

How We Future

Review of

Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby

Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming

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I remember when a friend, Abby Mellick-Lopes, lent me *Design Noir* (2002) shortly after its publication. Though Abby and I were both working at the EcoDesign Foundation at the time, Abby had the book, if I remember rightly, more because it was about Electro-Magnetic Radiation, which she was researching, than because it was about design. It was one of those great moments, when you open up a book and immediately start to wonder, 'What is this?' The first half of the book contained a rich theoretical excursus that established both the nature of the design work in a lineage of 'conceptual art meets science fiction,' and also the nature of the issue being explored through a historical survey of encounters with electricity and magnetism. The second half of the text comprised apparently verbatim interviews with people who had lived with the conceptual pieces of furniture at the heart of the project. The book was at the same moment cultural theory, design work and a kind of ethnographic monograph. The deficits of each one of those was made up for by the presence of the others: the theory was engaged in a social practice of making, the artistic critique was located in everyday experiences. All of this was done in the name of what was then a matter of technoscientific politics, an issue that was still nascent and so ripe for reframing. And the reframing performed by this book looked nothing like the way technologies themselves were being styled then, nor did it have anything in common with the metaphors underwriting how technology was being theorized at the time. The book and the work in the book had a small-run design-artifact-y mode with a staged quality. The overall theatrical effect had a distinctly 'Brecht-meets-the-50s but in middleclass Britain' quality – exactly what seemed needed given the WWW-hype of that time.

I remember thinking, with the book in my hands, 'This is exactly what sustainability needs.' The technoscientific politics of sustainability, especially back then, was so badly framed; it was miles from critical theory and artistic experimentation, and even from design. *Design Noir* seemed to be such an important model.

Appropriately, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have since then become some of the most important figures in the current expansion of design. You could say that design

has been stretching in four different directions: it has extended toward strategic business innovation by ‘design thinking’ on one side; and toward more complex and constantly changing ecosystems by digital service ‘interaction design’ on a second side; while becoming a more established discipline at universities with ‘design research’ and ‘design studies’ on a third side. It would be no exaggeration to say that a whole fourth side of extension has occurred as a result of what is variously called, following Dunne and Raby, ‘critical design,’ ‘discursive design’ and now ‘speculative design.’

For this reason, I think that *Speculative Everything*, the newish book by Dunne and Raby, must be given a careful critical read. And not only by designers. The experience I had of *Design Noir* should be the experience of non-designers who stray on *Speculative Everything*. People outside the profession and discipline tend to have a better understanding of design these days. Even so, this book should make them think, hopefully in a good way, ‘Wait, what is this [thing called design]?’

For this to happen, we perhaps need a more considered history of why DnR – as I will from now on refer to them, since there is a brand politics at stake that I will come back to – here and now?

Wozu Critical Design in düftiger Zeit?

At a higher level, the answer perhaps lies with the debate over whether late capitalist societies are still progressing. Fanatical talk of disruptive innovation seems to evidence that significant breakthroughs in how we live and work are a thing of the past. Technological developments, whether computational or pharmaceutical, seem limited to distracting manipulations struggling to redirect us back to conventional marketing-driven consumption, while the things that actually generate wealth for the very few are epiphenomenal systems of financial engineering. In this context, the future-oriented urgency that DnR claim for their nevertheless insistently ambiguous work looks very symptomatic of this current condition.

At a mid-level, there is the fact that, whether or not it has a theoretical rationale, Art (with a capital ‘a’) sure does seem to have died quite a while ago. Somewhere between ubiquitous visualization and fabrication on the one hand, and the transient mega-spectacles of Arts Festivals on the other, with the pathetic gestures of relational aesthetics a decade ago in the middle, there does seem to be no trace even of the ruins of Art. Again DnR seem symptomatic: their ‘doth protest too much’ insistence on producing works of design, not art; their explicit nostalgia for ‘70s ‘radical art and architecture;’ their embarrassed rationale for wanting to exhibit in galleries (though

preferably (archaeological) museums); all the while evidencing a deep envy of highly art-directed, big budget cinema.

At a lower level, there is the politics of design entering the university system over the past few decades at the exact moment that neoliberalism began imposing an audit culture on research productivity. Design was drafted into the academy with the other ‘creative industries’ but unlike those other practices (the visual and performing arts), could have rested on its commercial applicability laurels. It has instead joined with those other practices and battled to constitute distinctive methodologies and epistemologies for its research. Dunne participated in early skirmishes [“New Methodologies in Art and Design Research: The Object as Discourse” co-authored with Alex Seago, *Design Issues* Vol.15 No.2 (1999)], and ‘Critical Design’s notoriety derives in part from it being taken up widely as an example of ‘design by research.’

(Things are a little more complicated, in ways worth noting. Dunne did collaborate initially with Bill Gaver on the design (no!-it’s-not-a) research method known as ‘cultural probes’ (“Design: Cultural Probes” with 3rd author, Elena Pacenti, in *Interactions* Vol.6 No.1 (1999)). In the division of labor following their, according to rumor, acrimonious divorce, Gaver it seems took the process and DnR the outcome. Gaver’s studio produces very ‘speculative design’ looking artifacts; however, in the more digital tech-industry context that tends to fund the studio’s work, the artifacts are staged (exhibited, and located in a project time-frame) as exploratory in the more research sense of the term. DnR’s artifacts by contrast claim to be more ‘finished’ and so available for discussion only, rather than further designing. Consequently, *Speculative Everything* contains almost no discussions of process at all. There is mention of decision-making about the aesthetics of exhibition, but few accounts of background research or ideation processes. The problem with this is that DnR are often cited as precedents for design researchers, especially practice-based doctoral candidates, wanting to claim that artwork-like-designed-artifacts, because they are anti- or para-functional, qualify as research – understood as the more general art of raising questions. Of course, provocation is necessary, as the very first moment of, but not sufficient for, researching – at some point, you need to try to answer.)

Beyond all this, beyond design research, design art and design innovation, *Speculative Everything* is focusing on very important societal issues, issues that must be examined and responded to:

How can we think in productively critical ways about our futures, about what is likely?

And within that, what must be resisted as unlikable?

What else might be possible, and how can we make such other futures more possible?

I certainly agree with DnR that these are worryingly under-researched issues upon which our very futures rest.

We, we, we

For this reason, it is frustrating how badly written this book is – though clearly I am no model. Despite the claim in the preface that the book moves from “a general setting of what conceptual design is, through its use... to [its] aesthetics,” [vi] the structure is more like multiple overlapping perspectives on ‘speculative design.’ This repetitive approach can end up being confusing and often contradictory.

By far the most annoying thing about the book is the incessant use of ‘we.’ DnR is a couple so they must use the 1st person plural. And better that they are upfront about owning the opinions expressed in the book rather than the perspectival-less declaratives of most academic writing. But it is disconcerting when, despite most of the ‘we’s meaning, ‘We, DnR...’, many ‘we’s are there to invoke humanity in general. The ‘we’ of “We have become a society of individuals... We live in a very different world now but we can reconnect with that [visionary] spirit... But to do this, we need more pluralism in design, not of style but ideology and values,” [8,9] is obviously not the same ‘we’ as, “We coined the term *critical design*... We feel it is the right moment to offer an updated view of what we think [critical design] is.” [34] But which ‘we’ is it in,

We view people as obedient and predictable users and consumers... Are we prepared to treat society as a living laboratory as we do with digital technologies?... For the most part, we live in a consumer society and consumerism drives economic growth... But we are designers not writers... Whether we like it or not, we now live within a multitude of realities... We view people as free agents, not necessarily rational, but free to make up their own minds [38, 48, 51, 86, 159, 161]

Even more annoyingly, often when a claim desperately needs to be qualified by a ‘We, DnR, believe...’ it is not: “most people believe [design] is about problem-solving... All good design is critical... If it is labeled as art it is easier to deal with but if it remains design it is more disturbing... Although on the surface this project may seem absurd, it raises interesting questions.” [2, 35, 43, 65]

This is more than a stylistic quibble. This is a book advancing the notion of critical design. It tackles global issues that are not being satisfactorily handled by the very

Western, even though globally dominant, modernist approaches to designing. The book explicitly names homogenizing global capital as what design must be critical of, generating speculations about other possibilities that can resist capitalism's "There is no alternative." [8] So questions of 'who is this 'we'?' are axial. But there is very little ethnic 'diversity' in any of the projects, and there is no explicit discussion of cultural difference in the text. Even when projects are reviewed that were produced in particular contexts, East Asia for example, and developed notoriety as a result of culturally specific media platforms and habits, these are not taken into account in any significant way.

There is of course plenty of diversity in the projects when it comes to human-machine and human-animal relations. Disability is negotiated – as an opportunity for transhumanist futures for instance. But this only makes the lack of other kinds of diversity even more conspicuous.

Notably absent is class difference, despite the primacy accorded by the book to the 2008 Financial Crisis. One of the newer DnR projects documented in the book is *Foragers* (2010). Motivated by a scenario in which coming food shortages will not be adequately dealt with by governments, the project explored DIY digestive devices that groups of people might use to gather food from the urban environment. It seems to me that there is an unavoidable issue of wealth inequality here. But it is explicitly erased: "Rather than the foragers being grungy and dressed in obvious clothing, the photographer suggested they wear outdoor, sporty clothes to challenge expectations of them being organic and anti-technology." [151] This aesthetic choice is justified in terms of "avoid[ing] hyper-realism... so that viewers were aware they were looking at ideas, not products." [151] But why those ideas, and not ideas of race or class? These are not a stretch in this case but part of the premise – if grassroots groups are forced into subsistence by scarcity, wealthy people hoarding what resources there are is the unavoidable corollary.

Preferably Plausible, Probably Possible

All this goes to the opening premise of the book: that 'we' (all seem to) have lost the capacity to vision and dream. For DnR, evidence is how much we merely 'hope,' "hope that we will not allow ourselves to become extinct, hope that we can feed the starving, hope that there will room for us all on this tiny planet... We don't know how to fix the planet and ensure our survival. We are just hopeful." [1]

This claim then leads to the primary hypothesis of the book, which arrives via the 'Cone of Futures.' This is a diagram that is common in Foresight literature. The future is seen as series of widening cones extending from the present. The narrowest

cone is the ‘probable,’ the limited range of futures that we are already heading for given that we have no visions for alternate futures. If we did start dreaming about alternatives, that would give us a much wider cone that we could call the possible. Of course, some possible futures are fairly unlikely, so the cone midway between the possible and the probable is the plausible. Somewhere on this diagram you could indicate where the preferable lies. DnR locate it as overlapping the probable and plausible, though there is no reason to imagine why the preferable does not in fact lie outside the plausible, and even outside the possible. Many utopias, as highly preferable, are deliberately implausible. And though DnR cite Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* repeatedly, DnR seem to see their project as working in the space between the possible and plausible rather than the plausible and probable, and not necessarily in terms of the preferable. Their brief is to make affecting designs that lie outside of the cone of the probable in order to widen that cone, and indeed all the cones, creating space for different kinds of futures, or at least consideration of different kinds of futures:

This is the bit we are interested in. Not in trying to predict the future but in using design to open up all sorts of possibilities that can be discussed, debated and used to collectively define a preferable future for a given group of people... We believe that by speculating more, at all levels of society, and exploring alternative scenarios, reality will become more malleable and, although the future cannot be predicted, we can help set in place today factors that will increase the probability of more desirable futures happening. And equally, factors that may lead to undesirable futures can be spotted early on and addressed or at least limited. [6]

We believe that even nonviable alternatives, as long as they are imaginative, are valuable and serve as inspiration to imagine one’s own alternatives... Speculative design can inspire... a feeling that, if not exactly anything, more is definitely possible. [161]

Before explaining this further, I should finish my point of about the neglect of cultural difference. This hypothesis, that design can and should correct the paucity of futures available to us, restoring to us our capacity to vision, depends on the claim that ‘we’ currently have constrained futures. This assumption is captured accurately by the diagram when it insists that ‘we’ are all at one singular point in time, the apex of the cones from which all possible futures narrowly extend. However, it is very apparent that whilst ‘we’ are all at this moment in the calendar imposed upon us in the name of functional global capital, many of us are in very different ‘places,’ with very different sets of futures. From where I am, a privileged white male, my cone is wide and long (though I am personally running out of time, and may be living at the moment in a rapidly declining post-empire). My cone is not dissimilar to DnR’s, I imagine. But it is very dissimilar from the cones of Pakistanis I know, or Brazilians or indigenous Australians. I don’t mean by this my personal ontogenic futures, but the

trajectory of my phylogeny. Whilst us in the North/West seem to have lost our capacity for visioning, could the same be said for those up and down the line of now in BRIC nations? An Islamic Caliphate is a highly motivating vision held by many in our present that is changing what futures are probable if not preferable for many, not just those who promote that vision.

Again, this is not just a cheap identity politics criticism. It opens the way to seeing that DnR's rationale for their work is itself open to question. There are strong design communities, practicing and researching, with models of futuring that challenge those of DnR. The DESIS Network for instance works with William Gibson's oft quoted, 'The future is already here – it is just not evenly distributed.' The motivating claim is that, far from being poor-in-future-vision, communities – usually the more marginalized ones – are already innovating systems for meeting their everyday needs that are quite distinct from market provisioning or government services. The job of the designers is not to come up with these visions of alternate economies, but to find social innovations, to find people in the now trying to build different kinds of future cones, and bolster and proliferate them through service design.

By comparison, DnR still see the designer's job as modernist-ly leading rather than postindustrial-ly servicing communities. The task of the designer is get 'the people' to think about what they cannot and/or will not. It is no wonder then that whilst DnR will frequently insist that such 'people' be allowed to do their own imagining and make up their own minds, they are nevertheless often cast as just a little annoying: "Many people struggle to know what they are looking at and how they should relate to [a speculative design]." [141]

"Viewers need to understand the rules of the game and how a speculative design prop is meant to function in a given situation. This is very difficult because viewers are not used to encountering design objects with this purpose either in the press or exhibitions... One challenge for design criticism is to clarify and promote new rules and expectations for viewing speculative design objects in noncommercial settings such as museums and galleries." [94]

This 'designers voice' [96], directing us as to what 'We' should be looking at, and how, has pride of place for DnR: "This is the bit we are interested in... We are interested in... We are more interested in... We believe it is more interesting to... We are very interested in... [6, 76, 89, 131, 149]

Nevertheless, whilst it is not the only reading of the present with respect to the future, I do think that the working assumption of *Speculative Everything* has merit, at least for the late consumer capitalist economies of the North/West. With cultural qualifiers, I certainly agree that, “As Frederic Jameson famously remarked, it is now easier for us to imagining the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism. Yet alternatives are exactly what we need.” [2]

The difference things make...

On this count, DnR do have a very important contribution, one I alluded to at the outset when describing the powerful potential evident in *Design Noir*. The book goes to considerable effort to distinguish between the futures thinking possible with design as compared with literature (science fiction), cinema and art. When DnR insist that *design* has a unique and much-needed contribution to make to the project of enhancing our futuring capacities, they mean mostly *product design*. They are insistent on futures being made present through artifacts, artifacts that are finished design works, not prototypes. Or more accurately, these artifacts of possible futures must have the polish of finished design works because, of course, they do not actually function. In contrast to *Design Noir*, the artifacts being promoted by *Speculative Everything* are not to be experienced in everyday life, but instead exist primarily within carefully curated exhibitions, alongside high-end photography and textual fragments from the scenario being exhibited or about the exhibition as a whole. Images of the artifacts as exhibited then circulate in the media.

So why? In terms of aiding our capacity to vision and evaluate futures collectively, why design, why product design, why completed yet non-functional artifacts, and why exhibited (and photographed)? How does this enable us (‘we’) to widen and deepen our engagement with the future?

The argument is far from clear because it is dispersed unevenly throughout the book and never summarized. As far as I can make out, the argument turns around particular epistemological claims about designed artifacts, about the ambiguity generated by their physical reality when only partially contextualized:

- *1: Making the Future (Physically) Present*

The prime objective of speculative design is to force an aspect of the future into the present so that it demands a response:

A key feature is how well [a critical design] simultaneously sits in this world, the here-and-now, while belonging to another yet to exist one. ... That is why for us, critical designs need to be made physical. Their physical presence can locate them in our world

whereas their meaning, embodied values, beliefs, ethics, dreams, hopes and fears belong somewhere else. [43-4]

Whilst imaginary, not yet, speculative designs are nevertheless present, physically “in the same space as the imaginer... making the experience more vivid, more alive and more intense;” [90] more than, DnR argue, literature is possible of: “One strength for design is that its medium exists in the here and now. The materiality of design proposals, if expressed through physical props, brings the story closer to our own world away from the world’s of fictional characters.” [79]

- **2: *Distancing Overidentification***

Nevertheless, and somewhat contradictorily, DnR have a concern for the overwhelming reality of cinematic experiences: “Films also require us to put ourselves in the place of the protagonist but they require less effort because we are immersed in a high-resolution world designed to push our emotional buttons.” [91] At times, this concern seems Brechtian: DnR want to ensure that there is still space for critical questioning, interrupting audiences that might slip into more passive identifications with characters in narrative scenarios. “[Speculative Design] proposes an alternative that through its lack of fit with this world offers a critique by asking, ‘why not?’” [43] “The props of speculative design are different [from those in the narrative arts]. They are triggers that can help us construct in our minds a world shaped by different ideals, values, and beliefs.” [91]

- **3: *Maintaining Designerly Intent***

DnR are very particular about the design aesthetic that qualifies a project as a speculative design. I will discuss this below, but in overall terms, though there must be something in the design that distances the audience from overidentifying with the fictioned future being materialized – a ‘glitchy’-ness DnR call it [96] – this must not devolve into parody or irony. This appears to be part of the reason that DnR have dropped ‘critical design’ for ‘speculative design;’ to move from something that sounds too rationally commentary-like to something that is more affecting: “Stephen Duncombe argues that the radical left has relied too heavily on reason, ignoring the place fantasy and fabricated realities play in our lives.” [159]

When people encounter the term *critical design* for the first time, they often assume it has something to do with critical theory and the Frankfurt School or just plain criticism... Critical design is critical thought translated into materiality. It is about thinking through design rather than through words and using the language and structure of design to engage people... It is the gap between reality as we know it and the different idea of reality referred to in the critical design proposal that creates the space for discussion. It depends on dialectical opposition between fiction and reality to have an effect. [35]

In terms of positive characterizations, DnR maintain that there must be a consistency and even an authenticity to project. Speculative designs must have a strong, coherent, designer-as-author “voice” if their patent impossibility is to nevertheless be impactfully plausible: “The most interesting voice, or perspective to design from, for us, and probably the most neglected, is the designer’s own language. Usually this is missing in design fictions because designers try to make their design prop as ‘realistic’ as possible by using the prop’s presumed language, the language of the world as we understand it.” [96] The rationale here seems to be to ensure that the audience cannot get off too lightly: even if the design is humorous, or ambiguous as to whether there is seriousness behind the proposition, viewers must sense that the issues involved a very serious: the designer is being serious about whether this proposal is serious or not: “The objects [of one exemplar of speculative design] were created in a dry and straightforward way with the high attention to quality of materials, construction and detail one would expect in a well-designed object. It is through its demeanor that one starts to wonder just how serious it is.” [42]

- *4 Exhibiting for Imagination*

So if the projects have a material reality, that is nevertheless not immersive, but also not merely glibly contemplated, what activates viewers into serious engagement? The answer seems to be something like ‘incompleteness.’ Each component is a flawless-looking design, but the context for these products is not all there. The lack of totality, in an exhibition for instance, leaves (carefully circumscribed) room for viewer imagination to fill in:

One way of considering the fictional objects of speculative design is as props for nonexistent films. On encountering the object, the viewer imagines his or her own versions of the film world the object belongs to... Props used in design speculations are functional and skillfully designed; they facilitate imagining and help us to entertain ideas about everyday life that might not be obvious. They help us to think about alternative possibilities – they challenge the ideals, values and beliefs of our society embodied in material culture. [89-90]

It is for this reason that the natural habitat of Speculative Designs has become the museum: “Becom[ing] active imaginers... is something people do when they visit museums to view historical artifacts, often carrying out a sort of imaginary archaeology on the artifacts on display.” [93]

- *5 Disseminating Debate*

Having materialized possible futures in compelling ways that are nevertheless not comprehensively conclusive, speculative designs should elicit not only generative

responses from audiences, but also then critical reflection and discourse. “Speculating through design by presenting abstract issues as fictional products enables us to explore ethical and social issues within the context of everyday life.” [51] There is no designing of this debate: it is deliberately left open.

The idea of the ‘proposal’ is at the heart of this approach to design: to propose, to suggest, to offer something... The project’s value is not what it achieves or does but what it is and how it makes people feel, especially if it encourages people to question, in an imaginative, troubling, and thoughtful way, everydayness and how things could be different... Not a solution, not a ‘better’ way, just another way. Viewers can make up their own minds... Ultimately, it is a catalyst for social dreaming. [189 – closing sentence of the book]

At times, there are claims that certain popular media, from newspapers to social media - are the forums for these debates (for example, in relation to Auger and Loizeau’s *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots* [50]). But at other times, the media is more just a vehicle for distributing these speculations otherwise trapped in museums. In this regard, DnR note the danger of the photogenic quality of these physical designs (as per 2) over-powering their intent to provoke discussion: “Speculative designs depend on dissemination and engagement with a public or expert audience; they are designed to circulate... Each channel [exhibitions, publications, press and the internet] or medium creates its own issues of accessibility, elitism, populism, sophistication, audience, and so on. This need for dissemination means speculative design have to be striking but a danger is they end up being little more than visual icons” [139]

... so says us

Now the entire of this dialectical defense, of why futures should be negotiated through exhibited products, that I have tried to reconstruct here, is based on unsubstantiated supposition. Many of the claims seem common-sense-like, but we are talking about ‘critical speculations’ on ‘technoscience’ derived futures: the stakes are high, so I would expect each step in the argument would be carefully argued. Consider these assumptions:

1a ‘We’ are bad at imagining alternative futures?

- Though science fiction is strong in film and literature, as are speculative startups, sometimes crowd-sourced, and transhumanism.

1b ‘We’ are bad at negotiating abstractions?

- Yet people argue robustly, even physically, about nationhood or notions like freedom and god.

1c 'We' are more (critically) engaged by things that are physically present?

- Though gaming is strong, and people fear cancer and radiation, and some re-organize their communities in response to theories about post Peak Oil collapse.

2a Immersive experiences pacify 'us'

- Yet simulations are used for learning and films and literature can spur creative fan elaborations.

2b Things whose reality is ambiguous are thought-provoking?

- How does the experience move from an 'is' to an 'ought,' from the affect of uncanniness to the question of whether what is represented is preferable or worrisome?

2c When 'we' see one new alternative, 'we' are opened to contemplating that everything is alterable?

- Or 'creatives' appear able to imagine alternatives that will not in the end make a difference to the overall directions we are heading in.

3a Critical commentary is less effective for getting 'us' to negotiate futures than affective visions?

- Yet activists debate the futures emerging from governmental analyses, and nothing constitutes the future like the arguments informing a business model.

3b A strong designer's voice countering expected styles generates audience engagement?

- Or it marginalizes the work as the speculations of certain prominent individual designers.

4a 'We' are activated by incomplete (narrative) contexts?

- Or we remain despondently puzzled.

4b 'We' project ourselves into the lifeworld of artifacts in a museum?

- Though perhaps we do this more when we can interact with artifacts, even dwell with them for periods of time.

5a 'We' only engage in debate when proposals remain open?

- Yet strong positions are what elicit the most media debate

5b What circulates through 'our' media generates debate?

- Or occludes debate, and debate happening where, and to what end?

5c 'Our' media is a locus for debating the future?

- Though its presentism and pace preclude debate, unless you mean the 'Comments' section.

Future Shopping

DnR do have one central argument underwriting their account of Speculative Design that I have not yet mentioned. Again, despite its centrality, it is ambiguous, but not deliberately.

Another place where we are prompted to contemplate ourselves in futures on the basis of incompletely contextualized products, apart from museums, is shop windows: "When we see a strange shoe or ritualistic object we wonder what kind of society must have produced it, [etc]... We enact a form of window shopping, trying things out in our minds." [140]

Now this is problematic. In some ways, the enemy from which Speculative Designs try to defend us is the market, that is, the way the market is able to dominate our futures:

Although there have always been design speculations... design has become so absorbed in industry, so familiar with the dreams of industry, that it is almost impossible to dream its own dreams, let alone social ones. We are interested in liberating this story making (not storytelling) potential, this dream-materializing ability, from purely commercial applications and redirecting it toward more social ends that address the citizen rather than the consumer or perhaps both at the same time. [88]

So DnR, "designers working outside a strictly commercial context and aiming to engage people with complex ideas," (102) work hard to indicate that whilst Speculative Designs should have the polish of a product on the market, as in step 3 in the argument reconstructed before, they must also be clearly differentiated from a product on the market (without lapsing on the other hand into art). Speculative Designs must work homeopathically with the same language of desire and imagination as market-led product design but in order to constitute the very alternative futures that market-led product design refuses.

This aesthetic dilemma for DnR is most apparent when it comes to how the products circulate in the media. DnR reject cinema for being too totalizing but favor the more fragmentary nature of photography. Whilst you would imagine CGI would appeal to DnR in being able to make the speculative appear hyper-real in an image, DnR worry that "it is very difficult for an artist, designer or architect to transcend the dominant style." [102] Their response is to endorse examples where a CGI-ed component of the

image is evidently superimposed onto a real image. Some of the examples are public service announcements, but others are advertisements. Hence then the dangerous claim that, “Highly aestheticized fashion photography is also a rich source of inspiration for the creation of atmosphere [in *Speculative Designs*]” [131] With this example – expensive clothing marketing – we have arrived at the place at which highly speculative, critical even, propositions are in fact just another means for reinforcing the market-driven status quo.

In the end, this aesthetic question is merely a symptom of the underlying politics of the whole of *Speculative Design*. What warrants the whole of DnR’S project is a far from critical or speculative ‘theory of change’ or ‘model of man.’

A) We [‘We’] have recently become interested in the idea of critical shopping. It is by buying things that they become real, moving from the virtual space of research and development by way of advertising into our lives. We get the reality we pay for... In a consumer society like ours [i.e., ‘we’], it is through buying goods that reality takes shape. The moment money is exchanged, a possible future becomes real. If it did not sell it would be sent back, becoming a rejected reality. [37]

B) The problem for DnR is that:

when we act as consumers we often suspend these general beliefs and act on other impulses. There is a separation between what we believe ought to be and how actually behave... Usually when we discuss big issues we do so as citizens, yet is as consumers that we help reality take shape. [49]

C) The corrective response is not more mere criticality, as was noted in step 2, but rather ambiguously real propositions that can seed questioning into the otherwise unthinkingly emotional reactions of consumers:

By presenting people with fictional products, services and systems from alternative futures, people can engage critically with them as citizen-consumers. Being faced with a complex mix of contradictory emotions and responses opens up new perspectives on the debate [about technoscience driven futures].” [49]

D) These now questioning-yet-still-engaged ‘citizen-consumers’ are what DnR means by “critical shoppers” [37]

This is one of the purposes of critical design – to help us become more discerning consumers, to encourage people to demand more from industry and society as critical consumers. [36]

This argument is again based on unsubstantiated assumptions: are ‘we’ stupefied into uncriticality when shopping as opposed to reflecting on technoscientific risks as diligent citizens? Do ‘we’ become questioning of market-led futures when we see something apparently speculative yet still as photogenic as a fashion editorial?

My main concern here is that it is patently clear what futures DnR think are not just the only ones possible, but also preferable: ones structured by competitive markets in which ‘our’ only agency is choosing to buy or not buy. Or to put it another way, agency to determine futures lies only in the hands of those with discretionary budgets to spend.

While beginning the book with claim that the financial crash of 2008 “triggered... a new wave of interest in thinking about alternatives to the current system” [9] and closing the book with a call for ‘speculative everything,’ in the end DnR are insisting that that to which there is no alternative is consumerism. This is why the book is so adamant about its individualistic pluralism: “Design can be combined with any of these [forms of change], but it is the last one – individual action - that we value most. We believe change starts with the individual and that that individual needs to be presented with many options to form an opinion.” [160] Even neoconservative precedents cannot warn DnR off this consumer-desire-based future: “We believe, like Philip K Dick, that there is no longer one reality, but seven billion different ones... The individualistic approach, although associated with right-wing liberalism, is also an impetus for highly individualistic micromodifications to reality, usually to satisfy some desire that official culture is unable to meet, such as unconventional political views or specialist sexual fantasies and fetishes.” [162]

This is why the basis of the speculations by DnR always have technoscience at their center, rather than altered social relations. Putting the focus on problems that we *all will* apparently face is a good way of excusing the need to deal with, if not concealing altogether, that there are problems today that not all of ‘Us’ face, that there are people who benefit, from what is available on the market, from technoscientific advances, and then there are people who most definitely do not get to enjoy those benefits – and who invariably also are made to bear the costs of those ‘advances.’

DnR™

As DnR’s project descends from utopianism to the tasteful shopper’s plea for “more pluralism in design,” [9] DnR must make sure to clarify their brand niche as opposed to everyone else’s competing fetishes. This is the last aspect of the book that I would like to register: the almost petulant policing of what meets with DnR’s approval. Deadpan, absurdism, black humor are good [40], irony, parody, pastiche are bad

[102]; sketches can seem old-fashioned, but detailed drawings are day-dreamlike [107]; Buckminster Fuller is too technological, better is Norman Bel Geddes [164]; Matthew Barney is too idiosyncratic, the Yes Men too sensational [40]; model-like is good, toylike is bad [118]; museums were to be avoided, now they are perfect [140]; etc.

In so many ways, this book ends up not being an argument for a new kind of designing, one that is taking up the challenges of ‘our’ depleted futures, but instead just a declaration as to what entails a copyrightable DnR project: “*Speculative Everything* began as a list we created a few years ago called *A/B*, a sort of manifesto. In it, we juxtaposed design as it is usually understood with the kind of design we found ourselves doing.” [vi]

But in fact that is the convenient lie. Given who DnR are in the field of design and design research at the moment, this book is not so “idiosyncratic,” but instead a speculative recuperation of critique, a significant investment in returning criticism of market-based futures back into a source of just more market-based futures.

As I indicated at the outset, I believe that ‘critical design’ is a very important, because timely, way of negotiating the deficiencies the global consumer class societies does appear to have in regard to their futures. I hope that I managed to show that DnR do a terrible job of explaining what is in fact both the power of many of their projects – mainly the early ones – and the potential of the practice they have spawned. So I would like to – and feel some responsibility – for trying to set out what is of merit in their work and their account.

Aspects of Critical Design I™ believe are Valuable

i) Expert Accelerationism

I was critical of how the focus of ‘Speculative Design’ in DnR’s versions prioritizes the technoscientific. Whilst advocating on behalf of the significance of design, especially when designers move “upstream” to sit alongside technoscientific researchers, the book nevertheless tends to reinforce the superior status of technoscience. It is not questioned as a practice, so is instead recast as something we are just going to have to get better at adapting to.

Nevertheless, I agree with the general proposition that “we [designers] can take research happening in laboratories and fast forward to explore possible applications

driven by human desire rather than therapeutic need... As designers, we need to shift from designing applications to designing implications by creating imaginary products and services that situate these new developments within everyday material culture.”

[49] The strategy here is related to what is currently being called ‘accelerationism,’ a critical hyperbolization of current technolibertarian tendencies. Designers need to use their capacity for ‘creative leaps’ to rush scientific research to a diverse range of marketizable technologies. This is a race against what market-based Lean designers are employed to do anyway.

The difference with what DnR is proposing concerns the target audience. DnR pitch these rushed moral ambiguities to the general public for democratic consideration. But as Ulrich Beck, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Michel Callon have made clear, our modernist forms of democracy are not up for this kind of debate. Plus, this passing on of the issue allows the originating sciences to maintain an erroneous faith in their own purity: there is their research, and very separate the commercialization of the implications of that research, something that is so separate that it is not their responsibility but instead the concern of everyone else, the public and its government who must police the evil market. By contrast, if the designer is sitting alongside the scientific researcher, sketching amoral or even immoral implications, then the scientific research expert is the audience. The critical designs can then impact the very people in a position to respond to those designs. Science would be more immediately contaminated by its own techno-profiting by-products; and so a very different technoscience practice will need to be designed.

ii) Prefigurative Criticism

At one point, DnR seem to glimpse the risks associated with their insistence on producing troubling designs that are nevertheless proposed deliberately without clear intent: “Dangerous ideas can be conceived that open up possibilities better left unexplored, and once thought cannot be unthought. And these projects might prepare people for what is to come by unintentionally paving the way for a greater acceptance of [some technoscientific venture] through desensitization.” [51] Instead of negligently concluding without explanation that “Despite this, however, we feel the benefits of this approach far outweigh the negatives,” [51] it seems to me that with careful design, these negatives represent exactly the power of critical design. As we have seen with Google Glass, despite a multi-fronted PR campaign, the perceived negatives of this technology are prefiguring its reception: a few rough scenarios of things the technology is not even capable (e.g., extensive video recording) have highly sensitized ‘us’ to what this particular system entails.

Doing this concertedly is a strategy that Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis called ‘Prefigurative Criticism.’ The aim of this practice is pre-emptively ambush the

branding of an objectionable project in development, associating it with negative consequences before it has had an opportunity to market its benefits. In contrast to DnR, this is a decisive strategy of critique, not merely an attempt to stimulate debate. But it is not distanced commentary; it must take place through artifacts that can circulate in the media with exactly the same level of resolution that DnR insist on.

iii) Seeing Round Corners

“As the science fiction writer Frederick Pahl once remarked, a good writer does not think up only the automobile but also the traffic jam.” [49] I think that what DnR get right is that material products are crucial for seeing these sorts of seeing second-order consequences. What they get wrong is why, and so how. This kind of generative foresight certainly does not come from contemplating a removed museological object. If these things are props, it is because you must play with them, performing in improvisatory ways. The point is not imagine the future, but to feel your way in that unknown dimension. Products, especially speculative ones, demand enactment, bodystorming. By interacting with critical designs in these ways, and preferably over significant spans of times, the worlds that such things afford can be sensed. It is not just a matter then of seeing whether this or that design will work, but what the consequences of it being able to work will be. This is the essential perceptiveness of designing; the capacity to know reliably, without conventional metrics of validation, the patterns of use that will be likely as result of this kind of material intervention into certain sets of everyday or workplace activities. That space between the possible and the plausible, but innovatively distinct from the probable, that is the space that designers can inhabit through their embodied precedent knowledge of habits and tastes. This not the expertise of visioning wholly new futures, but exactly as DnR identify, the expertise of seeing what our now would do given that kind of future. Right now, when people are extolling that we should throw precaution to the wind and embrace transhumanist possibilities, we need more than ever this foreknowledge that designers access through physicalized and enacted design prototypes.

iv) Comprehensive Affirmations

DnR might be wanting to move beyond ‘critical’ toward propositions that are more ambiguous, but there is very little in their designs that looks strongly positive, that builds an argument for certain kinds of futures. As discussed, DnR insist that wish to merely offer options for imagination and discussion. Whilst there is deliberate avoidance of outright critique – prompting my call for more defiant Prefigurative Criticism – there is nevertheless always a kind of ‘knowing’ concern in the designer’s serious intent. This is why the overall taste regime still tends toward noir, just with a colorful palette. For these designs to be truly ambiguous, there should be much more readily identifiable moments of non-ironic endorsement, elements that make clear

cases for what would be valuable (and not just sexy or fun) about these futures for significant sections of the population

What this would require however is a complete reversal of DnR's strategy. Speculative Design presents discrete artifacts with hints of context. It is these absences which imbue the work with its noire-ishness; the fragments, exhibited in the austerity of museums, create haunting mystery, foreboding. To have elements of affirmation would require richer contexts, contexts that are made real by exemplary artifacts. These would not be glimpses of what scarily might be, be declarations about what should be.

This is in fact what DnR began complaining about: that we have only vague hopes rather than motivating dreams. But there is absolutely nothing in any of their work that you would actually dream of coming to pass. Everything they make real is concerning at best and often just horrifying. In the absence of taking responsibility for the debates they claim to be fostering, DnR's work can only be received with a quietly repressive, 'well, I hope that doesn't happen.'

It would not fit the DnR brand – very uncool to actually commit to a particular future, and to argue forcefully for its wider desirability – but that is what we need of design right now. Not speculations that just fuel the market-as-usual, but decisive intents to constitute different futures, especially ones that seem currently impossible.