Deciphering myths in design: towards restoring the materiality of the object through the technique of re-sketching

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Abstract

Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided.
Le Corbusier

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Introduction

What is a designed product today? What kind of relationship between people and material artefacts is inscribed within it? Apart from the manifest design intentionality that shapes it, what social and historical intentions motivate the contemporary designed product and color our appreciation of it?

For us, these questions are not posed as a rhetorical manoeuvre that will allow an opportunity for an ill-founded discussion about design on the occasion of a conference. They are, rather, of paramount importance, since to reflect on the social significance and the historical fate of its objects is what distinguishes a discipline from a profession. In this article, it is claimed that the contemporary 'designed product' as a cultural category of our daily life has become myth for some time. Worse, not only individual products of design have become preys of mythical speech but also design itself has become a myth when it assumed status as a value in itself. Worst of all these, however, occurs when these myths are internalized by design practitioners and students. In this paper, we will first examine the notion of myth, as the French critic Roland Barthes understood it, then, discuss its outcomes in the field of design and, finally, propose a technique of deciphering myths in design.

Before demonstrating how the pattern of mythical significations came to be superimposed on designed products and the idea of design as such, we should first briefly explain myth as the dovetailing of a semiological *form* with an ideological *function*.

Barthes as mythoclast

Mythology, as Roland Barthes (1993) conceived in his *Mythologies*, is both a formal science inasmuch as myth is a particular mode of signification and a historical study inasmuch as the function of myth is to transform a historical intention into a natural, eternal fact or to represent a localized intention as something universal. In other words, the Barthesian study of myths is an unprecedented juxtaposition of semiology and ideology.

From a semiological perspective, myth is a second-order signification which is brought to bear upon an already signifying unit. Myth appropriates the final term of a given system and utilizes it as the first term (i.e., the signifier) of its signification. In other words, the contingent meaning of a signifying unit is put at a certain distance so that a space is emptied for the mythical concept to fill it. The concept, as the mythical signified, introduces an intentional knowledge of reality into the appropriated system and, thereby, justifies its intentions through the agency of this first system. Of course, the new reality introduced into the first system by the mythical concept is a certain representation of reality favored by bourgeoisie. It is important to note that this intentional representation of reality is totally dependent for its acceptance by masses upon the existence of an already signifying, self-sufficient first-system. Mythical speech could not have been successful if it had attempted to communicate its representations by means of a first-order linguistic system. It is a parasitical form totally in need of a pre-existing, ready-made signifying unit. The literalness of the first system is offered as a reason for the mythical concept in case it is asked for an explanation. Myth, therefore, does not hide its intentions. Rather, it makes its intention accepted as a statement of fact through the presence of the literal meaning of the first system. Since it still holds the first system at its disposal, myth is relieved of the burden of providing the receivers with an explanation. For it intentionally confuses the two systems so that the literalness of the first system is made to appear as the explanation of the second, mythical system. As a result, it presents things as if they mean something magically by themselves, while, in fact, it endows things with a preferred meaning.

Barthes illustrates this sorcery of myth with an example of the vogue for the building of imitated Basque chalets among French bourgeoisie (1993: 124-125). When he first saw these buildings in Spain, he did not feel personally addressed by them. Having seen their imitations in Paris, however, he could not help feeling that he, as an observer, was called for naming them as Basque chalets. Barthes deduced that his feeling of being interpellated was probably due to the appropriative nature of the concept of basquity. That is, he was confronted with Basque chalet as an object appropriated by the mythical metalanguage of bourgeois speech, forcing him "to acknowledge the body of intentions which have motivated it and arranged it there as the signal of an individual history, as a confidence and a complicity" (Barthes 1993: 125). Divested of its historical determinations, the Basque chalet in Paris appeared in the eyes of the beholder as if it was something that magically came into being before him and for him. As Barthes expressed,

"…the adhomination is so frank that I feel this chalet has just been created on the spot, *for me*, like a magical object springing up in my present life without any trace of the history which has caused it" (1993: 125).

As this example illustrates, virtually everything can be caught up in the network of mythical speech inasmuch as their meaning is already complete in a linguistic system of apprehension. In other words, not only linguistic signs but also pictorial representations, objects, events, even persons can lend themselves to myth. Myth, therefore, is a kind of metalanguage with a particular intention. While the meaning of the first term already "postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions," myth puts all this historical contingency at a distance better to fill it with an intentional signification by sleight of hand (Barthes 1993: 117). Therefore, it transforms "the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature" by giving "an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (Barthes 1993: 141-142). Captured by mythical speech, the complexity of historical facts and the richness of meanings undergo a profound impoverishment. Through myth, the fabricated quality of class interests appears as natural, eternal or universal facts. Briefly, myth replaces the complexity and contradiction of social relations and their material outcomes with the simplicity of essences. This is the point at which a semiological form is put in the service of ideology.

Design as myth

As the Basque chalet example clearly illustrates, the material artefacts of our daily use can also offer themselves to mythical significations. This is all the more so for contemporary design and its products. Today, we observe design phenomenon mythified in three distinct but closely interrelated ways:

First myth: design as proper name
Design has become myth when it came to be understood as a value in itself rather than a material activity of professionals engaged in the process of decision making in a larger network of industrial production. Accordingly, design itself becomes a marketable commodity to the extent that it is released from its material, social and political determinations in the popular consciousness. In many instances, we see designed products whose sole signification is that of being designed. Thanks to this myth, there emerges a new regime of valence in which individual products are given value according to their position in a semantic scale of *designed-ness*. That is, the success of a product on the market depends on its capacity to employ semantic devices that will make it signify Design as its proper name. In this first myth, design as a generic concept is the object which is appropriated and purified by the second order signification of myth. If design is perceived as such a magical quality separable from concrete products, the designer also comes to be mythified as a 'magician' separated from the social and material circumstances that condition his/her work. This gives rise to a corresponding myth of the designer.

The influence of this myth on the understanding of design has been disastrous because once design is mythified, it can no longer be explained by terms other than design's own. Because it is elevated to the rank of a purely creative activity undertaken by certain talented individuals, design activity becomes increasingly isolated from the social map. The designer is depicted as a genius who works alone in his studio, immersed in the privacy of his inspirations. As a result, the design process comes to be regarded as a nucleus impervious to any influences outside of its immediate concerns. The practical and discursive existence of design gradually disappears from the scene, giving way to a 'mystique of design'. The prevalence of this myth not only closes the channels of critical reflection on design but also reduces the scope of design activity to a pretentious preoccupation with the creation of 'serve-the-rich' and 'serve-the-gallery' objects. According to this myth, design can not be defined, since it is an intuitive talent of a few privileged individuals. This myth, therefore, restores design, under the protective shield of the mythical notion of 'genius', to an unattainable world from where its power emanates. As a consequence, the only response expected of the critics and users to the products of design becomes limited to one of admiration rather than understanding and questioning.

Second myth: designers' myths
The second myth concerns designers themselves. The intransitive language employed by designers when characterizing their works prepares the ground for some myths to emerge among designers. As is well known, there have been a number of metalinguistic statements that prescribe particular norms and rules of designing. These include well-established design statements and themes in the form of maxims that permeate design practice and implicitly or explicitly define what makes up good design, what designers should and should not seek to achieve through their designs. Prominent examples of such maxims include "form follows function" or "less is more" of modernist era as well as "form follows meaning" of product semantics in the so-called postmodern period. Now, though at the beginning these statements might have been uttered with operational intent and had transitive links to their objects (i.e., designs), through the process of canonisation they have quickly transformed into mythical significations. In other words, when in 1896 the American architect Louis Sullivan (1975: 11-14) first uttered the "form follows function" phrase, he was trying to demonstrate the meaning of his design decisions by transitively linking his language to the making of his famous tall office building. However, no sooner this phrase started to be employed metalinguistically in order to celebrate existing or would-be designs than it turned out to be a myth. That is, the phrase ceased to be the language-object of practising designers and became the metalanguage of rhetoricians intent, in design practice, on persuading the public or, in education, indoctrinating design students with a higher principle to which they were expected to subscribe. By virtue of such myths, designers come to believe that instead of being historically determined they are engaged, through their work, in the truths of essence. In fact, through these designers' myths, a historically identifiable style begins to pass as a timeless value of true design. In this respect, Peter Dormer was quite correct when he interpreted "form follows function" as having been merely a style among others (1991: 20).

Third myth: myths as projected into designed objects
The final myth concerns designed objects themselves. Beginning with the rise of consumer culture after World War II, designed objects have gradually become purveyors of a diversity of mythical significations. According to Adrian Forty, manufactured goods all the more readily lend themselves to mythical appropriation since their unquestionable materiality and the overwhelming sense of actuality that they induce in people turns them into a suitable substance that the mythical speech generally seeks. This is precisely because myth prefers to inhabit forms that stand in the most insistent ways. Such forms as designed objects allow the mythical significations to enjoy both a prolonged life and credibility in society that the less concrete forms such as movies may lack. As

Forty (1986: 9) puts it, "unlike the more or less ephemeral media, design has the capacity to cast myths into an enduring, solid and tangible form, so that they seem to be reality itself".

Contrary to the doxological poverty of the first myth of design as a proper name, the myths embodied in designed objects manifest the most thematic expression of mythical significations. They are the bearers of a diversity of mythical conceptions ranging form ideas about technology and progress to a number of lifestyles particularly favored by consumer capitalism. As an example to this richness let me refer to two cases of mythical projection embodied in designed objects. The first example is the myth of modern office work as an enjoyable vocation suggested by Adrian Forty (1986). It is worth quoting here at some length:

We can take as an example the common assumption that modern office work is more friendly, more fun, more varied and generally better than office work was in 'the old days'. The myth serves to reconcile most people's experience of the boredom and monotony of office work with their wish to think that it carries more status than alternatives, such as factory work, where there is no pretence about the monotony. Although advertisements for office jobs, magazine stories and television serials have been responsible for implanting in people's minds the myth that office work is fun, sociable and exciting, it is given daily sustenance and credibility by modern equipment in bright colours and slightly humorous shapes, designs that help make the office match up to the myth (Forty 1986: 9).

A colleague, Ali Berkman, who studies products that employ ergonomics as style, offered the second example. According to Berkman (2001: 2), once having been a strict science of work, ergonomics has started recently to be employed only as a style in order to convey a "sense of ergonomics and ease of use" to the consumers. Therefore, according to him,

"It [ergonomics] is transformed into a vocabulary of expressing concepts like ease of use, comfort and also the myth of 'science behind design forms'. This vocabulary is comprised of textures, angles, softpads and biomorphic shapes. Consumers do not perceive it as a visual attitude and easily accept it. This exploitation of ergonomics is usually seen in product groups for which no more structural innovation is possible – toothbrushes, hand tools, sports shoes, etc. – and is used as a means of enhancing product differentiation in the market. However, western competition culture cannot cope with such a lack of progression. Pseudo-ergonomics and over-ergonomics are valuable tools for designers or producers for giving the sense of progression in some cases" (sic) (Berkman 2001: 2).

As these two examples illustrate, designed objects have become supports for countless myths about the world in contemporary consumer culture. Thanks to the reality reference suggested by the spontaneous materiality of designed objects, these myths begin to appear "as real as the products in which they are embedded" (Forty 1986: 9). In fact, however, what myth engenders in and through the product is a profound dematerialization. Under the sway of mythical speech both the materiality of the object itself – that is, the materiality of a number of decisions made during the process of its production – and the materiality of relations in which the object is socially produced and endowed with meaning disappears and gives way to a mystique of the object. In other words, myth divests the designed object of its individual as well as social history. In the literal sense of the term, myth robs the object of its memory, which consists of "the sum total of all the choices and fixings made at each stage in the passage of the object from conception, production and mediation to mass-circulation, sale and use" (Hebdige 1988: 82).

Through this dematerialization, the "social logic" that governs the production and circulation of objects disappears from the sight and the contemporary product begins to assume sign-value in a

"hierarchical code of significations" (Baudrillard 1981: 64, 68). This is the moment when designed objects are totally transformed into objects of consumption. Worse, the more the object is dematerialized, the less the transparency of social relations that produced it becomes intelligible. In other words, mythical appropriation of manufactured objects in the contemporary consumer culture has turned into a form of social control (Baudrillard 1981: 68). This is because dematerialization is one of the preferred formulas for the process of depoliticization. We must remember that the object, as the product of human labor, is always already political in every society and historical period. As Marx once remarked, "the most natural object contains a political trace, however faint and diluted, the more or less memorable presence of the human act which has produced, fitted up, used, subjected or rejected it" (Barthes 1993: 143). This is even more so for the industrially produced object that prefers to hide the political traces of its production behind innumerable myths.

The birth of styling as dematerialization

We have shown that myth dematerialises manufactured objects by turning them into signs that exchange among themselves in a differential code of significations. Of course, by dematerialization we do not mean a liquidation of the object. Rather, it signals a new type of relation established between the user and the object, in which the perception of the material conditions that gave birth to the object as well as its consumer is eclipsed by the newly emerging consumer sensibility mediated by styling. We claim that the process of stylization as a cultural phenomenon emerged gradually after World War II is responsible for this dematerialization. Stylization, as the prevailing ethos of consumer culture, is what best defines the mythical appropriation of material relations in our society. A parallel mythical appropriation of the manufactured goods occurs concurrently with the emergence of styling in design.

In design literature, styling is defined as "the application of surface effects to a product after the internal mechanism has been designed" with the intention "either to disguise or to enhance the relationship between form and function" (Julier 1993: 182). Though it is generally acknowledged that styling is used as a means for stimulating consumer demand, its social implications have been given little attention by designers. When we consult Dick Hebdige, however, we can get quite a clear picture of its social consequences. According to Hebdige (1988), the birth of styling after World War II marks the passage from a production-led economy to one of consumption. Specifically, the turning point was the decision of the Italian company Innocenti to offer both the "dressed" and the "undressed" versions of its Lambretta motor scooters simultaneously to the market. However, the consumer demand for the dressed version was so great that Innocenti quickly decided to stop the production of undressed models (Hebdige 1988: 91, 96). This anonymous vote signaled both the emergence of a new value (i.e., styling) in design and the growing importance and the potential malleability of consumer preferences. The age of the product in its traditional sense was over; by means of styling, the superimposition of the image on the object finally became possible. In other words, products were transformed into language-objects upon which the mythical speech could easily descend through the agency of the image.

From the viewpoint of design, this was made possible through such design decisions as "the encasement of mechanical parts in metal or plastic 'envelopes'" which endowed products with sculptural elegance (Hebdige 1988: 92). However, this tendency of design towards the perfection of surfaces and the disappearance of mechanical components radically transformed the relation of users to the products. As Hebdige (1988: 97) remarks, this was a "more remote" and "less physical" relationship of ease. Thanks to the mediation of styling, the user is led to relate even to the most tool-like object through an interface. In other words, the phenomenon of styling not only enveloped certain products amenable to stylization but also inserted a generalized interface between users and the product environment with which they are surrounded. This generalized interface is nothing but the cloud of mythical speech hovering over objects; and the form of myth in our consumer society

is the image linked to the object through the relay of styling. The social consequence of styling is to effect a general sublimation of the object. It does so by actively imposing separations "between the human and the technical, the aesthetic and the practical, between knowledge and use" upon the contemporary designed object (Hebdige 1988: 97). Through such separations the object is dematerialised and becomes an image ready to be coded as a sign of a desired lifestyle.

Re-materialization through mythoclasm

What Barthes did in his Mythologies was an attempt to decipher myths by means of a perverse linguistic move. He turned myth against itself by mythifying it in turn. In other words, he tried to recreate the object by introducing still another mythical speech into it. Barthes achieved this by using the given myth "as the departure point for the third semiological chain" and taking "its signification as the first term of a second myth" (1993: 135). To employ an odd terminology, the Barthesian technique of mythoclasm involved the production of a meta-meta-language. As was demonstrated in *Mythologies*, more often than not the linguistic clues for the second, artificial myth are to be found within the first myth. This was precisely the case, for example, in Barthes' treatment of the new Citroen (1993: 88-90). In this essay, he tried to restore Citroen DS19 to its "premythical components" by fabricating a second myth from the homophony of its name (Hebdige 1988: 79). That is, he made use of the pun suggested by its series name DS (originally, short for *Diffusion Special*), which can also be pronounced *Déesee* (i.e., goddess in French).

Note that deciphering myths in Barthesian sense was not an attempt to reduce the given myth to its original, essential form. Barthes was perfectly aware that breaking through the illusions of mythical consciousness should not entail a pursuit of origins. For if it were so, it would lead the analyst to the supreme illusion of Platonic essentialism. As Barthes himself showed, deciphering myths was not so much a matter of reduction as one of elaboration. It was a procedure by which the materiality of social relations that gave birth to the object becomes intelligible once again as a result of an elaboration. More precisely, the Barthesian procedure involved bringing forth a displacement of the given mythical elements through textual elaborations of the object.

The Barthesian technique of deciphering myths brings us to the question of designerly ways of dealing with myth. Barthes was, after all, a man of letters who contrived a *textual* technique as a weapon against myth. We should, therefore, ask whether we could develop a corresponding technique for the field of design criticism. In other words, how shall designers, as men of ideas in matter, be dealing with the mythical speech that prevails over their products? We suggest that this can be achieved through a technique we call 're-sketching'. However, we also claim that the technique of 're-sketching' has already been practised, albeit tacitly, in the form of some impromptu tactics within our material culture. In other words, we can observe some informal applications of this technique among the works of some designers and within the realm of popular appropriation of products. This was, for example, precisely the case when mods, having exhausted the expressive potential of the motor scooter to its limits by means of a vast number of customising practices, started to strip the scooter of its side panels and front mudguards (Hebdige 1988: 112). Having been repeatedly mythified, the scooter reached a stage in which it can no longer be mythified. As Hebdige (1988: 112) aptly puts, "after baroque" came the stage of "minimalism: the image of the scooter was deconstructed, the object 're-materialised'". Taking this anecdote as my key metaphor, let me now formulate the technique of 're-sketching' in a formal fashion.

Re-sketching as a technique of re-materialising designed products

The status of sketching among other drawings for design has not so much been questioned as taken for granted. It has come to be regarded as axiomatic that sketching is an indispensable and relatively isolated stage of the design process, involving the gradual development of a concrete form from an initial pattern. In such accounts, the emphasis is placed more strongly on formalistic and inward-

looking aspects of the process than its communicative functions that involve the generation and interpretation of signs as symbols within a social, material context. However, this conception of sketching as an introspective search of a designer for the evolution of form allocates the *figural* function of design thinking solely to the process of sketching, while the role of *discursivity* and *materiality* in design is altogether removed from the scene and assigned to the production and presentation drawings. This is probably because sketching is the least codified one among design drawings. Therefore, regarded as the least discursive and the most figural drawing of design thinking, sketching becomes mystified, unable to be penetrated either theoretically or in practice.

We suggest that to penetrate into the processes involved in sketching is crucial since the reasoning carried out and the outcomes achieved during sketching constitute and reflect the vary materiality of design activity. That is, the material descent of designed products can only be revealed through their analyses at the level of sketches. In other words, the myth of designed product can only be deciphered by treating them as if they were still in the form of sketches. To explain this, we should first offer an ontological definition of what a product is within consumer society.

An object of consumption is, by definition, an entity which does not readily yield information about the process of its production. What lends a product the character of an object of consumption is the success of industrial manufacturing methods in either erasing or concealing the traces of its technical as well as social production. For this reason, the end products of design present themselves to perception as impenetrable, opaque, and therefore, indisputable items that magically came into existence. In a similar vein, David Fleming (1998: 42) states that,

"[T]he process of construction involves the use of certain devices whereby all traces of production are made extremely difficult to detect.' If we want to examine the 'coming-into-being' of an object which could have been other than it is, we will need some way to 'break open' the object and view the history of its construction".

A sketch, on the other hand, lends itself to such an opening that Fleming remarks, because it does not conceal the traces of its production. This trait of sketches enables one not only to perceive the "coming-into-being" of the object but also to trace the multiplicity of paths that were opened but not followed, the multiplicity of alternatives that were alluded to but not solidified by the designer. My point might have already been understood. Sketching has a special significance for deciphering the myth of designed object and re-materialising it.

Sketches allow the entry of the analyst into the shop floor of design whereas the illustrated, final drawings can only represent the shop front of design. When considered at the level of individual products, sketches, in a sense, perform their own genealogies since they are the genealogical records of products, demonstrating the 'descent' of final design decisions. The myth of a given designed object, therefore, could only be deciphered by reconstituting its sketches. Note, however, that the significance of sketching for this technique is not dependent upon the availability of sketches. In other words, we do not have to reconstitute the object as faithful as possible to its original sketches in order to re-materialise it. We should, rather, treat the given product as the first term of a new mythical elaboration. Contrary to Barthesian technique of textual elaboration, however, we should once more mythify the object by practicing a formal elaboration on it. More specifically, the technique of re-sketching involves trying to appropriate the mythical object by subjecting it to another myth.

For example, nothing is more alienating (and re-materialising) than the effect resulting from reading the postmodern myth of product symbolism into an object that embodies the myth of functional form, that is, an effect resulting from countering the myth of "form follows function" with that of

"form follows meaning"! This would allow us to see the fabricated quality of what was once considered as the natural outcome of the function of an object. In other words, re-sketching might allow us to see the unacknowledged activity of product semantics behind functional form. And, indeed, this was precisely the case when the ideal of function became itself a source of symbolic inspiration and, instead of following function, form became a conveyor of images reminiscent of machines with the advent of 'machine aesthetics'.

Another way of re-sketching the given mythical object is to treat it as a *bricolage* rather than a *nucleus*. In other words, the mythical object can be re-materialised if it is treated as an assemblage of haphazard or incongruous elements. According to this conception, a designed product is not a nucleus. Both the formal unity and the functional identity of a product are myths. That is, each designed product has, by definition, a mixed lineage.

The unity of form is not a 'given', not an *a priori* category of designing. Rather, the unity of form is fabricated from extraneous elements in a piecemeal fashion. In order to allow the disparity at the very origin of a designed product to appear, the analyst should decompose the gestalt (i.e., the unity of form). This can be done by disregarding the given articulations of the object and creating new articulations in it so that the multiplicity of disparate forms whose traces were erased begin to reappear.

This procedure may also involve an attempt to dissolve the functional identity of the product. This can be done by deliberately erasing the species boundaries between products so that the functional identity of a product ceases to supply the stable ground on which to build a design argument. In other words, the analyst should re-sketch the object until it ceases to be a *product* and turns into a *chimera* [1]. As you may already know, the chimera is also a mythological figure. We have deliberately chosen this ancient myth with which to counter the myth of designed object. What is it that the myth most abhors? To be cancelled by means of an immemorial ancestor!

Notes:

[1] *Chimera*. 1. (a) A fire-breathing she-monster in Greek mythology having a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. (b) An imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts. 2. An illusion or fabrication of the mind, esp. an unrealizable dream. 3. An individual organ or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution (*Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, 1989).

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