




Design and Self-reproduction: A Theoretical-Political Perspective

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Abstract. Art, in the strictest sense, and industrial design, are associated with many other phenomena, activities, and objects in lists that constitute the field of visual studies. From this subsumption, the traditional hierarchical preeminence of pure or fine art over industrial design, and the corresponding disciplines that deal with them, seems to be reversed.

As the means of recording and disseminating images of everyday life have further developed – and the visual domain of private and social spheres has been able to disproportionately expand its audiences – a self-reproductive function has gained space over the merely utilitarian, aesthetic, or symbolic function, meant in a traditional sense. It is precisely for self-reproductive purposes that the privileged ‘prop’ is not a work of art but a product intended for use.

On this basis a design theory which takes this function into account can adopt a decisive task: it can offer a contribution to the delineation of a general political theory of visibility, that is completely different from a theory of the social use of images.

Coherently with these aspirations, this essay puts four different objects through an ‘extended’ analysis: a type of 6th-century Attic kylix, the cradle of Napoleon’s son (1811), a cardboard cot of the 60s, and a ring light used for selfies and vlogging.

The perspective unbarred by these broadened analyses is different than that which can be delineated on the basis of traditional classifications and forces a different set of questions the object needs to be asked.

Keywords: Political Theory of Design · Political Theory of Visibility

The history and theory of applied art originated along with the history and theory of fine art in the modern sense, namely, with the studies of Alois Riegl. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that art, in the strictest sense, and also industrial design, can be associated with many other phenomena, activities, and objects in lists that constitute the field of visual studies, at least according to the repertoire found in Walker & Chaplin [14].

For the sake of our argument, we must also take another factor into account: once introduced into the world, all these image-objects, just like any other object, can be subject to forms of social reuse, resemantisation, and detournement by third parties [12]. In short, anyone can appropriate a visible object and, through it, give rise to a form of new production of images.

However, in this social reuse and new production of images, not one but a plurality of subjects and relations come into play that break the traditional, intentional chain consisting of creator-object-image-meaning-user. The primary intentionality of the creator is replaced by a plurality of third intentionalities that, as such, are not gathered in a specific subject (the originally conceived recipient). This induced and inextricable ‘thirdness’ can leave the impression that the object itself produces new images by its own virtue. Namely, that the object-image is self-reproducing.

In speaking of self-reproduction, we borrow the concept from biology, in order to treat it in a theoretical-political sense. In biology, ‘self-reproduction’ (e.g. of cells) is that ‘statistical process of making very similar things’. ‘Very similar’ but not identical (replicas), because, even if this a process that starts from the ‘same’, it is ‘less precise’ [8]; it has a degree of indeterminacy and allows for differentiation and evolution. Since the object obviously does not give rise to new individuals, like in vital processes, self-reproduction is understood here as being the object’s capacity to introduce itself with a certain autonomy into a world of relations, while still remaining itself and other than itself. In other words, to represent an actual difference, acting as a physical (plastic) device in a concrete space.

Self-reproduction, even if linked to certain characteristics of the object, is a function activated by an indeterminate someone else. A function that is not properly envisaged by the creator and that does not have a true recipient.

In self-reproduction, the object goes beyond its mere ‘being made’ and touches the boundaries of the action. Here, ‘action’ must be understood in the radically political sense that we find in Arendt: action is unconditioned with respect to its origin, undetermined with respect to its objective, unpredictable with respect to its consequences; it is rooted in plurality and falls into an interweaving of conflicting relations, wills and intentions, so that it ‘almost never achieves its purpose’ [1].

I believe it is precisely on this basis that a design theory which takes this function into account can adopt a decisive task. That is to say, it can offer a contribution to the delineation of a general *political theory of visibility*; the need of which is admitted in the field of visual studies by Bredekamp [2]. A political theory that is completely different from a theory of the social use of images.

In fact, this self-reproductive function of product design naturally involves instances that I have elaborated elsewhere [4] for art:

- 1) Opening up to the perspective of a multidirectional plural interaction vs a mono- or bi-directional dual interaction;
- 2) Determining the basic structure of the gaze that is activated each single time;
- 3) Identifying of a space *between* the object and the subject, and between subjects that, at the same time, unites and separates them; a space of tension, of potential conflict, of difference;
- 4) Changing the focus of the questions that are posed to the object: from questions concerning essence and process (what? how?) to questions concerning position (where?).

Coherently with these aspirations, I will put four objects – which are very different in terms of age and conditions of realisation and use – through an ‘extended’ analysis. These objects are: a type of 6th-century Attic kylix, the cradle of Napoleon’s son (1811),

a cardboard cot presented by Bruno Munari during a lecture held in 1969, and a ring light used for selfies and vlogging.

Let us begin with the most ancient object, the kylix: a cup used for drinking wine during symposia. The example shown here is the so-called ‘large-eyed’ kylix. ‘Large-eyed’ because of the presence of four large eyes painted along its outer surface. These ‘large-eyed’ kylikes can differ considerably in the richness of their decorations. Some, for example, are very simple, with a stylized nose and ears, to the extent that they unequivocally represent a human face.

Others, instead, might depict a single human figure, a character from a mythological scene, painted between the two eyes that, however, at a certain distance, is perceived as a dark spot which can still resemble a nose. Additional examples, such as the kylix belonging to the collections of the Civic Archaeological Museum in the Italian town of Fiesole (Fig. 1b), or the one signed by Nikosthenes belonging to the MET collection (Fig. 1c), invert the relationship that was just illustrated: a rather large, crowded scene saturates the space between the eye decorations. Any illusion of a human face disappears. In short, in this latter case, it would be more correct to speak of a series of scenes interspersed with decorative ‘eye’ motifs, rather than the contrary. The painted eyes are elements with which the basic figuration (the mythological scene) has to do, just as it has to do with the other non-figural elements of the vase: its curved surface, shape, handles, and stem. As we know, one artistic factor of Greek vase painting consists in the great ability to coordinate form and figuration, namely, functional elements and elements of the image, in one single rhythm. But to which of these two orders do the painted large eyes belong? They are indeed painted, so we should initially state that they belong to the order of decoration. However, specifically the kylix shown in the figure, with the inverted relationship between its large eyes and the other figures, suggests a different interpretation. One that can only be understood by taking into consideration the particular role the dimension of gazes had in Greek civilization, especially in contexts of encounters and social exchanges, such as in symposia.

From a viewpoint of the Greek conception of the mechanism of vision, the eye was not considered a receptacle for optical waves but rather a source from which rays depart and touch the objects towards which the gaze is directed [5]. This touching has additional meanings, in terms of sociality and also superstition. A certain kind of gaze can potentially be a way to send bad luck at a distance (evil eye). The risk of falling victim to this kind of gaze had to somehow be nullified by some sort of protection. From this perspective, the painted eyes define the practical-utilitarian function of this kylix: a device that – in a moment of distraction, when a person has their face immersed in it while drinking – keeps a ‘barrier’ engaged and aimed towards the other diners, capable of responding with a protective counter-gaze.

This, therefore, overturns the logic against which good design is the antithesis of superficial decoration. In the ‘large-eyed’ kylix, one can identify a figurative element that becomes form, performs a practical-utilitarian function, and goes even further, introducing an element of action with which both the object and the user self-reproduce and correspond to a world of relationships.

The Cradle of the King of Rome (1811), namely, that of Napoleon François Charles Joseph, son of Napoleon I Bonaparte and Marie-Louise of Austria, is a piece of furniture

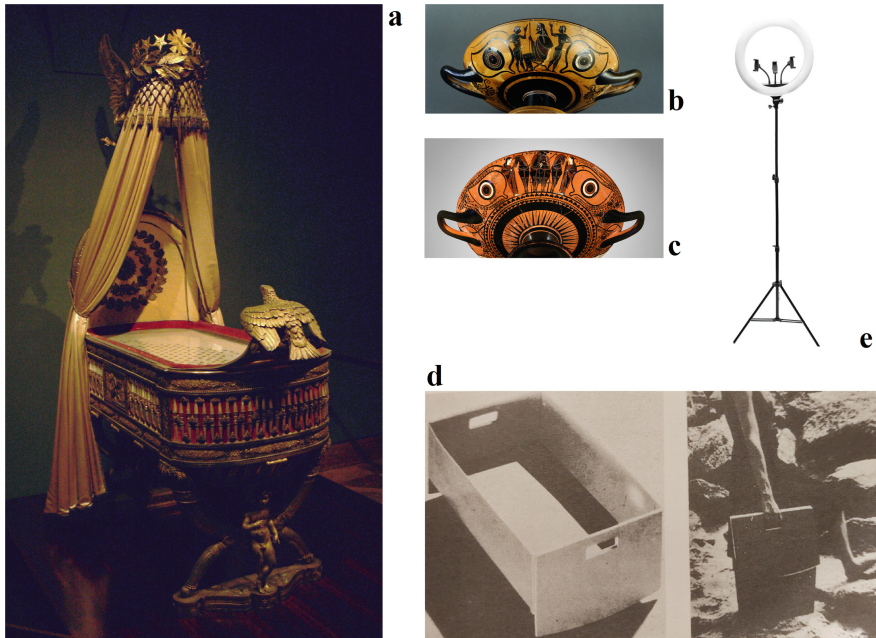


Fig. 1. a) Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, Cradle of the King of Rome, 1811. Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Weltliche Schatzkammer. b) Attic kylix, 6th century BC. Fiesole, Civic Archaeological Museum. Courtesy: Municipality of Fiesole. c) Attic kylix, 6th century BC. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. d) Cardboard cot, from Munari, B.: Artista e designer. Laterza, Bari (1971). e) Makeup & Vlogging Ring Light. Manufacturer: Rio.

in which decorative richness and figurative rhetoric are so pronounced it is commonly used as an example of everything that modern product design is not. The cradle was a gift from the City of Paris to pay homage to the infant and rejoice that the Empire had finally secured its perpetuation in an heir.

Designed by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, it is the support to a series of symbols and allegories (Fig. 1a). The two most conspicuous figures are a Victory hovering over the world at the head of the cradle and, on the opposite side, an eaglet, *aiglon* in French, as the prince had been nicknamed (son of the imperial eagle), ready to take flight (or just landed?).

What should be immediately emphasized is that this cradle was not the only one belonging to the imperial couple. Other cradles and cots, which were more or less concretely useful or merely representative, have been catalogued and studied, but this is certainly the most famous of all. A 'throne in the form of a cradle' rather than a 'cradle in the form of a throne', as it has been correctly defined [13]. Yet, the cradle itself is so bulky and heavy that it is not even practically suitable for repeated ceremonial uses. Therefore, we have to imagine that, not only were the occasions for using it almost non-existent, but so were those for showing it to people outside the imperial family.

Instead, due to its symbolic excess, it seems to have been purposely designed not to appear in public, but only to give rise to an entire series of self-reproductive phenomena.

Celebrated, mythologised, or even mocked, this exaggerated piece of furniture appears in many prints of the period. Some are extremely accurate depictions of the cradle in detail, others are reconstructions from memory or fanciful recompositions of its main figures: the ever-present winged Victory and the eaglet. Other prints actually fully reinvented it, with strange and incomprehensible changes in positions, modifications, reductions, or multiplications of its elements. Some of these imaginative deviations, with a return movement, end up reconfiguring the very perception of the cradle in its environment of use.

A print engraved by Adrien Godefroy, from a drawing by Adolphe Roehn, depicts the image of what in the title is called *The Hope of Posterity* (*L'espoir de la postérité*) in an intimate, almost family atmosphere (Fig. 2). Napoleon is leaning against the fireplace, Marie-Louise is seated next to and facing him, and behind her is what I would not call a different cradle, or an invented cradle, but an imaginary and synthetic version of the Cradle of the King of Rome. The Victory on this cradle is missing. Moreover, an adult eagle – the fulfilment of the Glory of the Holy Roman Empire and not the eaglet – gently holds in its beak the veil of the cradle above the sleeping infant. Here, the eagle is as naturalistic and alive as ever, and it is perhaps the presence that, more than all, more than the parents themselves, is animated towards the infant with a genuine sense of parental protection, not oblivious to the gravity of the future that will weigh on his shoulders.

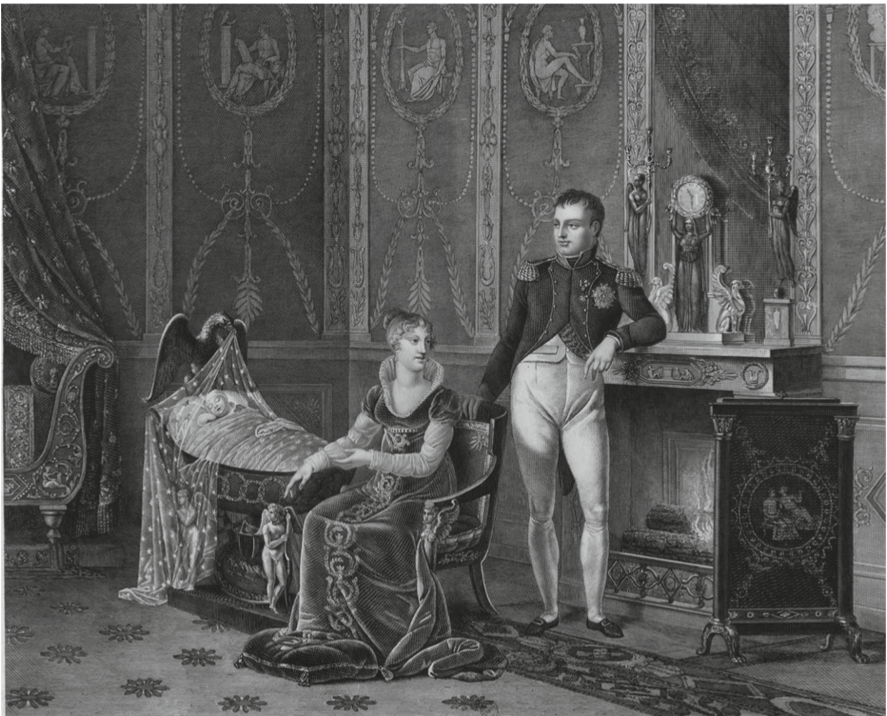


Fig. 2. Adolphe Roehn (design), Adrien Godefroy (engraving). *L'espoir de la postérité*, 1811. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département estampes et photographie.

Images like this reconfigure the object as a plastic device. A plastic device is what acts in a circumstantial surrounding, in an inhabited room, for example. We are still historically a long way from scientific studies on the sleeping habits and the attention span of babies that today lead us to consider musical mobiles suspended from cots as being useful. Nevertheless, after their self-reproductive and imaginative flight, the figures at the head and foot of the Cradle of the King of Rome, which were designed for society and history, are refunctioned into devices that represent an ongoing parental awareness of what is at stake in that cradle: a co-presence of symbolic strength and fragility, nature and its daily cares, and a responsibility towards the past and future. A series of cross-references given in the space in which the cradle is located and for those who concretely revolve around it, simultaneously in their historical and natural roles: infant, prince, emperors, and parents.

A story of protection and survival, a representation of the relationship between parents and infants, and the social significance of (every) birth, are also at play in the third of the objects we have chosen to analyse. During a lecture at the Carignano Theatre in Turin on 21 March 1969, Bruno Munari showed a slide of a folding cardboard baby cot: sufficiently solid but very light, suitable for outings, and mass-producible at an extremely low cost (Fig. 1d). The same photograph is also reproduced in Munari's book, *Artista e Designer* [11]. The object is indeed very representative of the canonical conception of industrial design: typological invention, coherence between form and function and between material and production process, attention to the entire economic cycle.

However, the idea of putting a baby in a cardboard box, from a certain standpoint, could seem contrary to any conception of adequate care and protection of an infant. Its appropriateness to a vision of society and the self-reproductive extension of this object are rooted elsewhere: in a 'twin' object that emerges in transparency as a sort of functional and visual 'unconscious', but from which the first one does not derive. I do not know if Munari was aware of this, but I believe that the juxtaposition I am proposing, which is not 'genealogical' but imaginative, may open up broader perspectives.

The object I am referring to is the Finnish Maternity Pack (*Äitiyspakkaus*), which is actually both an object and a programme. The programme began in Finland in 1938 and provided that the state send each new mother a pack (a cardboard box) containing everything she needed for her newborn baby: wool to make clothes, a little mattress, covers, baby bottles, and so on (Fig. 3). The pack was initially created for low-income families. However, this changed in 1949: the right to receive the pack was extended to all mothers, under the condition that they be examined by a doctor, or in a National Health Service clinic, during the last four months of pregnancy. In truth, through this programme-object, the Finnish government intended to reduce many behaviours that could endanger the health of babies and mothers alike.

The object that interests us most among those included in the box is the little mattress: placing the mattress at the bottom of the cardboard box transformed the box into a cot. The use of the box as a cot made it possible for the infant to sleep in proper hygienic conditions that were often better than those in the average home environment of the period and offered an alternative to the habit of co-sleeping with the infant in the parents' bed, which was the cause of accidental suffocation in numerous cases. The programme

has continued to be implemented since the 1930s and, according to scholars, it has contributed in no small measure to a decrease in infant mortality in Finland [6].



Fig. 3. Finnish Maternity Pack 1953. Photographer: Atte Hyvärinen. Courtesy: The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas, Tampere.

Today, the percentage of families who live below poverty level is enormously lower than in the 1930s. Overall hygienic conditions, along with the propagation of a health culture, are incomparable to those years, so that the practical usefulness of the programme and the economic benefit of the provision of accessories are now truly marginal. Yet, even in recent interviews [7], the Maternity Pack has proven to be of great value to mothers, families, and the Finnish society as a whole. It is a ritual gift from the state which reminds us that we are all equal at birth. Through self-reproductive reuse, even the empty box conveys a precise idea of motherhood and society to our contemporaries and to the generations that will follow.

If the cardboard cot self-reproduces as a constitutively double object, what I will now introduce is more than a double object. It is a plural one. Pure imaginative proliferation. This object is the ring light, currently used for applying make-up or vlogging.

The ring light is a circular light equipped with a stand for support and positioning purposes, and a smartphone holder, which allows the latter to be used as a mirror (e.g., when applying make-up), for selfies, or for video footage to then upload to the web or

on social media channels. The LED light circle allows you to quickly adjust the lighting conditions of your face or body and look your best, in relation to your needs.

I deliberately mention *the* ring light in its generality and not a specific model, since it is one of those objects invented from prefabricated elements, without any claim of being interesting from a traditional design aesthetics perspective. If you will, it is a typical example of an anonymous design, like a clothes peg. Even if we have to consider it as deriving from make-up mirrors found in the dressing rooms of actors, it nevertheless has the dignity of a typological innovation, to the point of constituting a stabilized form, confirmed by its resilience to the proliferation of variants.

Since I have to talk about a specific model, I chose the Makeup & Vlogging Ring Light (manufactured by Rio), because of all its components – the tripod, circular light, and smartphone holder – are easily decipherable (Fig. 1e).

A ring light, as a purely functional and poorly designed object, should make itself invisible in use, and escape any possibility of being read in ‘aesthetic’ terms. And yet, as far as this object is concerned, aesthetics, ousted from one door, comes back through another, in a threefold sense.

First of all, its intended use is vlogging that, nowadays, is the most widespread practice of visual self-reproduction for all purposes, or for no purpose at all.

Secondly, by allowing a first level of image optimisation, this object puts aesthetics into play, diabolically questioning its tradition.

It is not, in fact, a ‘beautiful’ object, in the ancient Greek sense, which reverberates in our tradition, what ‘most outshines’ (*ekphanestaton*), but makes something else shine in a literal and spectacular manner. For some of these ring lights in online advertisements, images can be found that illustrate the classic comparison between ‘before’ and ‘after’ (the effect before and after switching on the light), typical of advertisements for slimming products and programmes or cosmetic surgery. As Andrea Mecacci [9] well demonstrated, this is a type of experience with which, after Pop Art, one must also deal from a theoretical perspective: the aesthetics of make-up. An unspecified direction of ‘ameliorability’ to which all forms can be subjected through some kind of treatment.

Finally, precisely because we are mirrored in it, we cannot but perceive a form in the overall aggregate, which has a chance of asserting itself as such. After all, it is an object destined for a generation that immediately began to speak not *through* smartphones, but *with* smartphones. And this assertion of itself as a form occurs on the basis of the simplest of expedients: anthropomorphism. The circular light at the top is roughly at the height of a human being’s head. It is indeed a lamp, but also a motif, a silhouette. Something resembling a facial expression seems able to be readable in the smartphone holder.

Therefore, the selfie ring light in its generality proves to be a complex ‘aesthetic’ object. It involves the dimensions of what is useful and what is beautiful, only to misrepresent or perhaps reconfigure them in the activation of a multiple spatiality that forces continuous inversions between inside and outside; decentralised gazes and movements that have extremely interesting aspects.

It is evident that the perspective unbarred by these broadened analyses is different than that which can be delineated on the basis of classifications through production (art/craft/industrial design), or even of the more functional four dimensions introduced

by De Fusco [3] in the historical-critical interpretation of design (project, production, sale, consumption).

As mentioned in the beginning, I believe that this different perspective, rather than being guided by various categories, forces a different set of questions the object needs to be asked. The intention is to go beyond the very question of the essence (which answers the direct questions: ‘what is it?’, ‘what does it express?’) and of the process (which answers the ‘how?’), in order to introduce indirect complements and the relationship between human beings that presupposes circumstances and other presences (‘to whom?’, ‘to what?’). To whom does it speak? To what does it respond? To what world of relations does it (cor)respond? And it is, above all, fundamental to have a shift towards questions that require spatial determination, towards questions that imply ‘where?’.

Where is it moving? Where does its movement take us? Where do we position ourselves in relation to it? Where does a space open up between object and user and between users (uniting and separating them at the same time)? Where in the object does the interplay of support and surface of contact give rise to a difference? Where does a difference hinge itself plastically?

The answers to these questions that we can derive from objects allow us to go beyond traditional pairs of concepts, such as ‘form/function’, and use terms that are more general and, at the same time, more meaningful on a plastic and, therefore, existential level. *Movement*: distinguishing between self-centred centripetal movements (Cradle of the King of Rome), centrifugal + heterocentred centripetal movements (kylix), self-centred centrifugal (cardboard cot), heterocentred centrifugal (ring light). *Direction of gaze*: towards the object itself (Cradle of the King of Rome) or towards the environment (cardboard cot), while the kylix establishes a different and multi-directional game of gazes, and the ring light disappears from *the* gaze the moment it is turned on and diverts gazes towards the subject.

However, the most decisive question is where a difference hinges itself plastically. The hinge point is where the object is introduced into the world and the world becomes visible through the object. In industrial design, this function is often performed by the joint (as we learned from Enzo Mari); in art, by some element of/on the threshold. Nevertheless, it is precisely this element that determines the true character of the object, its uniqueness as a plastic device (of whatever nature). Through the enucleation of this element, a political theory of the object can also offer a perspective on the need for a political theory of the mere image or of the iconic act.

Let us consider the hinge points of our four objects. In the Cradle of the King of Rome, it is clear that the figure of the eaglet is the real hinge: the directrices of all its relationships pass through its body and in the vivid ambiguity of its movement. On the other hand, an environment in which peers converge, exchange glances, and recognize each other emanate from the curved outer surface of the ‘large-eyed’ kylix. It is here where the world hinges onto. Instead, the hinge elements for the cardboard box are the two holes that allow hands to grip it securely and carry it, the ‘windows’ that open to the outside and, at the same time, reveal the double character of the object. Finally, in the ring light, the complex interplay of spaces becomes hinged on an inner distance, in the space between the ring of light and the smartphone holder. This interstitial space is the

junction of all the passages between inside and outside, between leaving and entering the scene, of the clashing between the three planes of the aesthetic we examined.

In my 2018 book [4], I attempted to analyse art as a differential unit. In this paper, I tried to put forward the object of applied art, or object produced according to the processes of industrial design, as a methodological tool for an analysis of the hinging of the *difference*. The reason for this choice today is simple: the applied art object or design object is born as a conflictual object from its origins, and the conflict it reproduces is immediately visible to all. As an even more explicit and extreme differential unit, it becomes a way of reflecting on the open problems, not only of its history and theory, but of those of art itself.

But beware. Let us not abandon the leading idea that industrial design and art must always be reinterpreted together. Indeed, if design is not confronted with the system of excess we derive from art in a theoretical-political perspective, we will never, to paraphrase Mitchell [10], have any idea of what objects, even the most seemingly insignificant ones, really want.

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