To The New Methodology Of Design Consciousness For The Futures

Galina Lola*, Tatiana Aleksandrova
Saint Petersburg State University, Russian Federation
*Corresponding author e-mail: Galina_lola@mail.ru

Abstract: The article discusses the issues related to the construction the future and the responsibility it entails. As a social agent, the designer usually has a pragmatic and instrumental relation with the future. However, any attempts to construct the future in a rigid manner will likely lead to the reproduction of the existing algorithms of thinking and acting, which may prove ineffective in the face of future challenges. The author’s methodology of semiotic discursive modelling of the design project, developed within the neopragmatist paradigm, makes it possible to arrange (discipline) the creative consciousness without limiting its freedom. This methodology gives the designer an opportunity to perceive the future as a set of variants, letting her or him choose the one that better corresponds to the challenges of the changing situation.

Keywords: Design, Methodology, Practice, Constructing, Non-linear logic

1. Introduction

As a development project, design has always dealt with the future. In the modern paradigm, design was seen as a product development project, be this product a commodity or a social system. However, repeated failures in the rational production of the ‘brave new world’ take us back to the problem of how design deals with the future. Choosing the future on the basis of current preconceptions is obviously wrong. However brave, these fantasies will always remain fragmented, incomplete, and dubious as to the scope of possibilities. Major trends in recent times that design is the bridge between reality and future (Yelavich, 2014). This statement is acceptable, but in this case the design methodology should be clarified.

Why wouldn’t we admit that there are lots of ‘futures,’ and we never have enough data to choose the correct one. Thus, it is important to refrain from dictatorship about the future and acknowledge its right to certain freedom. Instead of developing result-oriented projects, we should create situation-oriented projects that would attract the desirable variant of the future without imposing on it any predefined qualities.

This entails a revision of the basic methodological principles of the design product, or rather its communicative model. The very term ‘project’ is to be replaced with ‘construction’: in the neopragmatism paradigm, this emphasizes its processual nature and correlation with the ever-
changing situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Gergen, 2001). The neopragmatist paradigm gives a proper perspective to grasp the communicative nature of design: it is not only an interaction between designer and user but also a co-creation of some meaningful and emotional reality, a joint production of an existential event. Communication produces a symbolically arranged reality by means of symbolic and cognitive structures – words or, to be exact, language models and constructions as well as the contexts of their usage. The motives of an action are created by the action itself; the circumstances are being constantly constructed by the interacting individuals and thus can’t be considered prearranged. This way, the results of joint actions construct the reality that becomes the context for further actions. In terms of this communication paradigm, we can outline a general idea of the communication model of the design product. First, this model should be a semiotic structure; second, this semiotic structure should contain both a semantic nucleus and the context of its perception; third, unfolding of this semiotic structure in a communicative space creates reality that is both manageable and probabilistic.

Constructing a design product does not mean merely implementing an idea, but rather its fulfilling in the situation of uncertainty, which requires not just a revision of planning and rational choice but also immediate reactions, risk-taking, and improvisation. It is in design that we can develop a methodology that can harmonize the discipline with the freedom of creative thinking and suggest a set of intellectual tools for coordination of the spontaneous creative flow.

The methodology of semiotic discursive modelling (Author, 2016) sustains a free flow of thoughts and emotions, which by itself leads to an image and later a design product. Ironically, letting this happen by itself takes a lot of effort: coming, or rather returning, to a free mood requires a thought-through system of actions that involves will, effort, and self-discipline. The methodology I suggest helps to manage the inspiration by means of particular verbal practices. “For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast” (Psalm 33:9). Word and will make up a universal creative power that manifests itself in a design practice. Word is a source of the rational energy that through a sequence of words becomes a methodological will. By telling her/himself and others what she or he thinks and does, designer does not merely give structure to the initial concept and make it manifest; this special kind of narration creates the image by describing it. However, methodology is not only about working with words – it is also about disposing of them at a certain point. In the design practice, there is a time for everything: a time to tell stories, and a time to stop telling stories. Word is but an instrument that makes clearances for creation, and needs to be perceived pragmatically.

2. Formatting rules of semiotic discursive modelling

2.1 Defining the concept

Defining the concept is the first ‘assemblage point’ of the semiotic discursive model of design product. Concept is a found/created ingot of a semantic energy that appears though intuitive and rational apprehension of the sense of the would-be work in certain mental environment. A found concept is expressed in a concise and expressive formula.

2.2 Semiotic modelling

Semiotic modelling enables viewing the image: the concept code activates semiotic resources, and then the semiotic field transforms, by means of connotations, into a semiotic situation, a sort of energetic substance that makes image visible. As the image becomes clearer, its metaphor and motif
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become definite, fully arranging the semiotic situation and allowing for its description in a basic narrative.

2.3 Discursive modelling

Discursive modelling is a combination of practices contextualizing the semiotic core of an image. The first procedure is moving to border the image in order to look at it with the eyes of the Other. The second procedure plants guiding codes, thus enriching the semantic potential of the semiotic model. The third procedure is re-contextualization that puts the codes into the system and fixes them as parts of the metanarrative.

2.4 Cultural animation

Cultural animation puts a semiotic discursive model into the mode of controlled discursive practice, which provides the image with its own development logic and an ability to regulate itself in the communication environment. The procedure of cultural animation consists of making up a legend and its implementation scenario. Cultural animation creates contextual environment that may induce the process of creation of meanings and prepare the situation of impression.

3. Concept

The construction of the semiotic discursive model starts with a concept that, like a genetic code, defines the configuration of the ‘body’ of the model. Concept is the start and the end, for it preserves the essence of the assignment and serves as a reference point for the customer’s original task. Though it is the customer who defines the concept parameters, it is the designer who articulates them, as the elaboration of the concept can’t be reduced to editing of the customer’s requests; it is a complicated analytic procedure. At first glance, the concept is a short description of the final object that sums up the ideas on how to satisfy the needs of the target group. However, such a concept may be a beacon for a marketing specialist but not a designer, for the latter needs the concept not for choosing the successful business strategy but rather as the channel for his/her creativity. Concept understood as an outline, configuration of the event, is one of the most complex notions in design. Elaboration of the concept is the first and indispensable step to the construction of the semiotic discursive model. The image gives ‘flesh’ to the concept, vests it with ‘expressive matter’. The concept is the result of analytic work done in cooperation with the customer while the image is the product of designer’s creativity. During the elaboration of the concept it is the customer who is dominating; the creation of the image lies in the designer’s competence. Concept is the first point of assemblage of the semiotic discursive model. It is the centre of its semiotic energy that powers the whole process of creation of the design product.

Concept is an indispensable part of the communication with the customer, as it secures conformity and mutual understanding. A correctly developed concept releases creative energy, setting in on a proper course, taking control of creative solutions, disciplining and keeping it from superfluous motions; in the end, it creates the matrix of impression. However, concept should not be seen as the philosopher’s stone that produces creative miracles. In fact, it is the opposite: after a concept is successfully appropriated, it should reach a subconscious level, and from there test creative solutions by means of intuition. So, concept should be found, admired, thought through... and forgotten. Only a general mood should linger on: designer has to be inside the concept and start semiotic modelling with a light and empty head. This is a self-deception, but designer has to indulge in it lest s/he scares
off the image, for it comes to those who are ready to receive it gratefully as a gift (image is indeed a gift).

4. A semiotic model

If concept in the semiotic discursive model can be compared to the genetic code, then image is the body. The construction of the semiotic discursive model is simultaneous with the construction of the image; each stage of this construction is an approach to the image and its various implementations. First, the outlines of the image should be defined by the semiotic model that prepares its vision; then the achieved result should be specified by the discursive model. The semiotic model shall have the contexts of perception in the discursive mode. Translation of the image-semiotic model into image-discursive model is done through contextualization practices that invest the image with autonomy and its own development logic. Semiotic modelling is instrumental in preparing the situation in which an image may appear rather than in ‘creating’ that image. This means that a semiotic model must be found as a whole rather than composed of semiotic resources. Semiotic modelling is a sequence of procedures aimed at the elaboration and organization of semiotic resources that allow for creating such a model. Methodologically, semiotic modelling is based on social semiotics that discovers symbolic means used to construct communicative situations.

Neo-pragmatic social semiotics is not focused on semiotic resources as such – the true point of interest is their various arrangements that allow to form meanings. The following four points on the meaning-formation mechanism are particularly pertinent for the semiotic modelling of a design product:

1. recognition of meanings depends on the code chosen in each situation;
2. there are specific conditions for meaning-induction (the unfolding of meanings);
3. meaning-markers enjoy a focusing role;
4. narrative is understood as a meaning-generating structure.

Every procedure of semiotic modelling can be considered in terms of creative condition and creative action. Creative condition works as a ‘background’ against which an image appears while creative action refers to the thought-through acts of processing this image. Semiotic modelling is well represented in the following scheme: the concept-code starts concentrating semiotic resources and creates a semiotic situation that suggests a metaphor; getting a feel for the metaphor activates an image and clarifies it; as the image gets clearer, one finds a motif that centres and orders a semiotic situation, renders further precision to the metaphor and makes the image so distinct that it can now be described in the basic narrative.

All these actions are accompanied by modelling of creative conditions or, more precisely, by their modulation from absorption to detachment. The procedures of semiotic modelling follow each other and thus require certain succession of mental acts; however, the pivotal points a designer finds in the process of semiotic modelling – namely, a metaphor, a motif and a basic narrative – should not result from the logically accurate reasoning. There is no cause-and-effect relationship between these narrative actions: a metaphor does not result from a motif and the topic does not form a basic narrative. There are gaps and lacunae between them.

The basic narrative fixates the semiotic model and articulates an image; implicitly, it contains the instruments to be used to represent an image in an object. To bring the image into a basic narrative is to render a new quality to it. This process may be explained in terms of ‘crystalline grid’ and ‘plasma’. The basic narrative puts the image into the ‘crystalline grid’ by endowing it with the stable
ordered periodical structure. At this moment the image coincides with the model. Later, basic narrative is to change its state into plasma; it ceases being a structure and turns into a clot of meaning. This means that a semiotic model must have, while preserving its distinctness, a span of freedom and a program of development. This program is unfolded by the practice of contextualization that turns a semiotic model into a discursive semiotic model. However detailed a semiotic model might be, it will further develop and alter in communicative space. The practices of contextualization do help predict the ways of this development. By turning a semiotic model into a semiotic discursive model they create a construction of meaning open to re-signification and ready to enter a communication process.

5. A discursive model

Methodologically, creation of a discursive model rests on the neopragmatic social semiotics that considers contextualization as a semiotic practice of endowing with meaning. Social semiotics distinguishes three types of contexts, namely the syntagmatic (it considers actions, events and phenomena in their succession), the paradigmatic (it juxtaposes, compares and pulls together actions, events and phenomena) and the indexical (it brings together events that are interconnected within a given situation rather than presents various interpretations of a single event) (Lemke, 1993). To create a discursive semiotic model of a design product, the methodology of semiotic discursive modelling uses all the three practices of contextualization. However, indexical contextualization enjoys the priority since it opens up the horizons of continuous signification and resignification thus involving a user into stable and personalized communication. To actualize the indexical context is to increase an image’s interpretative resource by suggesting an activity and free choice of meaning to the participants of communication. As a result, we receive a possibility of ‘self-adjustment’ with regard to what is being interpreted. In this sense, indexical contextualization turns a user into a participant of the design process.

All of these contextualization practices change the distance between the possible understanding by the Other and the semantic core created by the designer. Thus, the semiotic model fixed in the basic narrative becomes a basis for contextualization practices. The transformation of a semiotic model into a discursive one is accompanied by the transversion of a basic narrative into a metanarrative – a verbal construction capable of simultaneously fixating the products of contextualization and creating the projections of future contexts. Construction of the image is a single action that has two dimensions and is done by simultaneous application of two technologies: the first one provides the vision of the image in its complete integrity while the second destroys the integrity of the image and unwraps it into a discursive practice, or the construction of meanings. Discursive modelling pursues an important task of giving out the ‘keys’ to the Other. In other words, it produces a communication that makes it possible for the Other who has found a code recognize it as her/his own. This recognition of ‘mine’ in someone else’s is the ultimate aim of discursive modelling.

6. Cultural animation

The methodology of semiotic discursive modelling encompasses all the dimensions of the communicative model of the design product, including its existence as a performance. Performance is the mode of existence of the design product in communicative space. Transversion of image into performance is done by means of the communicative technique that I would name cultural
animation, for it can really be compared to resuscitating of the image. The performance doesn’t show the image but it somehow appears, unfolds, develops and clarifies itself in it. The semiotic discursive model in the form of a performance shows itself as the state of conformal creation of meanings of the designer and the Other. The image-performance grows like a live organism and predetermines the outlines of the situation of impression. It is always difficult to estimate the behaviour of a living organism but the designer has to do it, that is – to construct the strategies for managing the performance. Cultural animation gives the keys for such management. The semiotic discursive model of image captured by the metanarrative is a ‘strong form’ that can produce meanings by itself, but is needs an impetus and proper environment. Those are provided by cultural animation. It gives the image the ‘scenic’ space for its implementation. In cultural animation, the potential turns into the actual.

The rule of semiotic discursive modelling of the design product is: everything (concept, image, product) emerges regardless of the resources. The procedures and acts of semiotic discursive modelling require a sequence of mental acts, and yet the key points the designer holds on to (concept – metaphor – motif – basic narrative – guiding codes – metanarrative) are not held together by a linear logic. There are lacunas and gaps between these narrative acts. Design begins with a precisely defined idea that is to be changed in the process of its implementation. The concept still defines the goal of the design practice, arranges and disciplines it, yet leaving from empty space for the experiment, improvisation, and prompt reactions to the changing situation. This results in a product that is equally predictable and unpredicted. This difficult-to-predict quality of the result is a necessity. The methodology of semiotic discursive modelling of design product activates a non-linear logic of practices (Bourdieu, 1990), for the pulsating nature of designer’s creativity requires an advanced spatial imagination and the ability to switch points of observation of a semantic landscape, leaping over its semantic gaps. In that sense, this methodology is not a guidebook in effective creative design, but a way to fine-tune one’s consciousness, putting it into the state when ideas come, images emerge, and proper tools are found.

7. Design as the facing of the future

Confident of its unlimited technological possibilities, the modern society is known for the emphasis it puts on planning and organizing the future. Of course, purposefulness and the wish to control are necessary for preserving human culture. But by rigidly planning the future we eliminate it, dragging the society into the ‘Hedgehog’s Day’, when a real breakthrough and social innovations become illusions while the obsolete algorithms of social actions keep being reproduced. The future has its logic, and we should rather try to tune to it than subdue it.

According to M. McLuhan, only the artist can be of help in this regard (McLuhan, 1964, p.64-65). McLuhan compares the threat that comes from extending oneself through new technologies with a surgery performed without anesthesia. Every new gesture produces a shift in the meaning, and people look for the ways to adapt to these shifts. However, the society never quite knows what is happening to it, and this is unable to develop full immunity to new technologies. Only the artist can help develop this kind of immunity. According to M. McLuhan, the artist can belong to any field, be it science or humanities. She or he is distinguished for her or his ability to grasp the shifts in the meaning, give them a form, and face them. The artists has a solid and comprehensive understanding of what is going on, which allows her or him to make corrections to the meanings before they turn into rigid clichés. The society then has an opportunity to translate the forms created by the artist into social ‘navigation maps’.
While giving credit to this idea of M. McLuhan, it is worth noting that the weak and spontaneous endeavors of artists may be supported by ‘strong’ and organized work of the designer. The methodology of semiotic discursive modelling may become an effective tool not only for adaptation to the changing reality, but also for creating a set of variants within it.

It is possible that society expects from design the creative methods based on this methodology. Such methods could become an alternative for rigid business schemes that aim to reach planned results, prioritize formal criteria, and disregard diverse and versatile contexts.

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About the Authors:

**Galina Lola.** Research interests: philosophy, theory, methodology of design practice. The author of the methodology of semiotic discursive modelling.

**Tatiana Aleksandrova.** Research interests: methodology of design practice. Designer with background in communication and graphic design.