

## BRAINWAVE DESIGN

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This is finally a space to express the uneasiness I have felt for some time at some of the products and designs I see in the pages of magazines, on design websites or in the numerous trade fairs I happen to visit.

It is an expression that for me as a teacher and researcher represents an opportunity for reflection and for some healthy doubt.

Why have I associated the term 'brainwave' with design?

Because in the same way as today the word 'design' has become a word of the masses, often abused or used improperly, I have borrowed a term that is almost slang to express my opinion on how design is viewed today, by both young designers and more mature professionals.

Amongst the numerous online dictionaries I consulted, the word 'brainwave' is frequently given the meaning of 'expedient', i.e. a remedy for solving something, for 'getting out of a situation'. The same term also has the meaning of 'a sudden idea' and 'a great, new, original idea'.

Some of these meanings, when referred to design, take on a critical and negative value, while others are certainly more positive and encouraging.

Undoubtedly the idea of a product that can be seen as an expedient - therefore as a remedy instead of a deeper, longer lasting solution that is, above all, the result of on-going research into design - takes on a negative connotation, like the temporariness that emerges from an interpretation of a product as being the result of 'a sudden idea'.

On the contrary, the same word 'brainwave' is associated with the validity and originality of an idea, and thus with what a product expresses as the result of an instantaneous process, the fruit of genius or of divine illumination.

Having dealt with the theme of 'duration' in the past (research that first led me to the concept of 'polysemy' and then to mythicise those products which, due to a fortunate combination of factors, remain in catalogues for years) I am today oriented towards embracing the negative connotation of the term 'brainwave' and to attributing it to all those contemporary design products that are rapidly visually - and also culturally - consumed.

Emblematic examples of this are the Him and Her chairs by Fabio Novembre for Casamania, Karim Rashid's objects/digital decorations or Jaime Hayon's objects for installations, etc.

The first are the expression of a design in which the morphological expedient of a man's and woman's backside impressed on a chair is the theme and main idea behind a product that cites and reinterprets a cult design object: the Panton Chair by Vitra.

What could be the polysemia in this case i.e. that set of meanings that is slowly revealed and allows a long, lasting relationship with its user?

There is no polysemia here. Him and Her reveal themselves instantly. They are provocative, irreverent, immediately communicative and play on emotions, but how long will they last?

How long will we want to have them in our home before we get tired of looking at them?

I could make an equally negative judgement on all those products that play on performance, on the surprise effect caused by their use, and which astound for the response that they try to give to our latent - but not so primary - needs. For example, the work of Spanish designer Marti Guixé or products by the Joe Velluto Studio, by Matteo Ragni and Giulio Iacchetti and a whole developing international young generation.

A generation well represented, at least in Italy, by Andrea Branzi in the 2006 exhibition 'New Italian Design' at the Milan Triennale di Milano, which attributes it with a strong ability to adapt, (only) to working in weak, interstitial spaces, free from 'star designers' and from the heavy industrial system, *'characterised by absolute indifference towards questions of aesthetics, style and language (which) produces light objects, that are microscopic but often ingenious innovations; ironic, courageous devices that explore the territories of the unexpected'* (A. Branzi, 2010).

I would add that young generation is the product of design's strong and exclusive communicative aim. It is indifferent to truly industrial issues and, therefore, to the real needs of those who have to use the products, to figures and to saleability for companies.

However, today all this is reality if we accept the interpretation of Fulvio Carmagnola who defines the whole economic scenario in which design (above all) operates as '*fictional economy*'. It is an economy based on processes of '*enhancement and generation of market value, of imaginary elements present in society and on media narrations and figures*' (F. Carmagnola, 2009).

I have often declared (supported by the affirmations of Vanni Codeluppi) that design today, more than ever compared to the past, has the ability and aim of manipulating the communicative contents of a product and planning its obsolescence. If we take an extreme view, we have reached the paradox of 'showpieces', i.e. of products designed and created only for the specific length of certain events (as in the case of Jaime Hayon's installations for Bisazza) or designed explicitly to fill up media spaces.

Thus 'brainwave design' thus becomes a through-line that is completely legitimised by our current social, economic and cultural contexts.

I am still uncomfortable as regards the sense of this kind of design, although this feeling has been somewhat alleviated by something I have read recently, which made me understand that perhaps we should look at 'brainwave design' from other points of view.

Alessandro Baricco, in a piece recently published in Wired magazine, set in an improbable future 2026, complains of the obsolescence of the analytical approach which, in the last 30 years – therefore in our present era – looked for the sense of things in their 'depth', as culture made us believe. '*Depth does not exist*': its invention was a result of the need to find '*the sense*' - a safe place - for our most precious objects. Today the sense of things resides in their surfaces, in all those elements that are light, ironic and surprising.

Hence the reassessment of the meanings of the word 'brainwave', which take on even more value, as synonyms of ingeniousness, improvisation and originality.

Based on this interpretation there is undoubtedly sense in the brainwave of an asymmetric cake mould, which produces slices of different sizes to satisfy different appetites, as in the case of Odoardo Fioravanti's 2007 Eccentric project, or even more meaning in designing something to satisfy the needs of goldfish, with a darkened area for them to sleep in, as with Do Not Disturb by the Joe Velluto Studio (2008).

One also cannot do without combining sunglasses with prescription glasses, to create a kind of ambiguous mask (as in 4occhi – 4eyes - by Giulio Iacchetti for Palomar 2008) or imagining to be able to customise one's time by creating a clock to write on, like Martì Guixé has done for Alessi with Blank Wall Clock.

We are far-removed from design that is called upon to solve social problems of a certain importance and to work on long-lasting innovations, but it seems that this is evidence of 'surfaces'.

Yet, I still doubt the sense and validity of teaching design that makes a 'brainwave' - a model that is completely free from methodology, critical development and 'depth' – something to emulate.