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Dark Places: design between horror and science fiction

As its title shows, James Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932) belongs to the genre of films brought together under the title-name of "Old Dark House", key to the success of American horror movies in the 1920s. Architecture, which can encapsulate or give rise to moods, played an important part in this genre; not only did its presence provide the story's dramatic tension, but, above all, it acted as a catalyst for the characters of fiction film figures, psychologically as much as symbolically.

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The dwelling is the main theme of the genre. Like a living and emotionally aroused being, it displays itself in all the facets of its expressiveness, to the point of reaching paroxysmal states: convulsions, murderous houses, etc. This dramatic mainspring recurs in all the films in the «Old Dark House» genre, and in them the house is seen as the Gothic den of sufferings in which the psyche is expressed. This mirror effect, where the convulsions of the décor are attuned to the soul, is relatively well-known. We find it, needless to say, in German Expressionism, where, from *The Cabinet of Doctor Cagliari* (1920) to *The Cabinet of Wax Figures* (1924), both made by Paul Leni, both city and cardboard houses give shape to the intensity of the feelings which shake the protagonists. Giving the inanimate the possibility of creating sensations is a conception that is not recent. In *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*

(1886), Heinrich Wölfflin already borrowed Robert Vischer's theory of empathy (1873), to wonder: "...how is it possible that architectural forms are the expression of a *Stimmung*?¹ (mood)". He opened aesthetic reflection up to the combined influence of spatiality and psychology. This same psycho-aesthetic framework circulates in the foundations of the whole history of design. Far from competing with the conformism of functionality attaching to it, another history of design associates objects with a sort of soul, and attaches to it the presence of ghosts and phantoms. And in this tradition of oblivion we find Noam Toran's strange short film, *Desire Management*. Celebrating the way objects intrinsically have a narrative strength², Noam Toran made some short films, in 2006, whose protagonists are five "hypothetical objects", which include an airplane trolley, a box on castors which reveals a baseball field "sample", and an odd self-supporting structure for a vacuum cleaner. Shown in situations of use by way of intriguing and funny short cameos, we can easily understand that design, drifting readily towards the extraordinary, the anomaly, and even the fetishistic, plays a choice fictional part by crafting a thoroughly suspenseful narrative.

¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomènes à une psychologie de l'architecture*, Paris, éditions de la Villette, 2005, p. 23.

² This is the common denominator for a generation of designers, the most noted among whom are James Auger and Jimmy Loiseau, and Antony Dunne & Fiona Raby.

In his analysis of Toran's work, the critic Nav Haq goes back over the political dimension of *Object for Lonely Men* (2001) and *Desire Management*, by creating "a physical and psychological space for thinking about the individual position which everyone has in society in general and perhaps we can even reckon that what is involved is their last refuge."³ This inventiveness underwrites a political contestation, which comes from the house and spreads to society, and it sanctions ingeniousness and individuality at the service of a domestic deviance in relation to the norm, where everyone turns out to be the handyman cobbling together a social disorder. Haq likens Toran's objects to the "apparatus", in the sense that Giorgio Agamben uses the term. They are technical objects just like the cell phone and the computer for which Agamben proposes "reinstating to common use what has been seized and separated in them."⁴ In this sense, having recourse, in the case of design, to the imperious *Stimmung* has got nothing to do with the past, with fantasy, or with strategy. Linking back up with the forgotten things of predominant historiography is a necessary gesture which removes design both from its intractability

3 Nav Haq, "Hétérotopies du laissez-faire", *Things Uncommon* - Noam Toran, Lieu du design, Paris, 2010, p.8.

4 Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif ?*, (*Che cos'è un dispositivo?* [2006], trad. de Martin Rueff), Payot & rivages, Paris, 2007, p. 50.

and from its functional alienation, and half-opens the way to an alternative and less limited history.

History of Design: the fictions of the origin

Speculating about this horizon cannot be done without coming back to the fictional dimension of the history of design, as measured by the yardstick of its original writing, as well as to the internal manner of its dissemination.

The forming of design is partly based on narrative structure and on a way of telling stories based on a mode of tensions likely to catch the reader's attention. The conditions of its genesis nevertheless seem more linked, by birth, to technical contingencies than to the spread of popular culture and the media. Two years after the first acknowledged use of the term "science fiction" by William Wilson in his essay *A Little Earnest Book Upon A Great Old Subject*, the authorship of the word 'design' was attributed to Richard Redgrave and Sir Henry Cole in 1849, with the creation of the *Journal of Design & Manufactures*. Written in a context where the Victorian decorative standards of manufactured products were deemed disappointing, within a booming industrial situation, and while the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* was declared open, the *Journal of Design and Manufactures* echoed growing concern over the delicate relations between decoration and function. With burgeoning industrialization,

and in view of the laws of standardization and functionalism extending from factories to homes in the manner of Taylorization, the publication constructed design as much as it accompanied it. These conditions have been described as much by Siegfried Giedion, who referred to Cole in the final pages of "Machines in the Home" in *Mechanization takes Command* (1948), as by the seminal *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), by Nikolaus Pevsner, our two great critics of the Modern Movement.

But over and above mass-media contingencies, the functionalist dimension of design comes from an even more perverse construct. Twelve years lie between Pevsner's publication and Giedion's. In the meantime, the Second World War produced, among other upheavals, a significant epistemic break, from the technological viewpoint. If, for his part, Pevsner drew up a heroic tradition ushered in by William Morris and completed by Walter Gropius, it was Giedion's intent to approve the exclusive anonymous history of American inventors. Though notably different, these outlooks shared one and the same faith in technology, which had been greatly developed during the previous century⁵. Giedion studied its evolution and gauged the consequences of innovative production methods. To this end, he referred essentially to the achieve-

5 Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, first edition in the original language, Oxford University Press, 1949, and for its first edition in French, *La Mécanisation au pouvoir*, Paris, Centre George Pompidou, Centre de Création Industrielle, 1980.

ments of scientists, researchers and engineers, but above all, as the subtitle suggests, approved "a contribution to anonymous history", that of unknown persons. These two theses clashed over the origin of design and its definition: Giedion included it in a technically-oriented culture, while Pevsner orchestrated a history of individualism.

However, both Giedion and Pevsner raised questions about the human dimension of mechanized society. And if Giedion reckoned that its examination was fuelled by: "... a desire to understand the effects of mechanization on the human being, and know to what degree mechanization is in agreement with the unalterable laws of human nature and how far it clashes with them"⁶, Pevsner had recourse to the person of William Morris to explain the same goal and subordinate design to function.

The fact that these two publications are what we can regard to be the two original narratives of a history of design is obvious enough. They jointly posit the origin of a system of references and analyses for design. In addition to representing the point of departure, they define the origin of that system. Their simultaneous existence prompts us to question the possibility of a history of design, knowing that they were written with, for Pevsner, the intention of more stoutly underpinning the Modern Movement, and promoting it in a

6 *Ibid.*

context little declined to argue the point, and for Giedion the idea of founding an “archaeology of technology” by introducing mechanization as a central concept.

But when examined, the line adopted by each of their authors reveals that, for these very reasons, they built a fiction. This discovery certainly raised a series of questions about the complexity of manufacturing history, all the more so because the conjunction of these two different narratives can be read as the sole historiographical project in the tradition. What is more, it is certainly surprising that this hegemony was so persistent in the field of design, given that neither of these two constructs was devised to formulate a possible history of design. This return to origins interrupted the linear course of that history, and thus created a gap for a kind of design which would thus sidestep the normative nature of the functionalist values advocated from Pevsner right up to the present day. Because these bases have been shaken, let us therefore get back to the present situation of design.

Mysteries of the MacGuffin

If Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) issue from a similar spatial connotation between psychology and physiology, this connection tries above all to work counter to the arrangements and systems applied by the supporters of the Modern Movement. The

death knell of this modern cinematographic correlation was sounded by the radioactive apocalypse of Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly*, the famous film noir made in 1955, which managed to associate science fiction and film noir, and intermingled technology and horror in a psycho-spatial way.

As the film unfolds, the plot is woven around the duel between a bunch of thugs and the private eye Mike Hammer to put their hands on a mysterious leather-trimmed box with elegant straps. It falls to the film’s *femme fatale* to get her hands on it and half-open it. And in an apocalyptic world’s end, the black box turns out to be a nuclear bomb. As a technological accomplishment of latterday modernity, the mystery contained by the coveted box announces the famous *Black Box*⁷ of architecture which the critic Reyner Banham has described as follows to wind up his posthumous essay: “... it could close ranks and carry on as a conspiracy which would not be encumbered by an observer, but would always be open to the suspicions nurtured by the general public for whom there might be nothing whatsoever inside the black box, except mystery for the pleasure of mystery.”⁸

So it is no coincidence if *Kiss Me Deadly* represents one of Noam Toran’s major film references. His extensive film atlas is informed as much by horror movies as by science

⁷ Reyner Banham, “Black Box” in *New Statesman & Society*, 12 October 1990.

⁸ Reyner Banham, “A Critic Writes”, op. cit. p. 299.

fiction films. Pride of place goes to David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988), Hiroshi Teshigahara’s *The Face of Another* (1966) and Peter Weir’s *The Cars who Ate Paris* (1974), but Aldrich’s film has a special place here. Shooting between two film genres, at once a political thriller in the Hollywood film noir tradition and a science fiction film whose narrative conclusion winds up with an atomic world’s end, its plot involves the quest for a leather-clad box. A MacGuffin, no less, a term which Hitchcock invented to guarantee the narrative plot of his films⁹, it here takes on an extra dimension well removed from the common-or-garden objects selected by the film-maker to incarnate his MacGuffins: the matches in *Strangers on a Train*, the attaché case in *Marnie*, and the envelope in *Psycho*. In the film *Kiss Me Deadly*, the instrument of the narrative is nothing less than a nuclear bomb hidden in a box. This tragic dimension alters the deal, because the film’s plot unfolds based on a fictional device which winds up the progressive ideal of the Modern Movement by associating it with a technological trauma. And it is in this light involving a *tabula rasa* that Noam Toran’s film *Desire*

⁹ Two passengers are in a train going from London to Edinburgh. One says to the other: “Excuse me, sir, but what’s that odd-looking packet you’ve put in the net above your head? – Oh, that’s a MacGuffin! – What’s a MacGuffin? – Well, it’s a device for catching lions in the Scottish mountains. – But there aren’t any lions in the Scottish mountains. – If that’s so, then it’s not a MacGuffin.”, in François Truffaut, *Le Cinéma selon Alfred Hitchcock*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1966, p. 112

Management unfolds with actions generated by his five devices. This is what happens with the air stewardess who, after making up her face again in a mirror, walks towards her trolley which we discover placed between the chairs of her living room. Delicately putting the two tips of her pumps on specially made wedges her trolley simulates atmospheric turbulence and takes her from row to row while she, intrepid, serves her drinks to absent passengers. Is this trolley haunted or possessed?

Spirits, Anxiety and Ghosts

In 1929, modern science fiction, as ushered in by the publisher and inventor Hugo Gernsback, sought to tame and simplify relations with the new technological innovations by fictionalizing them through his pulps. Since then, on the other hand, like Aldrich’s box, Toran’s MacGuffins result from a material quality which involves them in a meandering dialogue with the structures of a mysterious and invisible technology. Formerly represented by labyrinthine houses, and today by systems, the disquiet raised by technology is giving it new forms of expression.

To introduce this line of thought, let us bear in mind that, in the same way that the emergence of ghost stories was frequently associated with that of a complex, not to say antagonistic, connection with technology during the 19th century, and just as ghosts betray the incomprehensible and worrying nature of the

technology in place, Toran's systems go beyond any relevant re-reading of the notion of the 'Uncanny' with which the historian Antony Vidler¹⁰ revisited the notion of *Unheimlichkeit* posited by Freud, in order to link the familiar with the distressing in the ordinary refuge of the house. They revisit the strange agitation produced by ghostly illusions which turned horror film houses into indeterminate places. And thanks to telekinesis, and to magic apparitions and disappearances, they also develop as *Poltergeists* of ordinary everyday consumer objects and household appliances.

Let us wager, above all, that this linkage between design notions, ghosts and science fiction gains from being reconsidered by the yardstick of a brutal conception of technology, which even re-proposes another form of cyborg. No one has managed to describe this better than Serge Brussolo in *Procédure d'évacuation immédiate des musées fantômes* (1987). In this futuristic novel, he describes a post-atomic Paris, devoid of any source of energy whatsoever, and to make up for this, he tells how scientists are converting the souls of the dead into electricity, while the author of the Destroy project, the scientist Gregori Mikofsky, observes, for his part, that objects, and works of art in particular, also contain an energy that can be made use of—the Y wave—if they are destroyed. With

¹⁰ Antony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992.

the help of "simple tapes, [they] get household appliances to work, along with cars, public lighting, etc. This seemingly miraculous solution has its detractors too. Some people regard the method as impious because, in many instances, the stored flow also contains something human. At the same time as things break down, people perish in violent ways. The energy of the dead is inextricably mixed with that of inert matter. This strange mixture at times gives rise to the odd failure: machines seize up, although no technical flaw can be detected. The dead seem to want to get their revenge on the quick by wrecking their everyday lives. By a laying on of hands, just a few mediums manage to get the electrical appliances working again."¹¹

Like the objects possessed by Brussolo, the complexity and abundance of devices in the daily round—iPad, iPhone, GPS, etc—can be seen from the angle of ghosts that we imagine curled up in them. Their presence stems from the 19th century paradigm of the haunted house. Though inhuman by nature, this latter avoided the mimesis of the living to demonstrate that it had an array of feelings every bit a match for human beings. It was the answer to the anxiety stirred up by the emergence of new invisible forms of household energy, like gas and electricity. It was in this way that

¹¹ Serge Brussolo, *Procédure d'évacuation immédiate des musées fantômes*, *Présence du Futur* n° 447, Denoël, September 1987. See <http://sergebrussolo.ifri.net/t90-procedure-devacuation-immEDIATE-des-musees-fantomes>, Fabrice Ribeiro de Campos, on line on 19 July 2003.

natural forces, often evil spirits, took hold of the house, much to the delight of *Old Dark Houses* lovers.

It is this same set of issues that is grappled with by the whole generation of designers whom some have grouped under the umbrella term: "Design fiction", and which encompasses a conception of design for which the closely-related fiction of science fiction, along with its speculations and its hypotheses, plays a decisive role. Underground, and in the guise of an apparent objectivity, these designers challenge the consequences of technology for the individual and its impact on the environment. This is the case with *Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times* by Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades, which takes into account irrational fears about technology in the most serious manner, and most notably of all the eight prototypes of *Project Placebo* (2001), which slips into the everyday lives of volunteer guinea-pigs objects which possibly protect them from electromagnetic waves.

To fill out and wind up this shift, I shall adopt the analysis produced by Barry Curtis in *Dark Places*¹². Here he puts forward an essential hypothesis whereby the supernatural as a metaphor of oblivion, denial and corruption, a maze-like structure reflecting the mind for Freud, and the mystery of consumer goods for Marx, "is connected with the awareness of

¹² Barry Curtis, *Dark Places*, Reaktion Books, London, 2008.

the existence of hidden energies and forces", and whereby in the same way that minds responded to the decisive discovery of radio waves, today "the developments of miniaturization, mobility and tele-presence and their new kinds of "magic" interfaces have speeded up the production of new ghost fictions."¹³ So from horror to science fiction, be they the antidotes or catalysts for an anxiety-provoking technology, Toran's systems and devices result from this same method of action adopted by ghosts. And unlike the nature at the root of the energy which fuels ghosts, their presence does not change any more than technology: in the face of the new technologies and their consequences, ghosts—metaphors of anxiousness—are invited to a banquet.

Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods

¹³ Curtis, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.