, the

---

[1] The course involved the following PhD programmes: "Architecture and Design Cultures", University of Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum; "Architecture, Design, Planning", University of Camerino; "Environment, Design and Innovation", University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli; "Architecture and Urban planning", University of Ferrara; "Sustainability and Innovation for the Design of Built Environment and System Product", University of Florence; "Architecture and Design" and "Scienze e Tecnologie del Mare", University of Genoa; "Design", Politecnico di Milano; "Architecture", University of Naples Federico II; "Planning, Design and Architecture Technology", Sapienza University of Rome; "Management, Production and Design", Politecnico di Torino; "Architecture, City and Design", Iuav University of Venice.

environmental issue, the attention to the body and to interaction, the relation between design and technology, the contribution that semiotics and the philosophy of language can make to design. Out of this comparison emerged the essays by the doctoral students that make up this volume.

Before these, the essays by Paola Bertola, Luca Guerrini, and Raimonda Riccini reflect respectively on the perspectives of research in design, the doctoral learning experience gained in this seminar, and the influence that - directly and indirectly - Maldonado has had on the history of teaching design in Italy.

The section of doctoral students' essays opens with an essay by Pierfrancesco Califano that reconstructs how the six themes discussed in the seminar developed in Tomás Maldonado's thought and activity.

Reading Tomás Maldonado: back to Design Research Future

Paola Bertola

Design Research Pathway of Legitimation

In January 2020 the Politecnico di Milano celebrated the thirtieth anniversary since the establishment of its Doctoral Program in Design, the first internationally to be entirely focused on design, of which Tomás Maldonado was the coordinator since 1990. It was born at Politecnico even before the Bachelor Program in Design emancipated from the School of Architecture (1993), and the School of Design and the Department of Design were then formally institutionalized. It anticipated many other experiences that followed at national and international level, feeding the legitimation of design as a research discipline, able to express a specific cognitive attitude, a unique way of "knowing the world" and producing new knowledge.

Today we find ourselves in a highly transformed context both for research practice as a whole and for design itself as a discipline and research field.

On the one hand at European level, starting from the Salzburg document of 2005 (AA.VV., 2005), we have been witnessing a growing

attention to third level education. It is seen as a relevant lever not only to train academics, but to seed new entrepreneurial capacities, promoting research and innovation driven initiatives able to impact on local and territorial development, as other international models have been showing, especially the north American context (Etzkowitz, 2003a; 2003b). The pandemic crisis has layered to this an increased awareness on the importance of constantly developing research capabilities for which PhD education represents the founding pillar and this is giving an additional impulse to investments in it. This is clearly shown also at Italian level with the measures that the government is taking within the PNRR framework (MEF, 2021) to support doctoral education.

On the other hand, design in its statute of academic discipline has been highly transforming in the last thirty years. After the seminal Bauhaus experience, the goal to "scientisize" design emerged with urgency in the middle of last century, in a context increasingly populated by "designed artefacts", and moved from the recognition of the implicit nature of design practice towards the establishment of the discipline as an independent field of inquiry (Buckminster Fuller, 1957; Bradbury, et al., 2018). The theoretical debate that flourished in the 60s and 70s, especially in the Anglo-Saxon contexts, brought to diversified attempts to formalize a theoretical corpus for design. The need to codify "the" design process led to the appropriation of methodological approaches developed in other scientific fields, such as information sciences, mechanical engineering, mathematics and statistics, as well as social sciences (Collina, 2005), unveiling the undeniable multidisciplinary nature of design discipline (Gregory, 1966; Simon, 1969; Archer, 1979). However, it soon became clear that the elaboration of a comprehensive theory of design based on a set of methodologies able to guide its research approaches and codifying its practices was inconsistent with the nature of design itself. This acknowledgement rose with the epistemological study of several applied disciplines (i.e. medicine, architecture) showing the interweaving of theories and experimental practices in the process of advancing their disciplinary

knowledge (Rosselli, 1973; Schön, 1983; Friedman, 1997; Cross, 2001). Within the Italian context, the focus on "practice" as a specific ontological system of design has always had great relevance. When in 1990 Politecnico was the first University in Italy to institutionalize design research education, it could count on several experiences and expertise both inside and outside the academy. They were all the results of the same reflexive attitude transcending the material dimension of artefacts, an attitude which Emilio Ambasz highlighted in the exhibition "Italy. The New Domestic Landscape" he curated at MoMa-New York in 1972 (Ambasz, 1972). He eloquently titled his introduction to the catalogue *Transcending functions. In the world of Italian design simple shapes mask complex thoughts*, giving a formal recognition to an original body of contributions where design practices and design theories were strictly interwoven. Such contributions stemmed from a large community of "reflexive practitioners", among which many graduates and professors of Politecnico di Milano (Munari, 1966; Rosselli, 1973; Bonsiepe, 1975; Ciribini, 1984; Branzi 1999, 2008). Across the last thirty years of reflection, theoretical elaborations and design research practices, several advancements have been made reinforcing an interdisciplinary vision of design, blending theories and applied methodologies and building a rich, diverse and connected research community (Bertola, et al., 2020).

Design Research to Critically Question Future Trajectories of Change

After thirty years from the establishment of the first PhD program in design, thanks to several seminal contributions among which the one by Tomás Maldonado remains crucial, there is a general acknowledgment that design research training is a fundamental component for our cultural and scientific progress. And more specifically that it contributes to develop those speculative, critical and planning skills necessary to face the challenges that increasingly characterize our horizon.

More in detail I would like to focus on one specific theme, that of digital transformation, which certainly represents a topic he addressed beforehand with an anticipatory vision.

The context that characterizes our contemporaneity has profoundly changed, also in light of the experience we have lived in the last two years. Some dynamics of transformation, already underway, have been accelerated by the pandemic and today place us even more clearly in the face of challenges that require new categories of thought, new tools and the ability to promote a radical change of paradigm. In particular, along these two years one dimension of transformation has been influencing our daily lives more than others, that of digitization, towards which Tomás Maldonado had arisen many concerns with respect to its implications and potential impacts (Maldonado, 1997).

Indeed, during the pandemic several of the foreseen impacts he had drawn have shown their effects in an unprecedented way, making our reality a mirror of the three dimensions of the digital he had questioned in his book *Critica della Ragione Informatica* [Critique of the Informatic Reason]. Hence, the essay is organized in three main chapters.

The first one is titled *Cyberspace, a democratic space?*, questioning if the digital space generated by new media and networks is really accessible and participative.

The second one is titled *Telematic and the urban scenario*, discussing the dematerialization of our activities and related infrastructures for working and learning, and if they are still able to guarantee the quality of relationships, contents and knowledge.

The third one is titled *Human body and digital knowledge*, focusing on how digital technologies partake in the process of human body "artificialization" started with the technological development.

All these three themes resonate with several topics we have been discussing since the start of the digital revolution and then highly revamped during the pandemic.

First of all, the shift from the "industrial economy" paradigm to the "knowledge economy" one has been opening up a rich debate on the

accessibility of knowledge (Rifkin, 2000). Being intangible and easily transferable it could be potentially shared in a capillar way, especially thorough democratic and distributed web supported by new technologies; but which, in real, has demonstrated to be a factor of politization even worst that the previous ones. All ideologies based on the abstract conception of distributed and participative democracy have been becoming a lever for the growth of Internet colossi, such as Google and Amazon, owning now monopolies within almost completely un-regulated markets of knowledge and information (Sundararajan, 2016). This has become even clearer during the pandemic, where we have been experiencing how much technologies can increase inequalities between the ones that can access them, and the ones excluded, isolating entire urban neighborhoods, villages, regions and areas of the planet.

Also the second chapter seems contemporary indeed. In the last few years, the topic of transforming cities through an extensive technological infrastructure enabling efficient flows, shared services and full connectivity has been guiding the urban planning debate. Smart cities have become symbols for a sustainable transformation of urban environments and for improving citizens' quality of life. This concept of a cyber-physical space has quickly turned into real as a consequence of the pandemic. In a condition of social distancing, digitization has allowed us to carry on with several activities related to tertiary works and professions (a large majority in the first world), to learning and teaching activities (especially developed in western countries), in some cases even increasing our efficiency and working capacity. Looked downside, it turned out to be a factor increasing inequalities towards peripheral areas and activities, and also it has negatively impacted our lives (Sassen, 1991, 2015; Secchi, 2013). It has impoverished our human and social dimension, often distorting our work-life balance. It has demonstrated to be a very powerful tool for teaching and learning, but at the same time not always able to support the development of all students' cognitive capacity. The deprivation of the physical social interaction dimension from learning environments has been heavily

affecting younger generations, growing anxiety, sense of isolation and loneliness.

The third chapter touches perhaps the most sensitive topic within the discourse on technological evolution. In fact, it's never been so evident how implications of technologies which characterize the so-called fourth industrial revolution are unpredictable and unexplored. On the one hand, for the first time in the history of human development, technology is no longer able to simply process data and information faster and in greater quantities, as it happened with the third industrial revolution; but it is able to replicate cognitive processes, that is, to say, to learn and take decisions such as the paradigm of Artificial Intelligence teaches us. On the other hand, a process of convergence between information sciences and biological and cognitive sciences has also been triggered (the so-called Nano Bio Info Cognitive convergence, NBIC) (Dordrecht, Roco, 2016). Especially in the North American context, this process is supported by a strong "technology-driven" vision, in which the prospect of being able to fully exploit this convergence of technologies to enhance and increase human capabilities is highly pursued. This scenario, not anymore so-futuristic, populated by artificial intelligences and augmented humans brings with it undoubtably unexplored potentials for development, but also urgent ethical questions (Khushf, 2007; Harari, 2017; Russel, 2019).

The critical vision introduced by Maldonado on these topics seems to be quite anticipatory as effects produced by purely technology driven visions of the future are currently questioned from several voices, and especially in Europe a different perspective is emerging. It is based on a broader openness to knowledge development where, together with sciences and technologies, also arts and humanities find their space as necessary components for a sustainable transformation, in order to guide technological development towards applications aimed at improving the quality of life and the environment.

Too many times, approaches to innovation driven by the sole technological lever and blind to long-term impacts, have produced deleterious effects on the environment, on the transformation of work, on

social communities, on culture. This growing awareness is widening a new space for design. The culture of design, both in its speculative and design dimension, of dialogue between arts and sciences, of projection into the future of new and better ways of life, cultural systems, relationship practices, represents an important alternative to a purely technology driven vision.

Several initiatives among which the New European Bauhaus recently launched by the European Community are reinforcing this conception.

It is the sign for a "new humanism", capable of guiding technological development through a clear design vision. Despite the fact that our common understanding often confuses "humanism" with the conception of an "anthropocentric world", often iconized by the "Vitruvian man" drawing, it is instead rooted in a holistic vision of the world, which was at the core of the early Renaissance. A comprehensive science, unifying man with the world under the same system of governing principles, going from the mathematical reading of the world by Leonardo Fibonacci, passing through Leonardo da Vinci's exploration of scientific principles through the arts, up to Giordano Bruno's cosmology (Montecucco, 2001). It was in that cultural milieu that the masters of the Renaissance, embedding in themselves artistic practice, philosophical thinking and scientific research, were using arts and design to create meaningful visions of the world, designing desirable futures, such as in the fiction-book *Utopia* by Tommaso Moro, or in the painting *La città ideale* (The Ideal City) by Leon Battista Alberti.

Along this vein, contemporary design research practice can become an important guiding compass in critically discussing future innovation trajectories. By defining new relationships among societal trends, cultural directions and technological potentials, it can fully express its powerful capacity of "materializing" possible and desirable futures, making them tangible through design thinking.

A Living Legacy

There are several reasons why reading today Tomás Maldonado's corpus of thought can be so relevant and impactful.

First of all, the essays included in this book represent important steps to redraw some identity red threads within the design culture that still characterizes Italian schools and their contribution to design discipline in general.

Additionally, they embody a consistent way to update some of Tomás Maldonado's core themes through the exercise of a critical vision, itself an integral part of the legacy he left us.

Moreover, re-reading his essays through the filter of contemporaneity is one of the way to nourish the awareness about the strategic relevance of design research. This can contribute to reinforce the pathway of legitimation of design discipline that Tomás Maldonado himself gave a great contribution to.

Finally, given the ongoing contemporary dramatic transformations and the challenges we are confronting, it is particularly important that the contributions included in this book are developed by young PhD researchers in design. Indeed, doctoral research embeds by its nature that exploratory and curiosity driven attitude which is becoming so important for building a future more socially equitable, culturally inclusive and environmentally sustainable.

Bibliography

AA.VV., *Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society*, Proceedings of the Seminar, Salzburg, 3-5 February 2005, European University Association, Salzburg 2005.

Ambasz, Emilio, *Transcending Functions. In the world of Italian design simple shapes mask complex thoughts. In Italy. The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, Catalogue

of the Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art in association with Centro Di Florence, New York 1972.

Archer, Bruce, *The three Rs*, in "Design studies", 1, 1, 18-20, Elsevier, London 1979.

Bertola, Paola, De Rosa, Annalinda, Rampino, Lucia, Volonté, Paolo, *PhD in Design. Building a network of excellence*, Working Paper, Introduction to the Milano Design PhD Festival, Milano February 20th, 2020.

Bonsiepe, Gui, *Teoria e pratica del disegno industriale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1975.

Bradbury, Dominic, et al., *Essential Modernism: Design between the World Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2018.

Branzi, Andrea, Il design italiano: 1964-2000: un museo del design italiano. Electa, Milano 2008.

Branzi, Andrea, *Introduzione al design italiano. Una modernità incompleta*, Baldini e Castoldi, Milano 1999.

Ciribini, Giuseppe, *Tecnologia e progetto: Argomenti di cultura tecnologica della progettazione* (1985), Celid, Torino 1995.

Collina, *Luisa, Design e metaprogetto: Teorie, strumenti, pratiche*, Poli. Design, Milano 2005.

Cross, Nigel, *Designerly ways of knowing: Design discipline versus design science*, in "Design Issues", 17, 3, pp. 49-55. MIT Press, Boston 2001.

Dordrecht, Roco M.C., *Handbook of Science and Technology Convergence*, Springer, New York, 2016.

Etzkowitz, Henry, *Research groups as 'quasi-firms': the invention of the entrepreneurial university*, in "Research Policy", 32, 1, pp. 109-121, Elsevier, 2003a.

Etzkowitz, Henry, *The European entrepreneurial university: an alternative to the US model*, in "Industry and Higher Education", 17(5), 325–335, Sage, 2003b.

Friedman, Ken, *Design science and design education.* Norwegian School of Management, 1997.

Fuller, R. Buckminster, *A comprehensive anticipatory design science. Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 34, 357-360, 1957.

Harari, Yuval Noah, *Homo Deus. Breve storia del futuro*, Bompiani, Milano 2017.

Khushf, George, *The Ethics of NBIC Convergence*, in "Journal of Medicine and Philosophy", 32, 3, pp. 185-196, Routledge, New York 2007.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Critica della ragione informatica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1997.

Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, *Italia Domani. Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, MEF, Roma 2021.

Montecucco F. Nitamo, *Cyber. La visione olistica*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2001.

Munari, Bruno, *Arte come Mestiere*, Laterza, Bari 1966.

Rifkin, Jeremy, *L'era dell'accesso*, Mondadori, Milano 2000.

Rosselli, Alberto, *I metodi del design.* Clup, Milano, 1973.

Russell, Stuart, *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*, Penguin, New York 2019.

Sassen, Saskia, *Expulsions. Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2015.

Sassen, Saskia, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991.

Secchi, Bernardo, *La città dei ricchi e la città dei poveri*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2013.

Shön, Donald, *The reflective practitioner*, Temple Smith, London 1983.

Sundararajan, Arun, *The Sharing Economy. The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-Based Capitalism*, MIT Press, Boston 2016.

Stereotypes and Visual Emblems

in Contemporary Cultural Systems between Simplification and Banalization

Irene Caputo, Michela Carlomagno,
Francesca Casnati, Margherita Vacca

Maldonado and Semiotics Studies: an Introduction

The essay aims to investigate Tomás Maldonado's thought regarding the thematic area of philosophy of language, linguistics and semiotics. Indeed, he was one of the first thinkers to introduce the teaching of subjects such as semiotics, ergonomics and communication science in the education programme of the designer. Maldonado experienced this approach when he headed the School of Ulm (Hochschule für Gestaltung) between 1954 and 1967 and examined it in his critical contribution to semiotics theory, which is identified as the theory of signs (Morris, 1939, 1946) that studies signs and symbols as significant part of communication. The theory identifies three areas of investigation: semantics, which studies the relation between sign and signified; syntax, which concerns the relation between signs; pragmatics, the relation between sign and interpretation (Maldonado, 1959).

The results presented in this paper are the synthesis of a plural and synergic work that starts from the individuation and the discussion of specific topics in the field of social communication design until the

selection of cases of interest useful to explain the contemporary of Maldonado's thought.

This research was developed through a qualitative methodological process, subdivided into three main steps: the first is related to the critical reading and the interpretation of Maldonado's thought by the analysis of his written works; the second step concerns the categorization and actualization of themes, identified through the use of collaborative digital tools; the third phase relates to the selection and analysis of communication design projects, developing a taxonomy of case studies in the specific fields of data visualisation and new media.

The research focuses on the study of Maldonado's writings from the 1950s to the early 2000s, from which a strong connection emerges with the current themes such as the evolution of languages within new media, the spread of alternative communication codes, the tools for simplifying reality and also the attribution of a social and educational role to communication.

The analysis aims to bring these themes to a contemporary dimension, through the identification of some examples and projects of interest that allow reflecting on the boundary between simplification and "semantic banalization" (Maldonado, 1959).

From the analysed texts, three main levels are identified through which signs and signifiers act: logical-cognitive, visual and multi-sensorial. These levels allowed exploring themes in different fields and led to considerations about communicative language and the capacity of design to act on social meanings and to generate knowledge.

In particular, this paper adopts a logical-cognitive[1] interpretation to relate semantics with translation processes (Baule, Caratti, 2016) and attributions of meaning used by the design discipline. On one hand, these processes lead to uncritical thinking made of stereotypes and emblems, based on common beliefs. On the other hand, they attribute an interpretative dialogical ability to the design culture able to simpli-

---

1 *Logico-cognitive* refers to the processes involved in knowledge-perception, imagination, memory and all forms of thinking.

fy and spread messages to a wider audience. The purpose of the paper is to critically analyse this ability and to illustrate, through the identification of effective or weak case studies, the guidelines currently adopted in visual communication and new media fields.

Semiotic Reflections in the Field of Communication Design

The reflections developed from Maldonado's writings create a critical connection between the growing complexity of reality – supported and mediated by the improvement of digital technologies, especially those concerning hypertextual and multimedia production – and the need to simplify and make fragmented and substantial contents more accessible.

This complexity of reality underlies mechanisms of cognitive simplification that the designer implements to make the message decodable and incisive. As Maldonado states: "The visual communication specialist knows he is responsible for everything that is offered to the sight of the common man. [...] Nobody can ignore that his mission is to produce ideologies or to actively participate in their demolition" (Maldonado, 1953, p. 35. Translated by the authors).

Simplifying is essential in the process of knowledge and translation of complexity, but the risk is to banalize through a process of oversimplification. Therefore relying on excessively reductionistic or rigidly deterministic definitions and conceptualizations of a complex reality. The consequences are a flattening of conceptual differences and subtleties, and an emptying of representations aimed at developing a critical awareness of the relationships between symbols and things (Bennett, 1985).

Maldonado, therefore, focuses on the risk of oversimplification and stereotyping of communication languages, which leads to a semantic emptying and what he defines as the communication crisis,[2] which

---

2   Based on the thinking of Karl Jaspers, Maldonado states: "[...] nowadays, an information crisis is already beginning. Today, communication has been replaced at all

leads in the long term to no longer being able to read and critically analyse reality, as well as semantic and relational drying up.

The issue of the reduction of complexity becomes more and more central in the post-industrial debate in relation to its complex technological meaning. The Web has given everyone the opportunity to transform a fact into news and there is a widespread – and partly institutionalised – trend towards the progressive dissolution of the boundaries between information and entertainment (Morcellini, 2011). Today, more than ever, communication processes and ethics are therefore highly topical issues and objects of interest by numerous researchers (Makau, 2009; Panchevski, et al., 2011; Fabris, 2014) since they deeply affect our life.

The filter – that the evolution of communication media imposes on our perception of reality – changes transforming the patterns, times and spaces of relationships between people. Indeed, McLuhan observes that:

> Once transmuted into software, anything and everything becomes malleable, fluid, interchangeable. Each new medium is a new culture and each demands a new spin on identity; it is urgent that we begin to study all of the forms of knowing, now called literacies. Multimedia means simply compound literacies. As discourse shifts from page to screen and, more significantly, to a networked environment; that is, as discourse decentralizes, the established definitions and relations automatically undergo substantial change. The shift in our world view from individual to network brings with it a radical reconfiguration in culture (McLuhan, 2009, p. 12).

But the new media are not neutral and their intrinsic structure produces an influence on the recipients of the message, which goes beyond the specific content they convey. And it is for this reason that digital

---

levels by chatter. Chatter that is not only verbal, but also visual" (Maldonado, 1953, p. 31. Translated by the authors).

media fit so effectively into the political-cultural debate, in which forms of conceptual simplification are as essential as risky, given their ease in falling back into forms of intentional mediocrity (Maldonado, 1961) and of creating dangerous stereotypes in the critical elaboration of more complex concepts.

Maldonado himself often argued, almost prophetically, on the doubts linked to the communicative dimension of digital media, on the language adopted – which he defines as cyber-slang – and on the "[…] threat, in a similar type of jargon, to favour, in the short or medium term, a generalised stereotyping of language" (Maldonado, 2005, p. 240. Translated by the authors). His scruples were strictly connected to the peculiarity of this communication method of spreading worldwide thanks to the all-pervasive nature of the technologies at its disposal.

The Information Crisis, a Critical Interpretation

The topics raised from Maldonado's works are in a relationship of continuity with current issues and constituted the basis to implement a work of critical re-interpretation and actualization. This analysis required the use of conceptual tools that enabled to provide an overall and contextualised picture of the processes that today lead to what Maldonado referred to as the information crisis or the death of information. The schematization (Figure 1) of these processes is therefore the result of a systematic cross-comparison between Maldonado's written works from the contemporary context. The process of synthesis and schematization allowed to highlight part of the mechanisms that define today's cultural systems, according to Maldonado's perspective that connects culture and communication, communication and ideology (Maldonado, 1953).

The purpose of the following reflection is therefore based on the above-mentioned dichotomy regarding the ever-increasing hyper-complexity of reality (Morin, 2017) that characterises society as a whole and the need, on behalf of the media, to simplify information

in order to be effective. In following the process that, according to this critical interpretation, would lead to the crisis of information, the starting point – the concepts of multiplicity and complexity – is fixed at the top, opposed on the same level to the need for simplification, which implies not only a simpler comprehension of the message, but also a greater incisiveness of the communication.
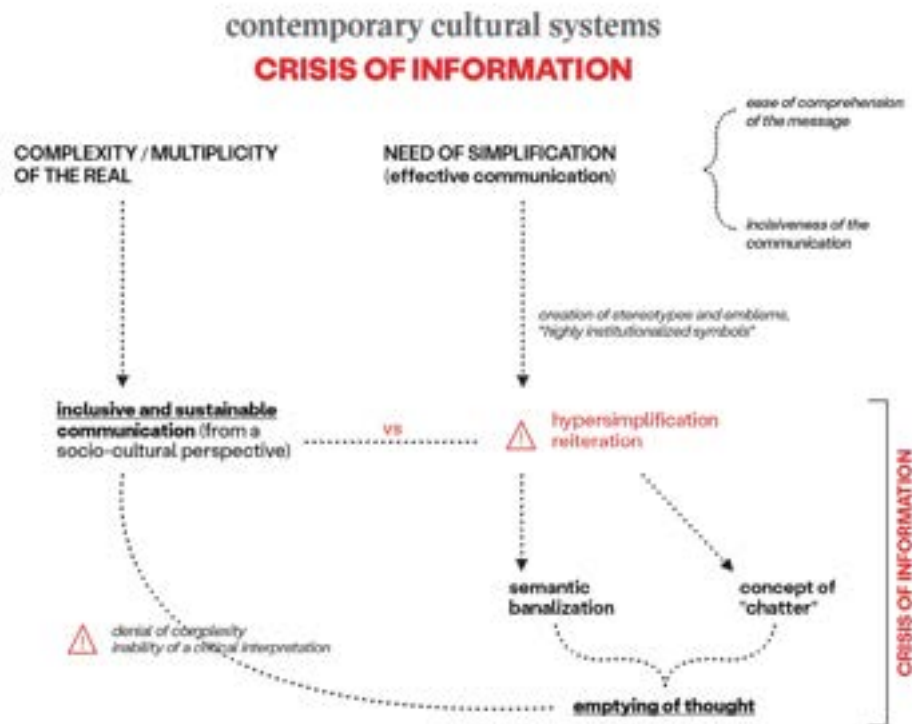
Figure 1. Graphical scheme representing how the information crisis appears in present cultural systems.

Therefore, if on the one hand there is the complexity of reality and the consequent urgency of a communication design that is representative of this multiplicity, in order to be inclusive and sustainable from a socio-cultural point of view, on the other hand the need for simplification inevitably results in the enactment of semiosis processes – where semiosis is defined as translation processes of meaning production (Baule, Caratti, 2016) – that lead to the formation and consolidation of stereotypes and emblems.

According to the definition of Zingale (2012), the stereotype is an ideologically oriented connotation, which implies firstly a high degree

of simplification and generalisation – the particular is arbitrarily elevated to the general – and a social sharing that sanctions its institutional and normative status. The thinking that Maldonado articulates in Communication and Semiotics as early as 1959 concerns precisely the tendency of some universes of discourse (e.g. cyber-slang) to excessively reducing the repertoire of signs, leading to the consequent generation of visual and verbal emblems. He states that "The higher the degree of emblematization of a symbol is, that is, the higher the degree of its semantic banalization is, the lower its communicative incisiveness. The more intrusive is its institutional meaning, the less is its functional meaning" (Maldonado, 1959, p. 71. Translated by the authors).

The increasing simplification of the message, up to hypersimplification, then coincides with the elevation of the degree of semantic banalization, which brings with it both the impoverishment of content and a distortion of the meaning produced since, being the stereotype ideological connotation, "whatever object it means, it means it by contaminating it with other meanings" (Zingale, 2012, p. 101. Translated by the authors).

Here the paradox of the serial image (Baule, 2012) comes into play, generating a short-circuit of meaning. The stereotype is technically necessary for communication, but at the same time, it impoverishes its content and distorts its meanings.

We live in an increasingly dense and overcrowded semiosphere (Lotman, 2005; Mirzoeff, 2015), characterised by the serial reiteration of hyper-simplified messages devoid of meaningful content. It is precisely what Maldonado identifies as chatter. Furthermore, based on the thinking of Robert Venturi, Maldonado states: "Epidermic communication, without any density and thickness: in short, a fictitious communication, a simulacrum of communication, just chatter, just noise" (Maldonado, 1970, p. 123. Translated by authors).

The result is therefore a "semiotic pollution" (Manzini, 1992) that well highlights a damaged system of production and reproduction of images that are worthless. These images are ubiquitous and pervasive

and are disseminated at such a rate that they inhibit our ability to see and critically understand most of them. If ubiquitous images are worthless, however, it is a profound mistake to assume that they do not have power and influence over society. This system generates a sort of paradox of worthless images, which is powerful and has several consequences:

> Firstly, as Smargiassi (2012) argues, the overproduction of images means that we are overwhelmed by an iconogenic surplus. This surplus is incongruent with the image's ability to create differences and oppositions because it is not content oriented as Volli (2008) argues. This surplus transforms the audience into a tabula rasa, sensitive and receptive to media communication, but largely unaware of content beyond the moments of transmission and reception (Caratti, Roxburgh, 2018, p. 3).

It also follows that "the group of words or images that still retains some original force is always received with distrust by the users of that expressive régime [the chatter]" (Maldonado, 1953, p. 31. Translated by the authors), generating a self-feeding loop. This vicious circle primarily causes the emptying of thought, ending in the denial of complexity and the inability to critically read not only media messages but reality as a whole.

In a historical moment characterised by the democratisation of the media that enable anyone not only to have free access to information, but to produce new information by fueling the proliferation and circulation of opinions, too often the ability to grasp the difference between fact and opinion is lost, as well as the ability to understand that between reality and its media transposition there is precisely a mediation, a semantic cross-section. Reality thus tends to be blurred by what is said or represented about reality.

Simplification and Banalization: a Case Study Analysis

The analysis has moved to an empirical level, seeking projects of simplification and banalization of communicative languages within contemporary cultural systems. The analytical approach is inspired by the critical analysis that Maldonado makes in *La speranza progettuale* concerning the city of Las Vegas, which is proposed as an equivocal space, saturated from a sensorial perspective and subject to the continuous search for eidetic stimuli, that create new phenomena of ambiguity (deprivation – satiation) (Maldonado, 1970). The collection of case studies constitutes a state of the art of selected practises in reference to the socially oriented communication design.

The research method used to collect and organise the case studies is contextual to the complexity of the identified problem, as it allows the development of a transcalar (macroscopic and microscopic) qualitative investigation of contemporary communication phenomena, demonstrating the relevance of the topics examined. Resuming the duality between *richness of meaning and clarity of meaning*[3] (Maldonado, 1970), the analysis leads to the concepts of simplification or banalization of the contents conveyed in artefacts of the cultural industry of contemporary society.

Through a synthesis operation, twenty cases of interest were selected on the basis of criteria such as: the impact on the media, longevity of the project, type of information flow conveyed. The method for the classification and the critical analysis takes its cue from the semiotic square (Floch, 1983; Felluga, 2015) also known as Greimas square, a conceptual matrix that was considered a suitable tool to represent the contrast of the concepts of simplification and banalization.

The analytical matrix develops along two Cartesian axes. The horizontal axis puts in relation the concepts of simplification and banalization. The vertical axis, on the other hand, puts in relation the ease

---

3   Reflection that Maldonado assumes from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1966, p. 23.

of comprehension of the message and the incisiveness of the communication. Their position generates four taxonomic quadrants in which the projects analysed have been classified.

Figure 2. Graphical representation of the semiotic square, main tool for the analysis of case studies.

Simplification – Ease of comprehension of the message

The first quadrant includes communication projects in which the need to simplify a multiple and complex flow of information produces effective, inclusive and sustainable communication systems from a socio-cultural point of view. Specifically, Will Media is an editorial project with the aim of being a point of reference for a large community that shares values and interests. Launched in early 2020, it uses Instagram and TikTok as privileged media channels through which to convey and organise the flow of information. The narrative modes of the covered topics, ranging from economics to politics, denote an

approach based on the simplification of complex phenomena through effective communication strategies. The user can select the topics of interest independently, continuing along a path that offers heterogeneous contents in terms of density, format and language. This project presents an effective communication system for the dissemination strategies adopted, for the clarity of presentation and the ability to synthesise the communicative artefacts produced and shared in the respective social medium.

Simplification – Incisiveness of the communication

The second quadrant reports communicative artefacts that use data visualisation to simplify large quantities of data and information, thus allowing incisive, immediate and dense communication of semantic references. Hearts and minds is a project supported by an interactive digital platform that explores the perception of the migration phenomenon in the European socio-cultural context. Through the communicative potential of data, the aim is to tell from an empathic perspective the impact of migratory flows and the behaviours recorded towards refugees and other migrants. In this case, the use of data visualisation takes place as a multilevel tool that allows the fruition of heterogeneous information, organised in different scales of deepening. The methods of visual restitution of data require an ability to interpret and decode the information and it presupposes a high level of media literacy; the visualisations produced are in fact addressed to an audience sensitive to the topics covered. Unlike the previous case, the designer's attention is focused on the definition of new codes and visual languages that allow a translation of complexity without any loss of content.

Banalization – Incisiveness of the communication

The third quadrant refers to deceptive communication strategies, which banalize the topic addressed through "an abusive use of the mass media, thus emptying it of its disruptive charge and reducing it

to a seasonal fashion like many others" (Maldonado, 1990, p. 65. Translated by the authors). The communication strategy of brands such as H&M[4] offers an equivocal image, albeit immediate, aimed at transferring values such as environmental, social and economic sustainability, which clashes with the complaints made by numerous activists about greenwashing[5] practises. The accusations of greenwashing have also been added to those of social washing, in reference to the precarious working conditions of those who work in the company's offices located in developing countries, as well as their low economic remuneration. The image proposed in the advertising campaigns conveys a positive but generalised and stereotyped message, which hides a non-transparent attitude in relation to the production processes and ethical principles of the brand.

Banalization – Ease of comprehension of the message

The fourth quadrant includes examples of oversimplification, leading to a banalization and impoverishment of the messages conveyed. Freeda is an editorial project born in 2017, which aims to become a platform for "a new generation of people who want to transform the world into a better place". The landing page of the site refers to its social profiles (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), used as privileged vectors of information. The multimedia contents and articles produced are in fact designed as instant articles[6] to be enjoyed in a direct and immedi-

---

4   In recent years, the fast fashion company H&M, as well as many others, has directed its marketing strategy towards sustainability in its multiple ecological, socio-cultural and economic meanings. On the official website, in fact, a section has been activated dedicated to the story of the company's sustainable actions to ensure a fashion that is more attentive to the environment, fair and inclusive.

5   The term *greenwashing* indicates that particular "façade ecologism" of some companies, organisations or political institutions that adopt a communication strategy aimed at building an equivocally positive self-image in terms of environmental impact, in order to divert the attention of public opinion from the harmful effects on the environment due to their activities or products. Negative effects not only at the environmental level, but also at the socio-economic level.

6   The *instant article* is a multimedia content present within the Facebook mobile app and viewable only to registered users. These are tools designed to optimise and make storytelling functionality more interactive.

ate mode. Most of the themes concern feminism and LGBTQ+ rights addressed through a generalized stereotyping of contemporary customs and traditions. Communication takes place mainly in the form of a pill, resorting to clichés and stereotyped images that reduce gender issues to simplistic slogans. The semantic and plastic banalization proposed in the published multimedia content is directly attributable to the phenomenon of pinkwashing.[7] Despite the poverty of in-depth content, the channel manages to collect a great success becoming today the leading Italian media company.[8]
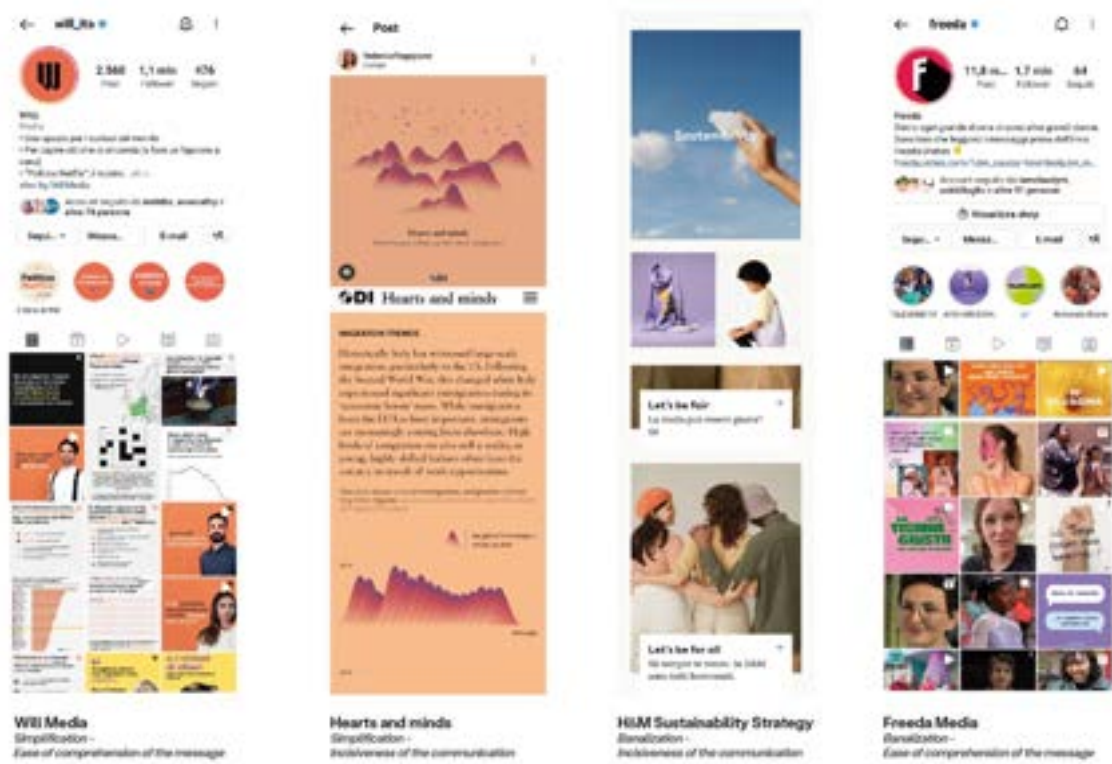

Figure 3. Case studies. In the figures four case studies are reported: Will Media, Hearts and minds, H&M Sustainability Strategy, Freeda Media.

---

7   *Pinkwashing* is a term coined to indicate advertising campaigns and marketing strategies that promote a product or entity through an apparent attitude of openness towards women's empowerment or the LGBTQ+ community.

8   https://www.panorama.it/Tecnologia/social-network/freeda-leade-media-company (Last consultation February 22, 2022).

Conclusions

The communicative opulence (Maldonado, 1961), produced by social media and the spread of digital communication platforms, imposes itself on traditional channels generating, on the one hand, a greater dissemination of knowledge on current topics, and on the other hand a proliferation of messages and opinions that feed disinformation and ambiguity. The emerged scenario shows that the case studies reported within the four areas which are closest to the concept of banalization feature a reduced complexity of thought, with a marked preference for a stereotyped and stereotypical informative dimension, which does not encourage curiosity for a more in-depth examination of the issues.

The high degree of generalisation of information leads to the apparently exhaustive nature of the same, reducing the stimulus to further critical exploration by the user.

On the contrary, the case studies referring to the concept of simplification, foster a translation of complexity based on the use of accessible languages and tools that facilitate the transfer of knowledge, while preserving the density of the content conveyed.

If the "ethical dimension of Communication Design [...] directs the value, the meaning and the content of communicative artefacts and their impact in the social context" (Baule, Caratti, 2016, p. 23. Translated by the authors), the perspective for the elaboration of such artefacts is a democratic and constructive exchange of knowledge oriented to overcome the proliferation of generalised and oversimplified opinions, raising awareness towards a conscious deepening.

Nowadays, the tools for producing and disseminating content and information are extremely accessible and their visibility is independent of their quality. Is it possible to imagine the diffusion of a communication ethics external to the culture of the project that democratically involves any content creator?

This contribution aims to foster a design reflection on which strategies and tools can be useful to stop the tendency of digital communication towards poverty of thought and the death of information.

Bibliography

Baule, Giovanni, *Trasfigurazioni di genere. Immagini forti, immagini fragili: il design della comunicazione*, in Baule, Giovanni, Bucchetti, Valeria (edited by), *Anticorpi comunicativi*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2012.

Baule, Giovanni, Caratti, Elena (edited by), *Design è traduzione. Il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto.* "Design e Traduzione": un manifesto, Franco Angeli, Milano 2016.

Bennett, W. Lance, *Communication and social responsibility*, in "Quarterly Journal of Speech", 1985, pp. 259-288.

Caratti, Elena, Roxburgh, Mark, *The Design of Stereotype and the Image*, in "The International Journal of Art & Design Education", 2017.

Fabris, Adriano, *Etica della comunicazione*, Carocci, Roma 2014.

Felluga, Dino, *Modules on Greimas: On the Semiotic Square. Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Routledge 2015.

Floch, Jean-Marie, *Le carré semiotique: pour une topographie du sens*, in "Sémiotique&Publicité II", Institut d'Études et des Recherches sur la publicité, Paris 1983.

Lotman, Jurij, *La semiosfera: culture. Semiotica della cultura*, Osimo Bruno, 2005.

Makau, Josina M., *Ethical and Unethical Communication. In 21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook.* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks 2009.

McLuhan, Marshall, *Literacy in a new key*, in "Proceeding of the Media Ecology Association", 10, 2009.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Problemi attuali della comunicazione*, in "nueva-visión", 4, 1953.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Kommunikation und Semiotik*, in "Ulm", 5, 1959.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Note sulla comunicazione*, in "Uppercase", 1961.

Maldonado, Tomás, *La speranza progettuale*, Einaudi, Torino 1970.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Cultura, democrazia, ambiente. Saggi sul mutamento*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1990.

Maldonado, Tomás, *Memoria e conoscenza. Sulle sorti del sapere nella prospettiva digitale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2005.

Manzini, Ezio, *Artefatti. Verso una nuova ecologia dell'ambiente artificiale*, Domus Academy, Milano 2012.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas, *How to see the world*, Penguin Books, London 2015.

Morcellini, Mario, *Neogiornalismo. Tra crisi e rete, come cambia il sistema dell'informazione*, Mondadori Education, Milano 2011.

Morin, Edgar, *La sfida della complessità*, Le Lettere, Milano 2017.

Morris, Charles William, *Esthetics and the Theory of Signs*, in "The Journal of Unified Science", vol. 8, no. 1/3, Springer, 1939, pp. 131–150.

Morris, Charles William, Signs, *Language and Behavio*r, Prentice-Hall, New York 1946.

Panchevski, George, May, Steve, Munshi, Debashish, *The Handbook of Communication Ethics*, Routledge, New York 2011.

Zingale, Salvatore, "Immobili visioni. Domande intorno alla persistenza dello stereotipo" in Baule, Giovanni; Bucchetti, Valeria (edited by), Anticorpi comunicativi, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012.