



Design as Symbolic Violence: Addressing the 'isms'

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In this document: conversation proposal (from p. 1) and documentation (from p. 6).

Catalysts

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Abstract

Design embeds ideas in communication, artifacts, services and spaces in subtle and psychologically powerful ways. Feminist, class, race and indigenous scholars and activists describe how oppressions (how patriarchy, racism, colonialism, etc.) exist within institutions and also within cultural practices. The theory of symbolic violence sheds light on how design can function to naturalise oppressions and then obfuscate power relations around this process. Through symbolic violence, design enables the exploitation of certain groups of people and the environment they (and ultimately 'we') depend on to live. Design functions as symbolic violence when it is involved with the creation and reproduction of ideas, practices, processes and tools that result in structural and other types of violence (including ecocide).



Design as Symbolic Violence: Reproducing the ‘isms’

While Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of symbolic violence in 1979 much of the conceptual architecture, including the description of how power functions in society and becomes embedded in culture practices, has been developed by feminist, race and anti-colonisation scholars and activists over the past 50 years. These groups have described how patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, colonialism and imperialism exist within oppressive institutions and structures, and also within the cultural practices that reproduce oppressions. Since design is a cultural practice involved with the production of things that we use in everyday life, the concept of symbolic violence is relevant for designers. Symbolic violence describes how design works in society to produce and reproduce power relations (Milestone 2007; Boehnert 2012, 2017).

The term ‘symbolic violence’ was coined by Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* in 1979 (translated to English in 1984) and later developed in greater depth in subsequent publications such as *Masculine Domination* (2001). The first book was based sociological research that examined social inequity and the reproduction of class power in French society. Bourdieu conducted a survey of 1217 individuals between 1963-68 and asked subjects to describe their personal tastes in music, art, design, home décor, etc. With this research Bourdieu describes the role of taste as a means of creating distinctions between groups of people. His findings demonstrate how these distinctions serve as a means of reproducing class power and the hierarchical division of people that ultimately enable and legitimize violence on various scales. Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as: “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invincible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (or more precisely, miscognition), recognition, or even feeling” (2001, 2). The effects are embodied in “bodies and minds by long collective labour of socialisation” (2001, 3). It is through processes of symbolic violence that power imbalances are naturalised: “The most intolerable conditions of existence can often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (2001, 1). The concept describes how ideologies, priorities, values and even sensibilities are flow through cultural institutions, processes and practices.

Design reproduces existing social norms and often encourages new normative behavior. Anthropologist Juris Milestone described how design functions through the operation of symbolic violence in his 2007 PhD thesis where he describes designers as particular types of experts who create “order by manufacturing certain subjectivities” (2007b, 175). Design disciplines the public by encouraging social hierarchies where people distinguish themselves with their ‘good’ taste and commitment to quality (2007b, 178). Design not only drives consumer desire but “can work to depoliticize war, technology, architecture, consumerism and globalization” (2007a, 96) by virtue of its aesthetic appeal and sophisticated grasp of cultural ideas. Design performs cultural work in ways that booster particular priorities as influenced by the intentions and assumptions of designers as well as those who determine what will be designed (typically the designers’ clients). While designers address the needs

and desires of their audiences and users (as they interpreted them), they can also perpetuate symbolic violence by embedding racist, sexist, classist and ecoist assumptions into design (Boehnert 2017). We now examine some specific ways that symbolic violence works in design, design education and the design industry.

Racism

Where racist symbolic violence exists in design perpetrators typically deny it. Still we do not need to look far to see it. A recent *NYT Sunday Review* article (Crawford, 2016) revealed how racist discrimination had been built into the machine-learning algorithms underlying the technology behind many “intelligent” systems that control the micro-targeting and segmentation of prospective users or customers. The article indicated as an example, software design of Nikon cameras, which in the past has misrepresented images of Asians as “blinking,” or Hewlett-Packard’s web camera software’s struggle with identifying darker human skin tones. Users of Google’s photo app have also in the past discovered within its digital photo albums the confusion of images of darker-skinned people for those of apes. The son of one of the authors of this paper personally experienced multiple visits to his school office for a ‘special photo sessions’ after several failures to take his yearbook photo due to the improper calibration of the photographer’s camera. Symbolic violence can be a reflection of emotional carelessness brought about by inadequate understanding of the perspective of others, i.e. failing to acknowledge the racial exclusivity caused by the perpetrator’s cultural capital. What may seem as neutrality in design, may also reveal underlying prejudices that may be caused by social distances caused by cultural capital. Bourdieu uses the term ‘strategic condescension’ to refer to the symbolic denial of such social distances between different social strata (1989, 16). Designers have the responsibility to resist the false narratives of design without politics. All design embodies assumptions and many of these are political. The sooner we reveal the effects of this narrative of depoliticized design, the more deliberate we can be about reducing prejudices embedded in design practice.

Sexism

Looking at statistics over the last 15 years of design schools across Europe through the (admittedly reductive) lens of female-male ratio, the number of female graduates has progressively risen, often significantly outnumbering males – especially in courses of communication design and courses with a focus on social and environmental issues. However, these numbers do not reflect in the visibility of young graduates within the design and other cultural industries. The theory of symbolic violence suggests that there are structural, cultural and ideological reasons that contribute to women’s invisibility within the creative industries. It is not because women are not dedicating the same energy to promote themselves as their male counterparts, but because there are symbolic and structural forces at work that determine that women are not achieving the same degree of career success in design as their male counterparts. When it comes to people teaching in design schools, the ratio of women is decisively below 50% and progressively decreases in higher ranks of

academia.¹ The same problem of invisibility is often obvious at design conferences, publications and other occasions of public visibility where women are significantly underrepresented.² Today female graduates are still “disappearing” – a loss which is not only affecting the life-path of the single designers and academics but also the field as a whole. As feminist philosophers Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding taught for over 30 years, the bodies through which we produce knowledge matter (Haraway 1991; Harding 1991). Each perspective is always partial. Male designers have different sets of interests than women designers – and their points of view are reflected in their work and then in the designed artefacts that create our environment. To address gender and other imbalances in the design industry and design education it is necessary persistently ask what kinds of bodies and social backgrounds are missing so that we can pragmatically undo the exclusiveness of a profession that perpetuates symbolic violence.

Classism (this section was written with Noel Douglas)

The banking bailout and economic crisis of 2008-2009 made the dangers of policies that encourage short term profiteering, financialisation and deregulation in the financial industry blatantly evident. In the UK £1.1 trillion of public money was used to prop up the banking system and recapitalise private banks (National Audit Office, no date). This unprecedented and massive transfer of public wealth to the banking sector caused a crisis of public finances. Rather than addressing the deep reaching structural problems that created the economic crisis, austerity policies have been imposed to force ordinary people to pay for the reckless actions of the financial classes. Meanwhile, the design industry has been used by the British establishment to legitimise this process and continue classist narratives that obscure violence created by the financial sector and class. For example, the D&AD New Blood Brief ‘Rebrand the City’ written by Venture Three Studio asks student to ‘Rebrand the City’ because:

The World has changed, and the City of London has no decent PR. But we need the City to work – for our livelihoods, our savings and our student loans. Rebrand the City, and create a global campaign to showcase it to the world (D&AD 2012).

The A&AD brief says ‘the City is vital to our economy’ (2012) – but the City of London brought the global financial system to a state of near collapse and then demanded public funds to recover. Students were one of the first victims of the economic crisis as tuition fees tripled bringing UK tuitions fees to become one of highest in the world (Walker, 2015). The D&AD Brief challenged students to collaborate with those who are responsible for indebting them. It used design to camouflage the reckless behavior of the financial industry and in the City of London. The banking crisis has cost each person in the UK between £30,000 - 80,000 (BBC, 2009). Despite these facts, young graphic designers are encouraged by A&AD to help

¹ Taking a look at staff pages around design schools in Europe in 2016 suffices to underline this claim. That design schools are not alone in this bias is confirmed by the report by the European Commission, “She Figures 2012: Gender in Research and Innovation,” Statistics and Indicators, (2012).

² The designers behind the blog <http://feminismandgraphicdesign.blogspot.it/> have produced statistics on gender imbalances in design.

advertisers fix the public image of the City. This obscuring work is an example of design as symbolic violence reinforcing classist narratives that obfuscate the conditions that have resulted in crippling austerity measures.

Ecoism

In many places truthful representations of the state of the environment compete with design characterising nature as infinitely exploitable. Design functions as symbolic violence when it is used to obscure human-caused harms to ecological systems and/or when it reproduces anti-environmental (ecoist) discourses that legitimise these problems. Since these harms ultimately impact people (with both disease and natural disasters – often far removed from where the decisions that lead to environmental harms take place): ecoism is also a form of violence. Anti-environmental discourses can be linked to other forms of oppression with the neologisms: 'ecoist' and 'ecoism'. Ecoism is like racism, sexism, colonialism and imperialism. It is a way of thinking that enables violence toward nature and the people who depend on the natural world for survival (Boehnert 2017). An example of design as ecoist symbolic violence can be seen in the design created for the Hopenhagen campaign, an initiative by the International Advertising Association in support of the United Nations at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP-15) in Copenhagen December 2009. Hopenhagen used the skills of designers to create a spectacle of corporate concern with no agenda for change on an order that would feasibly address climate change. Meanwhile climate activists in Copenhagen for COP-15 protested that the negotiations were subject to corporate capture that effectively prevented the adoption of a binding climate agreement. Several activist groups found the Hopenhagen campaign so offensive and damaging that they made the campaign itself the object of their protest. The Hopenhagen campaign obscured the debate on climate change at the UNFCCC Copenhagen Climate Conference 2009 with design and social marketing strategies that presented corporations as leading a people's campaign against climate change (Boehnert 2011; 2017).

Context of Conversation Topic

The topic for this conversation emerged from Chapter Two in Joanna Boehnert's upcoming book *Design/Ecology/Politics: Towards the Ecocene* (2017). For the DRS2016 conference Joanna sought collaborators Bianca Elzenbaumer, Dimeji Onafuwa and Noel Douglas to help develop the concept of symbolic violence and describe the ways in which symbolic violence manifests in design contributing to the various 'isms' (ultimately Noel could not participate in the conversation/workshop but he has contributed a section to the text above). The DRS2016 conversation workshop gave participants an opportunity to discuss, critique and develop the theory as a basis for the design strategies for social justice.

Organizing research questions

1. How do designers participate in symbolic violence?
2. How can designers reveal and undo symbolic violence?

The DRS2016 session

We ran a session with approximately 30 participants. Joanna acted as the lead facilitator and introduced the topic, schedule, goals and suggested ground rules for the session. She asked the group to agree to these rules (or modify them) and for their help co-facilitating the session. She then introduced the theory of symbolic violence. Next each of the catalysts described specific examples of various types of symbolic violence in design along with examples of design that reveals or undoes symbolic violence. Dimeji described personal anecdotes of his experience of coping with emotional carelessness in design (brought by the failure to understand the perspective of others) on issues of race. Bianca shared examples of the unequal treatment of graduate and professional females in comparison to their male counterparts. Joanna presented Noel's examples of classism with advertising campaigns for the City of London. She also presented ecoism as symbolic violence using the example of the Hopenhagen campaign at COP-15 (2009). Following these presentations everyone in the room briefly introduced themselves. We invited people to suggest types of symbolic violence or related topics. The five most popular ideas were established. Small working groups were formed to discuss and map out strategies of intervention. The workshop ended with each group summarizing their conversation to the group as a whole.



Post-DRS2016 Project Collaboration

The conversation launched an ongoing collaboration that evolved into a paper presentation 'Design as Symbolic Violence: Reproducing the 'isms' + A Framework for Allies' at the Decolonising Design group's *Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power* at Malmo University in November 2016. By this time Onafuwa had independently organised a workshop titled 'Privileged Participation: Allying with Decoloniality in a Difficult Climate' with Jabe Bloom and Teju Cole at the Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design. This new work provided a practical framework to help designers work with people who are impacted by structural, cultural and/or individual violence. The slideshow from this second presentation is available online.

Dissemination Strategy

1. Twitter served as a means of documenting the event and the continuing collaboration (we used the hashtag: #SymbolicViolence). We collected these tweets as a Storify thread:

<https://storify.com/dimeji/design-and-symbolic-violence>.

2. A slideshow presentation of the project as presented at the *Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power* at Malmo University in November 2016 is online here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/ecolabs/design-as-symbolic-violence>.

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About the Catalysts:

Dr. Joanna Boehnert (@[ecocene](#) + @[ecolabs](#)) works at the intersection of design, politics, technology, the environment and society. Her work investigates how visuals, data and text work together to communicate complex and often controversial information. Her book [Design/ Ecology/ Politics: Towards the Ecocene](#) will be published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2017.

Dr. Bianca Elzenbaumer (@[bravenewalps](#)) works on design projects that engage people in rethinking social, political and environmental issues by combining design research methods with radical pedagogy, conflict mediation techniques and DIY making.

Dimeji Onafuwa (@[casajulie](#)) works on understanding design's impact on the costs of contributing to a commons and how these contributions may transition communities to sustainable futures. He is presently exploring commons and open data at Intel Labs. He is a PhD candidate at Carnegie Mellon University.