g.o.d. and the *deus ex machina* of design

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the way that design ought to be narrated and legitimated within the context of the South African design industry. Special attention is given to the presence of disavowal in the design process, when clients commission designers to effect change for them, yet second-guess, mistrust, and scrutinise the proposed design solutions. Our grappling with this problem is done with reference to Nelson and Stolterman's concept of the 'guarantor of design' or g.o.d. and the contexts and considerations that affect how this g.o.d. is selected, constructed, and deployed. Both practical and ideological factors are negotiated as ways to understand these contexts and considerations, and, thereafter, the significance of empathy is highlighted as a means to tackle the various disjunctions that tend to arise in the scripting of the drama of design.

Keywords: Design research, best practice, Client-designer relationship, guarantor of design (g.o.d.), design and ideology, empathy.

Introduction

This article focuses on the manner in which the drama of design could be narrated and legitimated in corporate design environments, particularly in South Africa. This is done, firstly, by highlighting significant practical and ideological concerns in this drama, and, secondly, by examining the significance of empathy and empathic design as an ideological category that aims to bridge or mediate between

design praxis and design's ideological horizon. The intention is to pay sufficient attention to the establishment of best practices in design, whilst keeping in mind its inherent intricacies. As a 'wicked problems' discipline, design clearly deals with issues that are complex enough to 'have no definitive formulation' and 'no stopping rules' (Buchanan 1992:16). Wicked problems are so multifaceted and interwoven that solving them by using only one approach, or any singular focus, would be hopelessly misguided. Moreover, wicked problems are deeply shaped by multifaceted ideological factors that are themselves wicked problems and wicked contexts.

With this in mind, and to get a sense of why the narration and legitimation of the drama of design is of such paramount importance, it is helpful to focus on a common difficulty within the corporate sphere in the way that many relationships between clients and designers are negotiated. This difficulty may be stated simply as follows: *although clients approach designers to effect change for them, the design solutions proposed by the designer are often second-guessed, scrutinised and mistrusted*. This point of contention is so prevalent in the design industry that it is the subject of a great deal of commentary in popular culture (see figures 1, 2 and 3).[1]

While reasons for this difficulty may vary, the fact remains that the designer constantly needs to justify her design decisions to the client in order to allay the latter's reservations about implementing the proposed design solution. For design decisions to be justifiable they need to be based on something, preferably something with influence in the eyes of the design client. This 'something'—this foundation upon which design decisions are based—corresponds to what Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman (2012:202-203) call the 'g.o.d.' or 'guarantor of design'.[2]

Wherever the buck stops for making design decisions, whatever factors are given priority, or even whoever has the final word, is a g.o.d. Even if the term comes across as being a little too provocative, it seems to be a suitable way of naming a source of authority for generating change. After all, godhood carries with it many other connotations that are inferred when an appeal is made to a higher authority, including: the right to cause change, higher knowledge, security, prescience and power, as well as many other attractive qualities (aesthetics, for instance) that can persuade the client (and the designer) to leave their choices in the capable hands of their g.o.d. Specifically, with regard to higher knowledge, the godhood of the g.o.d. also, rather problematically, implies a rhetoric of omniscience. This is to say that it conveys the g.o.d.'s capacity to fully comprehend all possible ends and outcomes. Even if this is unreasonable and impossible, the ideological function

1. See, for example, Serial Kolor's (2015) poster series: *We turned the worst client comments into posters,* which contains comments that highlight the disjunction between client and designer: 'You haven't put enough design into it'; 'You start working on it. I'll send you the brief later'; and 'Okay, one last minor change.' The same concept is also found in Shanley and Treacy's (2014) posters, but many other examples can be found online that explore the tensions in the client-designer relationship.

2. According to Nelson and Stolterman (2012:203), the g.o.d. hones in on what certifies and legitimates a design actor's decisions, and how they are held accountable for their actions. Instead of focusing on the responsibility of designers for the outcomes of their actions, as Nelson and Stolterman do, this article investigates two additional aspects related to the g.o.d., namely: how design actors construct (or select) their g.o.d. in the first place, and how this g.o.d. is then deployed in practice.

FIGURE **Nº 1** ‹

I want you to use a better font, Serial Kolor, 2015.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

The target audience, Mark Shanley and Paddy Treacy, 2014.

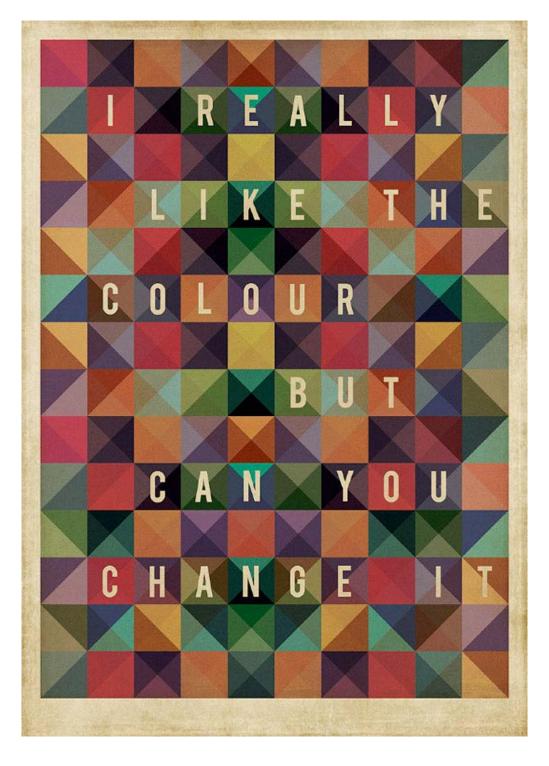*I really like the colour*, Mark Shanley and Paddy Treacy, 2014.

of this perceived omniscience is sustained by a basic emotional need: clients and designers are concerned about the risks of every design project, and the promise of omniscience, albeit a false promise, can appease such concerns.

Surprisingly, while the guarantor of design influences the way that design decisions are justified, negligible attention is given in design scholarship to its ideological dimension—that is, to the way that ideology acts as a foundation to the more practical outworking of the design process. Even when there is an implicit understanding of the magnetic pull of a g.o.d., hardly any heed is paid to the question of how to determine, ground and deploy its legitimacy. It should be obvious enough that any falsely selected g.o.d. amounts to little more than a *deus ex machina*—a 'god from a machine' that is inserted somewhat abruptly and clumsily at the end of a drama to 'resolve plot complications' that would otherwise be left hanging (Letwin, Stockdale & Stockdale 2008:43-44). Any *deus ex machina*, a g.o.d. set up without much careful consideration, is a false source of legitimation. And yet, as discussed below, this false legitimation is still enough to blind those involved in the design drama to their own use of flimsy reasoning and process management.

With this in mind, here that the best chance any designer has of choosing the most appropriate g.o.d. is through a particular view of design research itself, rather than constructing a fantasy legitimation (or *deus ex machina*) for the narrative of the design process. Design research in turn needs its own guarantor, empathy, which is discussed towards the end of the article. An exploration of perceptions among South African design practitioners of what the g.o.d. is, and how this affects the dramatisation of the design narrative, serves as a context for the discussion.

A great deal of the background research to this end has been done in a study investigating the conversance of designers with 'research for design' methods (Kirstein 2014). That study included a series of in-depth interviews and questionnaires of perceptions in the communication design industry regarding design research.[3] Using the data collected and analyses conducted for that study as a point of departure, this article takes a critical look at the processes involved in the identification of the g.o.d., as well as the formulation of and adherence to its strictures. Where inconsistencies and shortcomings are identified, recommendations are made for discovering and deploying a more useful and potent (but still limited) g.o.d.—a g.o.d. that can serve the drama of design better than a *deus ex machina*. To begin with, though, it is helpful to get a sense of the ideological concerns that shape the way that design decisions are made.

3. Kirstein's (2014) study investigates a tripartite stance of communication designers towards design research, namely: awareness, attitudes and aptitude. This tripartite stance is collectively referred to as 'conversance'. Furthermore, that study restricts the investigation to 'research for design' methods (which assist given design projects in meeting their objectives), as opposed to more general 'design research' methods (which may incorporate design itself, as part of the research method, to research something other than design).

The ideological dimension of design

Tony Fry (1999:5) regards design as the ubiquitous 'normality of the made world that is rendered background'. This is not an exagerration. After all, design has become somewhat synonymous with human environments. This is not to say, however, that design should be conceived of primarily in terms of the visible or the obvious—that is, in terms of clear aims, objectives, uses and products. Rather, it is best understood as the visible viewed as if it were invisible; it is the apparent that has been regarded as transparent and concealed. It is, paradoxically, too big to be seen. Thus, as much as the notion of design suggests a world that we look *at*, it also suggests a world we look (*away*) *from* or *through*. It is as much a part of the ground and frame of our perceptions as it is the thing that we perceive. To use more pejorative language, it is a prominent part of the foundation of our biases and prejudices.

Design is consequently best considered as an entire process of human invention that, whether intended or not, changes or intervenes into not only human circumstances but human consciousness itself, or perhaps even into the unconscious horizon of our perceptions. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2006) contends, design is part and parcel of the 'disavowed ideological dimension' of society as that which 'directly materializes ideology'. Ideology, for our purposes, may be understood as something that presents an 'enchanting picture of reality' (Lilla 2014). It is not, as common parlance would suggest, merely a system of beliefs or ideas. It is not just a concern of '-isms' or 'oughts' or worldviews that reside only at the level of our conscious engagement with the world. Rather, it is a subtle force that mediates between society's avowals and denials, between what is consciously acknowledged and what remains hidden from conscious awareness. It is more about the construction of a sense of equilibrium and a sense of togetherness than it is about specific ideas, although they may certainly play their part in the way that ideology affects people (Bawn 1999:303-334). Also, significantly, ideology suggests loyalty to a particular 'kernel of enjoyment,' as well as to things like institutions, rituals, politics, communities, and the like (Butler 2014:128). It suggests a way of thinking within particular boxes with set parameters that are difficult to challenge. In Louis Althusser's (1971:153) words, ideology may be defined as an 'imaginary relationship … to the real conditions of existence'.

Following an 'optical metaphor', Mark Lilla (2014) suggests that 'ideology takes an undifferentiated visual field and brings it into focus, so that objects appear in

a predetermined relation to each other'. Far from being innocent or neutral, then, ideology, as that which design makes concrete, suggests a hidden set of co-ordinates according to which understanding itself is mapped and thereafter shaped and put into practice. Unless this more invisible ideological dimension of design is called forth from its assumed scenography, the question of the place of design in the world becomes merely a surface concern. This is to say that design would only be dealt with at a symptomatic level; at the level, that is, of what it looks like rather than at the level of how it functions to shape and underpin our engagement with the world radically. The need for engaging with the relationship of the g.o.d. to design should also hereby become apparent. It is necessary, as is shown below, to change processes, but such processes will only be alterable if their ideological grounding can be adjusted.

To understand better how to deal with design in its totality, at its most fundamental ideological level, it is helpful to make use of the metaphor of a drama, as previously mentioned. If design may be understood as the planning of and carrying out of an activity, as the realisation or the conclusion of that activity, and also as the value added or purpose achieved through some activity (Dilnot 1984:3; Buchanan 2001:9), then it is clear that design is not something that is ontologically isolated from agency, processes, outcomes and values. It is part and parcel of the rules of relationship. Put differently, while design may be referred to as singular, it always presupposes a multiplex of material and nonmaterial processes that are continuously interacting. It is drama replete with front-stage elements, actors, and narrative trajectories, as well as the wirework and production schemes that are hidden backstage. It also, very importantly, suggests an affected audience. All of these factors will play some role—whether great or small—in selecting, establishing and deploying the g.o.d.

The birth of the g.o.d.

To understand, generally speaking, how any designer selects the g.o.d., one needs to consider where the designer's knowledge fits into the broader discourses and definitions of the design field. After all, it is what the designer knows that sets up her perceived hierarchy of importance of the various elements in the drama of design. Rather fittingly, Kees Dorst (2008:5) designates the term 'design actor' to the domain of design knowledge that describes the design practitioner. The designer as actor is located within the drama, rather than outside it, as one of its protagonists. Therefore, while designers are themselves writing the narrative of

the design drama, they are also inevitably among the *dramatis personae* of that same narrative. They are a part of the world they are rewriting; they are stakeholders in the process that they are constructing. This means that they suffer the outcomes of their dramatisation as much as anyone else would. They bear the weight of the g.o.d. that they have elected to serve.

In attempting to understand what the design actor does, Christopher Crouch and Jane Pearce (2012) describe the position of the individual design pracitioner, the design practitioner's identity, and the context in which these are located. In particular, Crouch and Pearce distinguish between the *field* and *habitus* of the designer. *Field* refers to a collection of practices and perspectives that delineate what falls within the domain of design and what is found outside of design. The delineation is not, however, necessarily a clearly drawn line but is a space contested by the various participants (Crouch & Pearce 2012:8).[4] Different voices contributing to the theorising, research and practice of design agree on some points while inevitably disagreeing on others. And, where there is disagreement, a natural process of contestation emerges concerning what is truly a part of the design field and what falls outside of it. Through this process of contestation, it becomes evident that there is a hierarchy according to which some views are considered to be more important than others (Crouch & Pearce 2012:8-9). This is a very important aspect in establishing the field of design, as the more dominant voices in the discourse effectively decide—at a high level, based on authority attributed to them by the design community itself—whether certain practices are considered an intrinsic part of the field or not. This certainly applies to attributing relevance to research practices, which will be accepted or rejected in accordance with predominant prejudices and ideological positions adopted by the various participants in the design drama.

The process of contesting the design field works hegemonically. It naturalises itself so that it not only encourages practitioners within the field to do things in a prescribed way, unthinkingly, but also discourages them from questioning the *status quo*. This means that even within the field of design, there are philosophical disagreements and opposing practices out of which any individual designer must elect their own set of convictions and modes of operation (Crouch & Pearce 2012:10; Nelson & Stolterman 2012:22-23). This individualised distillation of a specific set of views, practices and attitudes is what becomes the habitus of the design actor. *Habitus* refers approximately to 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005:316).

4.   Other disciplines outside of design also define themselves in relation to and against the design field, which means that the boundaries of design are contested from within as well as from outside the field.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1984:170) presents it, habitus is neither the result of any kind of pure free will, nor is it totally determined by forestructures of understanding. Rather, it is created by an interplay between the individual and the larger structural order. This is to say that the habitus is created somewhat unconsciously 'without any deliberate pursuit of coherence … without any conscious concentration' (Bourdieu 1984:170). It should be apparent, then, that the design actor's habitus is wrested from the field through a process of reflection and discrimination, which includes the conscious and unconscious inclusion and/or exclusion of certain ideas. The habitus, representing the design actor's convictions, adopted practices and attitudes, is the pool of knowledge and (for better or worse) biases from which the g.o.d. is discovered and/or constructed. Accordingly, what the designer accepts to be authoritative and true will be the determinant of what she chooses to be the basis of authority on which design decisions ought to be based. It will also form the bedrock of justifications that the designer uses to defend her design decisions to the client.

If, for example, the habitus of the individual designer is fixated upon the primacy of *techne*—technical knowledge and crafsmanship—there is a very good chance that other aspects of the design process will be downplayed or even neglected.[5] *Techne* would then gain prominence as a way of legitimating design decisions. Even while there are clearly a number of other important factors at play in the drama of design, this sort of emphasis on *techne* could cause distrust to fester between the client and the designer, especially since *techne* is unlikey to be at the heart of a client's decision making process.

Even if this example is somewhat simplistic, the point is that any one particular emphasis within the designer's habitus will inevitably have repercussions on how other elements within the drama of design are regarded by both designer and client. To put it more plainly, it is in negotiating tensions between the field and habitus that the designer will select or establish the g.o.d. The importance of properly negotiating the tension between field and habitus is therefore obvious: without such an understanding, the possibility of choosing a false g.o.d.—*a deus ex machina*—is increased dramatically. The above brief example also highlights a clear indicator of when a *deus ex machina* has been selected: it is anything that threatens the quality of relationship between the client and the designer.

5. In fact, there are some who contend that this is what characterised design thinking until the last decade or so (Dorst 2008:5-7; Kirstein 2014:24-26).

Manifestations of the *deus ex machina*

Drawing on her habitus, the design actor discovers or creates, whether wittingly or unwittingly, an *a priori* set of conditions and conventions that will serve as her frame of reference from which she can demonstrate deference or subservience to her g.o.d. This guarantor ultimately resides in one or both of two domains: within the design actor, or outside of her. Even if the g.o.d. is the designer, that designer will often still opt to express the guarantor as being a separate "other". The main reason for this is that it allows the maintenance of a veneer of professional objectivity. Instead of claiming to be the g.o.d., a designer may for example attribute their decision-making to their 'other': intuition and creative instinct or, even more credibly, past experience. In short, tacit knowledge is a particularly powerful motivator for relying on any particular g.o.d.

Ken Friedman (2008:153) describes tacit knowledge as an intuitive application of practical knowledge gained through repeated use and exposure. In other words, experience in writing design narratives eventually entrenches the design actor into ways of thinking and doing that become second nature. This can and does happen to the extent that the designer cannot necessarily articulate what her decision-making is really based on. Through this, the visible is rendered background and the ideological co-ordinates that guide the design process become unchallangeable.

As it turns out, there is strong evidence that reliance on tacit knowledge for foundational strategic decision-making is highly prevalent among South African communication designers (Kirstein 2014:90). While reliance on tacit knowledge is inescapable not only in design practice but even in the most mundane of everyday activities, Friedman (2008:154) laments that many of the flawed theoretical positions posited in design—even where research is involved—can ironically be attributed to a superficial understanding of tacit knowledge that is uninformed by literature or any other form of rigour. Even if tacit knowledge could help to support a legitimate g.o.d., there is still a need for design knowledge that is externally informed. Even if a legitimate g.o.d. can be selected by the fluke of a good intuition, the need remains for a means to test it.

With unprecedented access to field-specific information, not all of it equally reliable, there is clearly a need for a sifting mechanism to establish what is "truthful" and what is not (to help the design actor understand the nature of her extra-personal g.o.d.). For this reason, many designers rely on the credibility of what is broadly called "research". Part of the problem with this so-called "research" in the design

industry is that it suffers from an acute lack of semantic clarity (Kirstein 2014:11). For example, South African design practitioners who were interviewed regarding their research practices made no distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly sources, credible and dubious research, or even whether "research" described the information they were gathering as opposed to their own processes of locating the information (Kirstein 2014:78, 84, 89, 92, 95).

Moreover, many of these design practitioners bill clients for "research" when this probably involves little more than indiscriminately assimilating whatever results a web-based search engine churns out (regardless of where the information originates from). Any information of the designer's choosing is packaged as authoritative with the simple words 'our research indicates …'. This is precisely what is meant when referring to the *deus ex machina*—the so-called research here appears to act as a suitable and genuine source of external authority whereby the design results can be corroborated. It may even temporarily assuage the fears of the distrustful client. And yet, even a marginal increase in critical insight reveals just how flimsy this g.o.d. really is. It is a mask, albeit somehow a convincing one, that hides the fact that there is no real substance to the elected authority. It is at most a placeholder that indicates the need for a legitimate g.o.d.

Of course, there are designers who take greater care to process the assimilated information provided by their online research. In such cases, what is offered to the design client is not research merely because the design actor stumbled across it. Rather, it was properly assimilated into the design process—a process of experimentation, discovery and iteration that is seen as practice-led (or practice-based) research. Many design practitioners will shy away from the strictures of academic research because these strictures were not always developed for use in industry, or perhaps because they are inhibitive to the creative (and often non-linear) design process (Augustin & Coleman 2012:xiv; Biggs & Buchler 2007:62). When this is the case, the design process itself is often put forward as an inherent form of practice-led research. Although this suggestion has come from many quarters and for many different reasons, it has to date been effectively debunked (Kirstein 2014:44-45). This means that while a given design process may very well qualify as being practice-led research, all design processes do not automatically qualify as meriting this label simply by virtue of being design processes. Arguing in this manner would only be a typical example of circular reasoning.

The above contentions do not apply to all design actors everywhere. Some make a more concerted effort to locate receptacles of relevant design research on which to draw, taking special note of the origin of the information. Closer investigation reveals, however, that this process can become a minefield. Even case studies published by representative graphic design bodies such as Brand Council SA have been demonstrated to be ill-disguised design brag-pieces with no evidence of a compelling underlying research process (Kirstein 2014:46-47). Another more obvious contention would be that, even if due process is followed, the findings of a given design research project may not be valid owing to factors overlooked by the researcher. This, when added to the uncertainties of the research process outlined above, would suggest that designers not only need to look outside of their own prejudices for design knowledge to arrive at a trustworthy g.o.d., they also need to have some level of understanding of *how* research itself works. To legitimate research as a valid guarantor of design, one has to understand what legitimates research itself. This is something addressed in more detail further on.

The identification of acceptable research in constructing the design narrative is, unfortunately, not the only hurdle to be overcome. Even a hammer can be useless in hammering nails if the nails are in the next room. When a design actor says, 'Our research indicates …' she may very well be referring to excellent, accurate research. The research may even be represented in a manner consistent with what was intended by the original researcher. The question remains, then, whether the research begat the design narrative, or whether the design narrative determined what research to include. If one is to apply research to the process of design dramatisation, it makes sense that the dramatist (who is admittedly not the only force at work in shaping the narrative) would rely on the research to steer the direction that design narrative takes.

There is, nevertheless, another practice identified among certain South African communication designers where the design decision-making precludes identification of research—an intellectually dishonest logic called reverse rationalisation (Kirstein 2014:90). Reverse rationalisation can be described as a line of reasoning through which the justification or rationale is precluded by its outcome, rather than actually leading to its outcome. Reverse rationalisation takes on the structure of disavowal, which can be formulated via a paradox: 'I know quite well … but still …' (Pfaller 2014:40). Here, the designer may know quite well that the g.o.d.—the use of tacit knowledge or pseudo-research, for instance—is rather flimsy; but nevertheless still continues to operate as if the g.o.d. is legitimate. This hypocrisy, albeit often unconscious, cuts to the heart of the ideological edifice that justifies the selection

and deployment of a false g.o.d. The edifice is illusory but it is nonetheless treated as if it is real. The rationalisation is only that—a false story—and yet it is assumed to be sufficiently viable.

An example of reverse rationalisation is where a creative director or design manager intuitively, at the outset of the project, strikes upon what feels like a solution to the design brief. This is then communicated to a junior designer or dedicated research team member with the instruction to find research that will support the design decision. Even when this backwards rationalisation of design decisions is not made deliberately, the design actor may still succumb to this approach unwittingly in a well-documented phenomenon know as confirmation bias (Taleb 2010:55; Kahneman 2011:80).[6]

This is where an ideological dimension is most evident in choosing the g.o.d.: reverse rationalisation is commonly used by designers to convince not only the client, but even *themselves*, that their design decisions have been, and are, legitimate. The obviousness of the truth (namely, that this is little more than an elaborate form of self-deception) is the very thing that makes the truth invisible (namely, the design outcomes have been largely supported by unconscious choices rooted in untested prejudices). This logic is something that Žižek (2014:8) points out with reference to Donald Rumsfeld's famous remarks about 'the relationship between the known and the unknown: "There are known knowns; there are things that we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns—there are things we don't know we don't know"'. Žižek (2014:9) points out that there is an important relationship between the known and the unknown that is neglected by Rumsfeld, namely the 'unknown knowns'—'the things we don't know that we know'. In this design context, those involved in the process often "know" that their research is substandard and rushed or carried out merely to support a decision that has already been made, but it is not the kind of knowledge that is readily recognisible and is therefore not easily admitted.[7] The designer may know very well what is going on, but will still find ways to keep this knowledge buried and ineffectual.

Rather than making tacit knowledge explicit, as research should, the design process is often carried out in order to make explicit knowledge tacit. An illusion is created ('We know that we have not carried out sufficient research') and then treated as if it is real ('Nevertheless, we will continue as if our research is sufficient'). What is not in question here, though, is the obvious fact that design research must be given greater credence, as must the way in which the design actor appropriates

6. This is also called 'confirmation error'. A similar cognitive error is expectancy bias, in which the design actor will interpret whatever they see as confirming their *a priori* assumptions (Hubbard 2010:135).

7. That is to say, while the designer may have a niggling suspicion that their research is not air-tight, they cannot identify precisely where they strayed.

it into the dramatisation process. What is at issue is precisely how research can be understood and conducted to ensure that the guarantor of design is valid. This is to say that research needs to be conducted in such a way as to consciously seek to make the so-called unknown knowns more fully present and available, including the knowledge that all research is, by its very nature, limited to the co-ordinates that have been set up to ensure that the research question/s has/have been appropriately addressed.

To better understand design research, it is essential to see that design really exists in a constant tension not only between the habitus and field, but also between circumstances and behaviours, realities and ideals. Part of this tension is found in straddling past and future. This of necessity involves a persistent negotiation of the status quo on the one side (what has been) and that which design hopes to evoke or elicit on the other (what will or could be). Enmeshed with this tension is the process of change itself. The design outcome is, to borrow Victor Margolin's (2002) phrase, a 'politics of the artificial'; it involves imaginary interventions into the sociophere and its contexts and must be brought to bear onto reality to turn it into the new, desired reality that the designer envisages. More specifically, the process of dramatisation (that is, the narration of the design solution) implies writing the desired future as a new narrative that is to supplant or append existing perceived reality. This process is perpetually negotiating the risk that either, at one extreme, the *status quo* will merely be upheld in keeping with existing preconceptions and expectations or, at another extreme, that the actual outcome will be too far removed from what is needed to make any appreciable and effective difference. Clearly, the g.o.d. will play an invaluable role in navigating this risk, and an insufficient g.o.d. is likely to lead to either one or the other of these extremes.

Another problem faced by designers working with wicked problems is that it is often nearly impossible to determine what the outcomes will be: the g.o.d. is therefore as crucial for determining the ends to be aimed at as it is for determining how such ends will be reached. Risk is therefore at the centre of any design enterprise. The design client does not necessarily identify risk in its broadest phenomenological sense, but at the very least she recognises the need to manage risk as far as her business objectives are rendered vulnerable. As pointed out earlier in this article, design clients are often suspicious of design solutions, scrutinising and second-guessing the proferred design narrative. This, as the above argument has thus far suggested, turns out not to be an indictment against the clients. After all, it appears that their suspicions are often well-founded, considering the insubstantial ways in which many design decisions are justified.

This section has looked critically at the ways in which designers misappropriate the idea of the g.o.d. Although identifying these problems is arguably a step in the right direction, it does not yet enable the introduction of corrective behaviours and practices. For that to happen, various other areas of understanding need to be unpacked, such as what research is, which research methods are suitable to design, how to identify a method suited to answering the imminent design problem, and how design should be implented. Discussing all of these facets in detail lies beyond the scope of this article. However, a discussion of what the components of an effective g.o.d. could look like, serves as a point of departure for identifying and implementing further corrective measures.

Towards discovering and deploying a legitimate g.o.d.

The article has suggested that a particular understanding of research will best equip a designer to construct a substantive g.o.d. to legitimate her design drama. Knowing what characterises research and what distinguishes research activities from non-research activities, is indispensible in developing useful and credible research practices. Some would contest that having an authoritative foundation on which to base design decisions poses a danger: that of leading the designer to believe she is exempt from taking responsibility for her decisions (Nelson & Stolterman 2012:204). However, the danger of such presumed exemption only really appears when an illegitimate g.o.d. is constructed. When a designer appeals to a g.o.d. such as research without ensuring its veracity, she is already refusing to take responsibility for her actions—the g.o.d. therefore becomes a convenient excuse for lazy thinking and general passivity. On the other hand, one who appropriates research with suitable vigour, verification and validity demonstrates that she assumes responsibility for her work.

The seriousness of shirking responsibility is further clarified in considering the wicked nature of design problems. For example, several of the designers interviewed by Kirstein (2014:84) indicated that they shy away from research methods because methods are formulaic and do not seem to address the diverse needs of design projects. Most of the designers interviewed could not identify a single research for design method, and some offered that they use their "own" (undisclosed) methods (Kirstein 2014:78). In other words, these practitioners assert that employing credible research practices is restrictive and does not recognise the wicked nature of design problems.

This gross misapprehension of the nature of research methods is counterproductive. When designers resort to reverse rationalisation, essentially relying on tacit knowledge and past experience alone, are they not failing to acknowledge that they are dealing with wicked problems? Relying solely on intuition, built on past experience, belies that the designer does not consider the new design problem she is confronted with to be unique, or different to previous problems. On the contrary, several characteristics of research speak directly to the wicked nature of design problems. For example, research:

- begins with a research question (which requires a genuine understanding of the nature of the research problem)

- requires a clear, articulate goal (which sets a stopping-point for the research process)

- must be guided by the research question (so that it attends to the needs of the given design problem, rather than meandering aimlessly) and

- must follow a procedural plan (tailored to meet the objectives of the research project) (Kirstein 2014:16; Leedy & Ormrod 2013:2-4; Neuman 2012:11).

Consider also that eight out of nine designers who completed a detailed survey, submitted that they do not do more research in the workplace because of rigid time constraints (Kirstein 2014:81). If they truly understood the nature of research, these designers would not easily conclude that a lack of time justifies, or necessitates, conducting research without using an undergirding method. Subscribing to standard accepted research practices would ensure that the research method acknowledges the wicked nature of the design problem, and save time by assisting the designer both in reaching her goal faster and knowing when she has reached it. Appropriating tested, credible and creditable research practices enables the designer to construct a g.o.d. that is legitimate, and which also facilitates and streamlines the design process.

Unfortunately, until fairly recently, there has been a widespread perception that existing research methods are not suitable for design, since they were developed for other fields of human knowledge (Cross 1999; Narváez 2000; Bærenholdt *et al*. 2010:6). More recently, it has been argued that the research methods being devised specifically for design are one-dimensional, overly simplistic and not rigorous enough to address design problems holistically (Dorst 2008:6-7). Perhaps

this may account, in part, for the disdain for design research methods and theory expressed by some design practitioners.[8] This disdain is unhelpful and effectively restrains designers from improving their research practices. Very few of the respondents surveyed and interviewed by Kirstein (2014:84, 96) indicated that they make any effort to remain informed about latest developments in design research practices. This means that even if improvements and new discoveries are made in the field, many designers remain ignorant—regardless of whether the information is made widely available. Any new part of the field cannot therefore be assimilated into the designer's personal habitus. This phenomenon is also far from being a theoretical "what if" scenario; whereas hardly any of the 26 design practitioners (across several design agencies) interviewed in Kirstein's (2014) study could name a single research for design method, he was able to locate over 180 that are well documented (Kirstein 2014:50). This suggests that designers should not only have an understanding of accepted research practices, but also up-to-date knowledge of research practices in their own field.

Regardless of whether a designer's research practices and processes are at the cutting edge, articulation is also a critical factor that all too often becomes an unsurmountable hurdle. In some cases designers cannot proceed to execution simply because they are unable to explain their process to their client (Kirstein 2014:96). In other cases, the designer cannot satisfactorily justify the decisions underpinning the design approach and outcome (Frascara 2007:62, 63). These are surprising occurrences, since designers are communication professionals. However, the issue clearly goes deeper than designers' command of rhetorical devices. It may very well be that an inability to articulate effectively, in part, belies a lack of clarity and understanding by the designer; it is this lack that should not be present when the design has been based on a legitimate g.o.d.[9] Again, as intimated above, there is a strong possibility that designers themselves are often not even aware of what is needed in order to accomplish the desired outcomes, despite claims to the contrary.

It is reasonable to assume, bearing in mind the widespread lack of understanding noted above, that this dismissal of the importance of thorough design research begins at the level of design education. In fact, Jorge Frascara (2007:62, 65) accuses design educators of hiding their lack of knowledge behind fuzzy terminology such as 'intuition' and 'research'. What begins as a reliance upon mere intuition in design training will obviously filter through to the design industry. This is yet another reason why design practitioners need to keep abreast of best practices in their field: so that the theoretical component of their habitus is not the product of their limited formal design education only.

8. This disdain has been identified in several South African studies. See Kirstein (2014:5, 84), MacGarry (2008:135, 143) and the IDA world design survey pilot project (2008:66).

9. Assuming, of course, that the person who executed the design is either present to defend her design (or process), or has at least communicated her process clearly to the one doing so.

When habitually keeping up with best practices in the field, a designer is adopting a professional lifestyle of erudition. Doing so is a *de facto* admittance of the designer's incomplete, and imperfect, knowledge and understanding. This is a good admittance, albeit implied, since constructing a legitimate g.o.d. requires designers to recognise their biases — when a designer can recognise her own biases, she can proceed to differentiate between acceptable and bad bias. Naturally, designers will be biased in their approach to their design, no matter how rigorously they have researched the design problem. Even though research methods are developed in order to offset the effects of bias, they cannot do so completely for two reasons. Firstly, any method will be selected because of the biases of the designer. It is precisely because the designer gains experience and develops tacit knowledge that she develops decision-making heuristics that exist *a priori* to a given design problem, which makes her thinking biased (see Hubbard 2010:3-6; Kahneman 2011:7,10-11).

Secondly, research as an activity is an exercise in discrimination (by delineating a particular, exclusive area of investigation) and therefore is inherently biased (Foucault 1972:66-69). However, not all bias is bad; just as tacit knowledge is a necessary component of everyday praxis, delineation is essential to conduct research. Biases of inherency such as this are useful and necessary, but procedural biases introduced by the designer can distort the research (and therefore design) process.[10] Awareness of their own biases empowers designers to construct a more solid and viable g.o.d. It also helps them to accept criticism of their design processes and proferred solutions humbly, which is especially helpful when the criticism is legitimate. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that 'design's own knowledge' is a sufficient cure to the central problem outlined near the outset of the article: that clients, even though they commission designers to effect change, often mistrust, scrutinise and second-guess the solutions tabled by the designers. Even when a designer has employed a viable g.o.d., this fact will not necessarily dissipate the client's mistrust and hesitance to adopt the proposed design solution.

Empathy as an ideological category: the foundation of a legitimate g.o.d.

This article has argued for the need of a valid g.o.d. and for its connection to design research by examining some of the ways that a false g.o.d. or *deus ex machina* is selected and deployed. The concluding section proposes that the g.o.d. termed 'design research' needs to be be further legitimated by empathy.

At first glance, it may appear that what has been termed the *deus ex machina* g.o.d. is primarily supported by ignorance; in other words, that it seems to be supported mostly by the fact that many designers do not know any better. This, as already noted, is only partially true. Kirstein's (2014) research certainly confirms that an epistemic failure has a significant part to play in this process, but the more alarming fact noticed by Kirstein is that often designers do know better than to set up and then rely on a flimsy g.o.d., and yet they nevertheless act in a way that undermines this very knowledge. This is to say that better knowledge or judgement is not enough to destabilise the ideological centre that keeps the *deus ex machina* perfectly intact.

A possible way to address this problem is to pay attention to a fundamental paradoxical disavowal at the centre of the client's posture towards the designer. It is a posture which actually mirrors the designer's disavowals of her own better judgement that research needs to be done. There is both trust ("I know quite well that the designer can complete this job sufficiently well") and distrust ("But still, I choose to second-guess, scrutinise and mistrust the solutions that the designer offers"). To understand how to overcome both the disavowal of the designer regarding research, and the disavowal of the client regarding the designer and/ or her practices, it is vital to recall that the issue of ideology is at the centre of this article. It is ideology that acts as the primary ground of the epistemic problems noted here. It is ideology, a commitment to a particular kernel of enjoyment, that sets up the prejudices that act against best design practice.

A solution to the problem of selecting a *deus ex machina* begins to emerge when we see that ideology may further be understood as that 'generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as changes in this relationship' (Žižek 1994:1). It should already be clear that ideology is located, not at the level of our conscious ideas or in any kind of 'internalisation of external contingency', but is most evident as the externalisations that result from a perceived inner necessity (Žižek 1994:4). This suggests that locating what drives the twin ideological errors that result in the selection and deployment of a false g.o.d. is not just about identifying the error itself (the lack of thorough design research or the lack of trust between client and designer). Rather, it is about locating what it is that brings the error about. Put differently, it concerns what mediates and grounds the relationship between invisible factors (such as design decisions) and visible things (like design outcomes), as well as between invisible things (human motivations, for example) and apparent things (such as what is actually being communicated).

When the client sets herself up against the designer, and when the designer sets herself up against design research, this contention that ideology serves a mediating function—between the visible and invisible, between the past and future, between comfort and risk, between what we know and do not know, and so on—suggests that what is most lacking is in fact a sufficient point of connection between the client and the designer, and between the designer and the end user. A proposal for the missing point of connection is empathy. The point of arguing for greater empathy, however, is not to suggest that it is a neat solution or resolution to the problems discussed. Rather, it is a necessary element in human interactions that destabilises the presumptions that underpin the problems already discussed. Empathy is not necessarily comfortable or comforting, but is something that arrests and unsettles the process in order to ask questions about what is required to make any process or dialogue work. As the cornerstone of human relationships, it presumes all of the complexities that come with those relationships. Nevertheless, these complexities are preferable to the rigidity of mutual suspicion that often dominate client-designer discourses.

Claiming empathy as central to the design process by no means suggests that empathy is ideologically neutral. In fact, the reverse is true: it is a profound indicator of ideological values, forestructures of understanding and prejudices. Nevertheless, somewhat paradoxically, empathy is also a profound influencer of human relationships precisely because, while it is ideological, it is also that which protentially challenges and even mollifies inflexible ideologies. This paradox—that empathy is capable of both enforcing and undermining prejudice—demonstrates its complexity. Since empathy is a process of emotional contagion that allows one to subjectively, vicariously and imaginatively experience and/or identify with the cognitive state, perspective and/or emotional posture of others (Wieseke, Geigenmüller & Kraus 2012:318), a lot depends on which others are identified with. In its most simplistic and problematic form, empathy may only concern the most immediate circle of relationships in negotiating the habitus-field dialectic. Thus, for example, a designer may make the mistake of only empathising with other designers and would therefore find that her existing prejudices are reinforced rather than challenged. Empathy may be involved here, but only in its most limited sense, as something that confirms in-group biases. This is not the kind of empathy that is recommended here.

In its broadest and most useful sense, empathy—the kind of empathy that is able to mediate the various tensions in the design drama properly —is rooted in a threefold directive: firstly, it involves an identification with those in one's most immediate circle of relationships (designers empathising with other designers, for

instance); secondly, it involves an identification with those who are outside of one's most immediate circle of relationships (designers empathising with the client and the audience, for instance); and thirdly, it involves a deliberate experience of oneself as an other to others (for example, designers attempting to look at themselves and their work from the perspective of the client and the audience). In accordance with this threefold directive, empathy involves both centring (a sense of one's situatedness amidst familiar forestructures of understanding) and decentring (a sense of one's situatedness amidst less familiar and even unfamiliar contextual factors). If one of the three directives is lost, the kind of empathy needed for overcoming gaps in the client-designer-user/audience relationship would be absent. Empathy, in its most profound sense, is therefore not merely concerned with supporting in-group biases, although in-group biases will have their part to play. Rather, it is about a larger concern even for those who are not part of in-group identification.

Of course, empathy is not a new concept in design research. It seems, in fact, to be implicit in a range of human-centered design approaches, like collaborative (co-design), experiential, interactive, participatory, and open design. It regards identification as having some primacy in the design process, especially at the affective and emotional level (Holt 2011:152). Against purely instrumental approaches in user-centered design, empathy is 'other-directed' and so naturally carries with it somewhat utopian values and possibilties like 'betterment, improvement and even perfection' (Holt 2011:152). It is essentially collaborative in its desire to be open-minded, observant and endlessly curious as it seeks to behold things with the 'eyes of a fresh observer' (Leonard & Rayport 1997:10-13; Mattelmäki, Vaajakallio & Koskinen 2013:67). It is an approach that is perpetually committed, not only to function and emotion, but to ethics: for example, the Golden Rule, as the central principle of all ethical systems, is rooted in empathy (Gensler 2013).

Empathy, as an ideological category, therefore underpins the legitimate g.o.d. in three ways. Firstly, it is rhetorical, which means that it sets up a point of identification, at least to begin with, between the client and designer, as well as between the designer and the user or audience. In this, it prioritises understanding the different parts that each stakeholder plays. Secondly, it is ethical, in that it seeks to place the good—the wellbeing of as many stakeholders as possible—at the centre of the design process. Of course accommodating the various stakeholders is fraught with complexities, tensions and difficulties. The process will always be a negotiated one. Compromises are inevitable and, in the end, some will be better accommodated than others. Nevertheless, empathy acts as the glue that keeps the discussion going even when difficulties arise. When prioritised by all involved parties, it allows

for the possibility for conversation to continue, even in a deadlock. Finally, empathy is practical. It suggests that the best way to legitimate design research is to deal with the actual realities of all parties involved, including the relationship issues that are at the centre of the drama of design. Empathy does not function merely at the level of concepts and biases, but seeks to let the process itself play a significant role in its own unfolding.

Conclusion

This article contended that ideology is at the heart of the grounding, selection and deployment of a g.o.d.. Ideology, as that which mediates relationships, is always, in the hermeneutical sense, deeply prejudicial; in other words, it is that which filters reality in a particular way by means of pre-established loyalties and frames of reference. The practices of a number of designers in the South African design industry illustrate the way that this filtering process often leads to the selection and deployment of a flimsy g.o.d.. It seems all too common in the South African design industry that genuine design research is forced into the shadows by less robust research processes, or by fuzzy decision-making co-ordinates like intuition or experience. The obvious solution to this would be to establish and serve a legitimate g.o.d., but this, too, appears to be insufficient. As Kirstein's research has shown, many designers in South Africa know better than to use flimsy research practices, and yet this knowledge seems insufficient for generating any genuine change. Giving prominence to empathy not only as an ideological category, but also as a priority in the design process, seems to offer a chance for challenging or destabilising the ideological postures of the design processes' various stakeholders, whose biases may preclude the possibility of any kind of helpful advancement. This occurs only on the presumption that empathy fosters dialogue even within highly complex and conflicted scenarios.

The practical application of of the ideas presented in this article is therefore twofold. In the first place, the article highlights some of the existing problems that exist in the South African design industry with regard to the general failure to make use of design research. And secondly, for the sake of generating helpful discussion, and in the hope that this general failure may be overcome, it attempts to pinpoint the primary ideological problem that supports the lack of design research, namely a widespread lack of empathy. If this deficit can be dealt with by the design industry in South Africa, a lack of design research will certainly be more easily addressed.

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