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CRITICAL REFLECTION



OUR SYMBIOTIC LIFE

What does the future look like? Where is the world headed? What is the state of the global ideological climate? Katja Budinger and Frank Heidmann in their article *Our Symbiotic Life - An Exploration of Interspecies Relations* give not only potential answers to these questions through their prototypes but also demonstrates the power of “Design fictions” as tools for communicating complex and information heavy problems effectively and efficiently. Budinger and Heidmann’s article is focused on three things, illustrating potential new relationships with our environment through prototypes designed for these potential new environments, secondly on identifying and translating the principal trends, ideologies, and currents in our present culture which will shape our future, and lastly they give concrete examples and explanations for the use of “Design fictions” to create effective learning and understanding.

Budinger and Heidmann’s article does not begin with an artist statement expounding the ecological and humanitarian values that brought forth their prototype creations. Instead they begin by breaking down what a “Design fiction” is, its purpose and the language involved in this method. It is not that the article isn’t about our future relationship cohabitating with plants and dealing with the climate crisis, but rather that this problem serves as the frame for the authors to highlight the effectiveness of their methodology “our design draft will introduce a way to approach this highly complex topic and to humanize it” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019). Exploring ideas through “Design fictions” is nothing new, of course, but what is the difference between “Design fictions” meant to engage our imaginations and expand our awareness and fictions such as “Blade-runner” (Scott 1982) which provoke us to think on what kind of relationship we want to have with AI and technology in the future. In both we see the critical need for “a right focus inbetween” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019) when crafting their story world, even portions of actual probability and imagination, they build on existing scenarios (E.g. the relentless march of technological innovation or the climate crisis) and thus use the fiction to take the user’s perspective and broaden it. The difference lies in the medium by which a “Design fiction” is delivered. While a movie or a book may be a tried and true method for delivering a message, Budinger and Heidmann demonstrate how by process of iterative designs based on their fiction they facilitated the research process, revealing through that process “complex interdependencies” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019) and “ways to combine different research topics” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019).

Specifically “Design fictions” in the context of Budinger and Heidmann’s work is the creation of prototypes for four potential SSP’s or “Shared Socioeconomic Paths” (Budinger &

Heidmann 2019). These paths were “the Green path... the rocky road... the road divided... the highway” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019). Each path is a different plausible variation on how certain current trends intensified could shape our future and what that would look like. Budinger and Heidmann propose a future in their article which they call “Scenario 3: On Demand”, they provide the Socioeconomic context as being the manifestation of individualism and consumerism, a world where plants are treated still as lifeless things but are now being created and customized by humans, mimicking “plant principles like modularity, symmetry, and cells” (Budinger & Heidmann 2019). This cheery fiction sees humanity as coming to a technological nirvana, where innovation is limitless, but humanity gains a healthy admiration for the design principles of plants and begin to implement their programming to fulfill human needs (vain and empty as they might be in this scenario). Antoni Gaudi when designing his famous art nouveau buildings lived in a similar vein, drawing from nature mathematical principles of design and colors to create works such as “Casa Batllo” (Gaudi 1877) and “the Sagrada Familia” (Gaudi 1882). Both Gaudi’s work and Budinger and Heidmann reveal new worlds of possibilities by creating designs based on new rules which detach themselves from the restrictions of their current surroundings and place themselves squarely in the realm of fiction.

When trying to make digestible a complex and inflammatory issue it is important to consider every potential point of view, and therein lies the effectiveness of Budinger and Heidmann’s Design drafts. Although their ideas clearly come from a climate change believers perspective, they don’t blind themselves to unpleasant potential outcomes nor do they push their personal vision of the future on their audience. Instead of “An Inconvenient Truth” (Guggenheim 2006) where one socioeconomic path is explored at great lengths, Budinger and Heidmann through variety of fictions manage to make a large abstract concept explorable, digestible and best of all non-overwhelming.

Budinger, Katja, and Frank Heidmann. “Our Symbiotic Life.” *Connections with Nature*, 23 June 2019, pp. 1349–1362.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Blade Runner*. Warner Bros., 1982.

Gaudi, Antoni. *Casa Batllo*. 1877. Barcelona, Spain.

Gaudi, Antoni. *Sagrada Familia*. 1882. Barcelona, Spain.

Guggenheim, Davis, director. *An Inconvenient Truth: a Global Warning*. Paramount, 2006.