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The Thing in Fiction: A Philosophical Inquiry on Design and the Distribution of Agency

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Abstract

When considering design, a well-established distribution of agency in which the designer decides the fate of things and things merely conform is often taken for granted. This article proposes a philosophical critique of such a distribution of agency. Drawing on a reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Pavel, Bruno Latour, and other thinkers, it introduces a fiction theory of reality that redistributes agency and displaces our conventional notions of subject and object, human and thing. Finally, it investigates how this redistribution of agency based on a fiction approach to reality may redefine our understanding of design by looking into the conceptual frameworks of ontological designing, actor-network theory, and thing theory.

Keywords: design; agency; fiction; ontological design; thing theory; actor-network theory.

Introduction

Things have agency. Or at least that is what Bruno Latour and other prolific contemporary authors have been arguing. It is a controversial idea. In part, because of the profound consequences that may arise therefrom: if things act, can they decide what to do with us? And do we still get to decide what to do with them?

Such questions become particularly troubling when we bring design into consideration. The most common understandings of design, especially those stressing industrial design, presuppose a well-established distribution of agency in which the designer decides the fate of things and things merely conform. In fact, this distribution of agency is fundamental to the most established narrative of the origin of industrial design as a professional field: it comes into being—so the narrative goes—when the action of producing is no longer performed by one agent alone (the craftsman), being divided between an agent who designs (the designer) and an agent who manufactures (the worker). To quote one example of such a narrative: "It is actually only since the mid-nineteenth century [...] that we can speak of industrial design in the modern sense. Increasing divisions of labor meant that the design and manufacture of a product were no longer carried out by one and the same person, as had previously been the case" (Bürdek 2015, 17–19). Presenting this same historical narrative in retrospect, Carl Mitcham claims that "prior to mechanical industrialization, the artisan was at once 'designer' and 'worker'—yet neither" (Mitcham 2001, 30).

Yet the agency of the worker—the designer's "other"—is always at risk: he or she often sides with things in the distribution of agency. In the nineteenth century, this "reification" of the worker, and its counterpart, the "personification" of things, received two particularly famous treatments. First, there was John Ruskin's critique according to

which the result of the mechanization of labor was to turn the worker into a machine.[1] Second, there was Karl Marx's critique according to which the worker, alienated from the product of his work by the division of labor, faced a fetishized commodity that assumed the form of an autonomous entity.[2]

Already before Ruskin and Marx, however, Thomas Carlyle (1870, 8) observed a more general disturbance in the traditional distribution of agency between humans and things: "Things, if it be not mere cotton and iron things, are growing disobedient to man." In Carlyle's view, things were disobeying and ultimately commanding humans because the lives of the latter were revolving more and more around the enjoyment and trading of material goods. His conclusion was that the "disobedience" of things resulted from a loss of "soul" on the part of humans.

The three aforementioned critiques, and many others that build upon them, have one thing in common: they blindly accept as given the commonsense distribution of agency according to which humans decide and things merely conform. It is easy to observe that they already conceive of the agency of things in advance either as an impossibility (never more than an illusory effect) or as an abomination (a deviation from the proper, correct, or "natural" distribution of agency). These preconceptions still inform the most frequent reactions to the idea that things have agency, especially when design is at issue. In what concerns the distribution of agency, the specificities of the critiques by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Marx are of little consequence: all of them assume a pre-established order that defines in advance the agency of humans and the non-agency of things.

Seeking to question this presupposed order still informing design philosophy, I will, in what follows, present a critique of the commonsense distribution of agency and

advocate a redistribution of agency supported by an understanding of reality as fiction. In so doing, I will argue that the redistribution of agency also redraws the contours of what we understand by design. Ultimately, this article intervenes in debates around design as viewed from the perspectives of ontological design, actor-network theory, and thing theory.

Subject and Object, from Reality to Fiction

As the considerations above have suggested, the agency of things cannot be conceived of apart from human agency: when we address the former, we instantly encounter the latter. This is because an inquiry on agency is inevitably an inquiry on the *distribution* of agency. Agency, we will argue, cannot be understood as an attribute of certain beings: it is the result of a "collage" made from the continuity of events, subjects, objects, words, and their relations.[3] With such a "collage," actions are composed in particular ways.

The most common way of composing actions assumes two poles: an active one and a passive one. In other words, there is an agent who acts and something that is acted upon—subject and object. As shown by Friedrich Nietzsche (2002) and, afterwards, by Vilém Flusser (2021), the division of reality into these two poles (with and without agency) stems from the very structure of Western languages and presents itself to us as absolutely natural and self-evident. Nonetheless, a well-guided effort of imagination is enough to shake our faith in them. Let us consider the following excerpt from Borges' "Tlön, Ukbar, Orbis Tertius," in which the author envisions a world with a congenitally idealist language, devoid of both subject and object:

> [Tlön's] language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the 'present' languages and the dialects are derived: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word 'moon,' but there is a verb which in English would be 'to moon' or 'to moonate.' 'The moon rose above the river' is *hlor u fang axaxaxas mlo*, or literally: 'upward behind the onstreaming it mooned' (Borges 1999, 72–73).

This wonderful passage makes us instantly grasp that the self-evidence of the subject and the object only attests to their validity in the same dogmatic way that the naturalization of the theistic perspective used to attest to the existence of God. Indeed, Nietzsche considers the blind faith that we have in the understandings rooted in language as akin to our faith in God: "I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar..." (Nietzsche 1998, 19). God may have disappeared from our horizons of thought, but the conceptual apparatus that, under His sign, guaranteed the order of things continues to function without him.

As part of this conceptual apparatus, subject and object seem to have survived the death of God. Despite the much publicized "death of the subject" (as an effect of Nietzschean-based philosophies, such as that of Foucault), if we take into account most implicit or explicit design philosophies and the conventional understandings of today, the subject looks very much alive. As Bill Brown (2015, 167) puts it: "there are ways in which we might be said to be stuck with, or *stuck to*, certain subjects (you, me) no matter what twenty-first-century solvents can now be downloaded". This consideration marks a point of departure for this article that is different from the one Peter-Paul

Verbeek (2005) took in his book on agency, technology, and design. For him, the subject is gone, and the thing is at peril of death: "Now that we have survived the death of God and the death of the subject, we seem to be faced with the death of the thing" (Verbeek 2005, 2). Such a narrative presupposes not only that the death of the subject is a *fait accompli,* but also that the thing could have survived the death of the subject. However, unless some particular distinction is established between the thing and the object, there is no way that the thing could have survived the death of the subject, for the subject and the object live or perish together. As Verbeek does not establish such a distinction, his attempt to save the thing after recognizing the death of the subject is doomed from the start.[4]

But the question remains whether the subject and the object are dead or alive. As we have pointed out, they seem to survive in today's conventional understanding and in most implicit design philosophies. But so did God survive in the praise of the old saint in the woods, whom Zarathustra met after descending from his mountain. The thoughts of Zarathustra on this occasion were: "Could it be possible! This old saint in his woods has not yet heard the news that God is dead!" (Nietzsche 2006, 5). In a superficial reading, this passage seems to indicate that the death of God is a matter of fact: the old saint has not heard the news, he is just misinformed, he does not know the truth. The very idea of God dying, however, points in a different direction: the death of God cannot be an event that happens at a specific time or place, it can only be the result of reality presenting itself in a new fashion. Such is also the case, I will argue, for the death of the subject and the object. The question about their death is not a matter of fact, something that can be observed in a once-and-for-all given reality, but a matter of *fiction*.

What exactly this entails will become clearer as we explore the concept of fiction. Let us start with the discussion at hand, the one about the death of God. To say that God is dead implies that He was alive before. As God is immortal, His death can only mean that He was real but became unreal, or that He was a fact but became a fiction. But if a fact can become a fiction, the strong separation between the two cannot hold. To use Thomas Pavel's (1986) terms, this leads us to an "integrationist" view of the relation between fact and fiction, one that sees the concepts of fact and fiction as referring to the uses that are made of certain world models or "ontological landscapes."

The status of "fiction" is usually attributed to certain world models when their uses differ from the special factual use reserved for one model. But this factual use, as Latour has been showing for decades now, is a strange one indeed. To affirm itself, the world used in such a fashion must negate all others and hide the processes through which it came into being. To do so, it uses various strategies and subterfuges that include the shaping of negative terms such as "fiction"—when used in the sense of unreal, or "just a fiction"—or the more loaded term "fetish." Related to both of these terms is the idea of something made. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019)*: "The word [fiction] is from the Latin *fictiō*, the act of making, fashioning, or molding." And the term fetish comes from the Portuguese *feitiço*, which means something made like a spell or a charm, but that itself comes from *feito*, which simply means "made."[5]

This negation of the process of making is so fundamental for the factual use of world models that this very use can be shaken to the core if we take the negative terms "fiction" and "fetish" in a positive sense. This is harder to do with the term "fetish," because not much is left if we take away its negative connotations. Due to this, and to

show that to assume a positive view of the term "fetish" does not imply to posit a negative view of the term "fact," Latour coins the neologism "factish."[6] The term "fiction," on the other hand, is imbued with rich positive connotations that can take over when the negative sense which opposes it to "fact" is abandoned. Luckily, therefore, a hideous neologism such as "faction" can be avoided. We will simply keep the term "fiction," highlighting its positive connotations of something ingeniously invented, constructed, made, planned, or designed, while ignoring its supposed unreality. This way, reality itself can be understood as fiction, as it has to be made, invented, constructed, planned, or designed. The notion of ontological design that we will explore in the next section will make this clearer. But it is worth noting that Pavel himself already pointed to the resemblance between the process of reality-making and design: "The arrangement of ontological space strikingly resembles landscape architecture and urban planning." He even called the activity of such an arrangement "ontological planning" (Pavel 1986, 141).

Before moving to the next section, we must address one final issue: when we say that reality is a fiction, or that it is invented, constructed, made, planned, or designed, the question of authorship is usually raised, unless, of course, the question is posed in ontological landscapes in which the subject is already dead and, consequently, so is the author. But, as we pointed out, this is not the case in the ontological landscapes most commonly assumed in implicit or explicit design philosophies. Thus, it is important to stress that the concept of fiction proposed above, just as Latour's "factish," "authorizes us to not take too seriously the ways in which subjects and objects are conventionally conjoined" (Latour 2010, 56). This also means that we should not take the author too seriously. We thereby stay true to the thought of Nietzsche with which we began this

section. We can follow Nietzsche when he suggests that we think of the author as no more than the manure necessary for the work to grow (Nietzsche 1996, 100). And we can look to Nietzsche to support and enrich our concept of fiction, for Nietzsche already proposed an expanded concept of fiction that assumed a radical integrationist view, putting in check the conventional opposition between fact and fiction and between true and false:

> Why do we [...] assume that "true" and "false" are intrinsically opposed? Isn't it enough to assume that there are levels of appearance and, as it were, lighter and darker shades and tones of appearance – different *valeurs* – to use the language of painters? Why shouldn't the world that is relevant to us – be a fiction? (Nietzsche 2002, 35).

When conceiving such a fictional theory of reality, Nietzsche figures, as we did, that the question of authorship could be raised in an attempt to challenge it. He formulates the following answer, that we may as well use here:

> And if someone asks: "But doesn't fiction belong with an author?" – couldn't we shoot back: "Why? Doesn't this 'belonging' belong, perhaps, to fiction as well? Aren't we allowed to be a bit ironic with the subject, as we are with the predicate and object? (Nietzsche 2002, 35).

If the subject is part of the fiction as much as the object or thing, then it is clear that the conventional notion of authorship cannot be applied to reality understood as fiction. There cannot exist an author prior to reality that would create it from the outside, be it God, the I, society, or any other candidate. Reality is gradually made by all entities that are gradually made in it, whether subjects or objects, humans or things. This is what seems to be indicated by Nietzsche's conception of a fiction that, producing itself, gives rise to the subject/author and to the object/thing/work. Martin Heidegger arrives at a similar conception when inquiring about the origin of the work of art:

> The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work are each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names—art (Heidegger 1971a, 17).

In other words, there is no author as the source of the work: there is art, in which work and artist are configured, but works and artists in turn shape art. In a similar way, there is no subject or object as the source of fiction: there is fiction in which the subject and the object are configured, but their figuration in turn gives shape to the fiction. This same circular way of thinking can be used to think about design. That is what Tony Fry proposes when quoting this same passage from Heidegger—substituting the term "designer" for "artist," and "object of design" for "work of art"—to present what he calls ontological design (Fry 2014, 12).

Ontological Design and Elephants

For Fry, design can be best understood by means of this circular creative process that fiction (as conceived by Nietzsche) and art (as conceived by Heidegger) have suggested. This is because design as an activity of prefiguration—"the idea of the 'to be done' preceding the doing to direct its form" (Fry 2014, 13)—is usually inseparable from our conception of what is "human." But the framing of such an activity in a specific professional field (what we now more commonly understand as "design") is relatively recent and depends on a certain organization of work, which in turn is linked to certain dynamics of consumption. The point here is that there is a diffuse fictional process through which design gains certain configurations, which in turn shape our understanding of design. With such a shaping of design, particular distributions of agency take root.

If, then, we take design in the broad sense of "form directing," and reflect on how different ways of understanding it are associated with distinct distributions of agency, it is possible to discern four moments in design history that we can roughly delineate as follows: (1) a diluted agency, represented by the sensibility of the craftsman (traditional mode: prefiguration is blended with manual work and tradition); (2) a concentration of agency in the form (metaphysical mode: the designer as a vehicle for an ideal form to enter the empirical world); (3) a concentration of agency in the subject (modern mode: the designer, imbued with faculties—reason, creativity etc.—, becomes the source of the form); (4) a new dilution of agency, with a focus on the design process (diluted mode: the process no longer extracts its meaning from the reference to a subject that designs or to an end-object; the prefiguration and the resulting form emerge as part of the process). This last distribution of agency is still gaining shape as the concentration of agency in the subject continues to receive multiple critiques, derived partly from the Nietzschean-based way of thinking previously described.

This fourfold division is no more than a rough scheme with the sole aim of bringing to light different distributions of agency in design and of pointing out that the modern understanding of design stems from a specific way of distributing agency—the one shown in (3). It is possible to read the scheme as a broad historical narrative, even though no single line of development from (1) to (4) can be traced. For instance, during the late Middle Ages, the craft tradition was probably closer to (1) while the scholastic understanding of design was closer to (2).

What is specific to the modern understanding rooted in (3) is its claim to absolute validity and its pervasiveness, to the point that even critiques of this model seem to take its foundations for granted, as pointed out in the Introduction. The

transition to (4) involves a rebuttal not only of the specific characteristics of (3), but also of its absolutist pretensions. This makes the account of the transition from (3) to (4) even more complex, because it involves a partial return of (1), and maybe even of (2), in a new relativism, relationism, or pluralism.[7]

Now, if the definition of design as a professional field is rooted in (3), then the dilution of agency that is at play in the transition to (4) also dismantles the borders of that field. The notion of ontological design, as proposed by Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, stresses this point clearly: to think of design in ontological terms means to think of it as a fundamental process of reality-making, a process in which professional designers will continue to play a role, but that cannot be conceived of as controlled by professional fields. As Willis (2006, 70) puts it: "design is something far more pervasive and profound than is generally recognised by designers, cultural theorists, philosophers or lay persons."

This is one of the premises of ontological design that we will now consider. Willis (2006, 70) describes ontological designing as "a hermeneutics of design concerned with the *nature* and [...] the *agency* of design, which understands design as a subject-decentred practice, acknowledging that things as well as people design". One can immediately see the confluence of such a definition with the ideas we have developed so far. Agency is a prominent theme and Willis distributes agency in such a way that protagonism is withheld from the subject. Less obvious, however, is the connection revealed by the term "hermeneutics." What does such a term imply here? At a first level of reading, hermeneutics indicates a theory of interpretation or an interpretative work. Thus, Willis' definition might be read as a way of interpreting design which is concerned with the nature and the agency of design and which

understands design as a subject-decentered practice, acknowledging that things as well as people design. While this is a reasonable reading, it overlooks the complexity and the meaningful resonances of the term "hermeneutics" in Willis' conception. An investigation of such resonances and complexities may lead us to a deeper understanding of ontological design, and ultimately, to a return to the concept of fiction with which I have been working.

Hermeneutics has a long history, which has been widely explored and which we will not be able to revisit here. It will suffice to indicate that the hermeneutics that concerns us is the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. Unlike many other authors who have tried to think of hermeneutics as a science of interpretation that could indicate a more correct or objective way of interpreting, Heidegger and Gadamer saw understanding as the very basis of the way something comes to presence. This means that it is not possible to elaborate an interpretative method that leads to the "true" meaning of anything. First, because there is no possibility of a neutral apprehension that could serve as a basis for later interpretation—every apprehension is already anchored in a previous understanding. Second, because there is no static truth that would be provided by the author or the context. Third, because when any interpretative method is elaborated, the method itself also incorporates a previous understanding that was developed in time.

If we take into account the considerations above and make a distinction between understanding and interpretation—the former being understood as the assimilation of a meaning and the latter as the effort to arrive at an assimilation—, then the following excerpt from Willis becomes clear:

> [...] Heidegger gives primacy to the significance of Dasein's pre-ontological understanding of things–the understandings that come from being-with-things and with others rather than from introspection or from conscious acts of interpretation. Yet the commonsense model, inherited from traditional philosophy, is that interpretation comes before understanding, that it is the means toward understanding. Heidegger reverses this: 'Any interpretation which is to contribute to understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted' (Willis 2006, 73).

The primacy of the pre-ontological understanding of things indicates that, in the very being of things, that is, in that which allows a thing to present itself as it is, understanding is at stake. Meaning is rooted in the very shaping of reality—a meaning that cannot be the product of a consciousness, nor considered mainly as something abstract.[8] This clearly resonates with the expanded concept of fiction I have espoused, for it points to the understanding of reality—or rather realities, since I have suggested that reality lacks cohesion—as something always already shaped by meaning. And if the question of meaning is fundamental for understanding the way in which reality presents itself, hermeneutics, as an interpretative discipline, takes on a much broader task, since it becomes key to ontology.[9]

In this way, some concepts originally crafted for reflecting on the interpretation of texts can help us think about the process by which reality shapes itself. One of these concepts is that of the "hermeneutic circle." When referring to the interpretation of texts, the hermeneutic circle indicates the circular relationship that always exists between the whole and the parts of a text—when we read a fragment of a text, we need to understand it starting from the text as a whole. But to get to the text as a whole, it is necessary to put together the various elements that we apprehended during the reading. Therefore, the meaning of the whole is constituted from the meanings of the parts, but the meanings of the parts are constituted from the meaning of the whole. When

transposed to our relationship with reality, such a concept enables us to grasp the role of pre-ontological understanding, for it is this understanding that provides a world (a "whole") within which things can present themselves to us. At the same time, however, this world cannot be considered apart from our relations with things, which include the processes of designing. As far as design is concerned, this means that designing is always guided by pre-established meanings rooted in reality, but, at the same time, the unfolding of projects gives shape and meaning to reality. As Fry summarizes: "designers design in a designed world, which arrives by design, that design their actions and objects" (Fry 2020, 5).

This understanding of reality as always already anchored in pre-established meanings should not lead to any kind of nihilistic apathy. On the contrary, once we abandon the idea that reality has a permanent or essential order, every ontological landscape presents itself as something arbitrary and open, pregnant with "other things," as we will see in the next section. Reality is a fiction in the writing, its authorship being shared by all its characters, including "us"—for let us not forget that "we" are characters in the fiction of reality, and sink or swim with it.

There is a short story of Hindu wisdom that recounts the perplexity of some disciples after hearing from their guru that everything is "Maya" (something like illusion, sham, or fiction in the negative sense). While the disciples were assimilating this teaching, an enraged elephant approaches the group and they all have to make a desperate escape to avoid being trampled. After recovering, the disciples confront the master: if everything is Maya, why did you run from the elephant?, to which the guru would have answered: Well, because I am also part of the same fiction. Or, in other versions: You saw my escape as you saw the elephant—one is as fictional as the other.[10]

It is possible to assimilate the essential point of such a story despite the differences between the Hindu (or the Buddhist, for that matter) concept of Maya and our concept of fiction.[11] The essential point is the elephant: the threat. Our reality is threatened by hypertrophied elephants, what Timothy Morton (2013) has called hyperobjects (global warming, microplastics, etc.). Understanding reality as fiction certainly does not lead to an unconcern with these elephants, much less to the hope that it would be possible to stop such elephants with thought alone. Understanding reality as fiction places us before these elephants with a renewed posture, immune to the moralism, scientism, and negationism of conventional understanding. Adopting such a renewed posture, we can inquire about the possible narrative paths to deal with these elephants. Yet we must remember that: (1) there is no author (whether divine, human, or otherwise) who can direct the fiction on its own—the fiction unfolds with all actors (subjects and objects) as authors and characters; (2) the reconfiguration of the elements of reality and the redistribution of agency are part of the unfolding of the narrative, since the narrative changes completely depending on the subjects/objects that participate in it—whether we deal, for example, with Earth, Gaia, or Nature.

Revisiting the Thing and its Agency

At the beginning of this article, we moved very quickly from the discussion about the distribution of agency between humans and things to that between subject and object, indicated by the structure of Western languages. The quick passage was necessary for the sake of the argument, but now, in order to show how the concepts of fiction and ontological design can lead to a rich understanding of the agency of things,

we must revisit our early steps and look more closely into the concepts of human, subject, object, and thing.

Our usual understanding of what we are as humans points to the notion of "subject," insofar as we imagine that humans are those who possess within themselves, in the form of a soul, an ego, a conscience, or the like, the principle of their actions. This subjective principle of action was one of the main targets of Nietzsche's hammer, its demise being necessary for the construction of a philosophy in which the subject figures as something that is added to the action, or, in terms closer to the ones we have been using, a philosophy in which the subject stems from the creative movement that constitutes the fiction of reality. The demise of the idea of a subjective principle of action is what is usually referred to as the "death of the subject." But the notion of "death" can be misleading here. Just as we observed that a superficial reading of Nietzsche's sentence "God is dead" could lead to a factual use of (atheistic) ontological landscapes rather than to the more sound dismissal of any factual use of ontological landscapes, a superficial understanding of what is at stake in the death of the subject can lead to the idolatry of the object, that is, to the transference of all agency from the subject to the object. This occurs, for instance, when the subject is taken to be a mere effect of what the brain does, or, furthermore, of what atoms do. Such an outcome is no surprise. Nietzsche already realized that the smashing of idols more often led to an alternative idolatry, and that is why he preferred instead to *sound* the idols out, even when wielding a hammer (Nietzsche 1998, 3). By following Nietzsche and sounding out the subject and the object instead of smashing them, we have shown that their roles are not defined in advance and that there is nothing essential or necessary about them. To use Nietzsche's own words, we have found them to be *hollow*.

The idea of hollowness takes us, finally, to the last of the four concepts mentioned—the thing—, for Heidegger famously indicated that a hollow, a gap, or a void is at the core of what a thing is. Such an idea emerged from Heidegger's effort to grasp the thingly character of the thing beyond that which its objectness could reveal. Such an effort culminated in his lecture "The Thing," in which the examination of a jug makes us see that neither its qualities as appearance nor its process of making and its material reveal the jug as the thing it is: a vessel (Heidegger 1971b).

It is important to keep in mind that although this could be understood in the sense of Heidegger's tool analysis in *Being and Time*, in which the holding of the jug would be the in-order-to related to *Dasein*, that is not Heidegger's point in "The Thing." He is now trying to think about the being of the thing without resorting to Dasein's way of being in the world. As Brown (2015, 30) points out, "[Heidegger] abruptly severs the world from human-being to enable the thing to dramatize both its autonomy and its potency."

So, instead of stopping at the holding as a function, Heidegger now looks for that which holds. But what can *that* be? Heidegger's answer is: it is the void in the jug that does the holding. "The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel" (Heidegger 1971b, 167). Generalizing upon this and defining the thing as a void that holds, Heidegger then stresses that this holding is also a "gathering," something the old usage of the word "thing" already indicated. More specifically, then, the thing is a void that holds *together*. But what sort of outrageous and heterogeneous collage can a void hold together?[12] Could it be the very fiction of reality?

To tackle the question, we must take a closer look at this strange concept of "thing." What is immediately striking is the thing's distance from the object. The thing

is that which the object is not, but that nonetheless lies at its very core. In Brown's words (2001, 5), "[the thing] becomes the most compelling name for that enigma that can only be encircled and which the object (by its presence) necessarily negates."

Is this enigma of the thing something to which the fiction theory of reality I have proposed can respond? The answer is certainly affirmative if, despite its name, we understand the thing not as an *ens*, but as *becoming*, thinging, "an activity, a productive function animated by no human aim" (Brown 2015, 34). In other words, if we consider it not as a thing-in-itself, the apprehensibility of which by a transcendental subject could be discussed, but this that despite being nothing in itself, is the "beyond" of objects and (as Lacan makes clearer) subjects, as they appear in their relation in an always already interpreted ontological landscape. It is not a transcendental beyond, it is important to mind, but, as difficult as it may be to imagine, an immanent beyond: the forces that, still undefined, keep turning the hollow fictions of reality in which they gain a figuration,[13] the plastic forces in relation to which subjects and objects are what they are in the fiction of reality, but that also compel them to be some*thing* else.

Thinkers as different as Nietzsche and Latour seem to point to something of this sort when resorting to terms such as drives, forces, powers, weaknesses, entelechies, quasi-objects, actants, etc. Using our own lexicon, we can say that what all these terms reveal is *the thing in fiction*: the hollow, incoherent, moving, and excessive character of these subjects and objects that only in their more or less consistent, coherent, stable, and contained figurations sustain the fictional worlds we inhabit. Nietzsche's (2002, 38) adage according to which all that is profound loves the mask may help us grasp what is at stake here if, from it, we infer that loving the mask, the fiction, is the necessary outcome of loving the real, the processes of becoming, of reality-making, of ontological

designing, in which fictions come to be what they are and other than they are. In this way, it is possible to think of the subject and the object as masks that can only have (or not have) agency in specific masquerades.

The examination of the thing has finally put us in a position to provide a rich interpretation of the sentence with which we began this article: "things have agency." Cameron Tonkinwise (2017) has devoted himself to the same hermeneutical exercise and cleared the way for us by charting three possible readings of the sentence: metaphorical, symmetrical, and anticipatory.

The first one (metaphorical) is nothing but the weak reading that is not prepared to call into question the conventional distribution of agency. It may resort to all kinds of subterfuges to go around the sentence without really facing it. For instance, it is possible to say that things (as objects) "have agency" only inasmuch as they offer the context in which the real actors, humans (as subjects), act, or only inasmuch as they influence the actions of humans. The critiques mentioned in the Introduction which present the agency of things beforehand as either an illusion or as an abomination are examples of this reading, even though, in the latter case, the agency of the thing must be taken somewhat literally to function as an effective strawman. Just outside the boundaries of such a "metaphorical" reading, but still attached to it, are those readings that take the sentence seriously, but only to turn the conventional distribution of agency upside down and fall into what we have termed the idolatry of the object.

The second reading (symmetrical) is one that, taking the sentence seriously, understands that it keeps in check the traditional asymmetry in the distribution of agency. It understands that things (as objects) have agency because humans cannot have agency or be subjects in the way that conventional understanding presupposes. We can

immediately associate this reading with the dilution of agency resulting from actor-network theory or from the fiction theory of reality defended here, for if there is a process of reality-making or ontological designing in which subjects and objects come into being, action can only be referred to them *a posteriori*. Agency is diluted in the process, the masquerade of actors concentrating agency being secondary. As Latour (2017, 66) puts it: "[Before actants] become widely recognized as actors – they must, if I can put it this way, be ground up, kneaded, and cooked in a single vessel. Even the most respectable entities [...] are all born from the same witch's kettle [...]."

The third reading (anticipatory) is defined by Tonkinwise as one that allows us to grasp something for which we do not yet have a name. This is the reading Tonkinwise announces that he will make, but it is difficult to see exactly what is it that his reflections make us grasp for which we do not yet have a name. Curiously, Tonkinwise's definition seems particularly adequate to describe the reading of the sentence that can be derived from our encounter with the enigma of the thing. Such a reading is not separated from the second one (asymmetrical), but a turn it takes when we pay closer attention to the "witch's kettle" mentioned in the previously cited passage by Latour, which is but another name for the thing. By turning our attention to the process of becoming that the objects mask, a "thingly turn" inspired by the readings of Heidegger and Brown is effected. Such a thingly turn differs *toto caelo* from the one advocated by Verbeek because the thing in question here is not the object but its "other," this for which we do not yet have a name.

Concluding Remarks: The Thing in Design

The introductory considerations on industrial design have served as a point of departure for questioning the conventional distribution of agency and its two bulwarks, the human/subject and the thing/object. Then, the discussion on the status of the subject and the object led to an expanded concept of fiction, which in turn led to an expanded concept of design related to the process of ontological designing or reality-making. We also observed that this very process of ontological designing brings forth, in time, different understandings of design based on different distributions of agency. Four understandings of design were explored further (traditional, metaphysical, modern, diluted), highlighting the absolutist pretensions of the modern one. The roots of such absolutist pretentions lie in the same negation of becoming that gave origin to the conventional (negative) notions of fiction and fetish, the critique of which had led us to the expanded concept of fiction in the first place.

It is important to note that we are dealing here with two different layers of the concept of design: one pointing to the process by which realities come into being (ontological design), the other to particular realities and particular meanings of design (the four understandings of design). But there is a catch in this neat separation of layers. On the one hand, the process of reality-making or ontological designing can only assume a figuration in meaningful realities or ontological landscapes; on the other, the different understandings of design are inevitably shaped as part of ontological designing processes. There is no way out of the hermeneutic circle. Still, some interesting things can be said from inside the circle.

Concerning the first (ontological) layer of the discussion, enough has been said in the previous section: I have shown that, despite there being no way out to a privileged

reality outside fiction, the enigma of the thing points to a fundamental void holding together that which comes to presence in the fiction of reality.

Concerning the second layer (related to particular understandings of design and their uses), I have shown that the fiction theory of reality is in tune with the (already disseminated) rejection of the modern understanding of design, thus leading to a new dilution of agency that puts emphasis on the designing process. Finally, an examination of the thing stressed the hollow, incoherent, moving, and excessive character of subjects and objects. These are results that can inform studies on design understood in a more traditional sense—that is, related to material culture.

For Brown (2015, 19), "attention to physical objects (material culture) and to thingness […] can productively converge." This is a relevant insight, highlighting that the thing (as object) is not to be disregarded because of its hollowness. On the contrary, it can be approached in a fresh manner precisely when its hollowness or thingly character is taken into account. But if attention to things as objects and attention to the enigma of the thing are to productively converge, it is important to keep in mind the many ways in which they can diverge. One way is that of the already mentioned idolatry of the object or its twin, the idolatry of matter. Some materialists forget that the thing which can reveal itself as an object cannot be in itself material, materiality being only a particular way of coming to presence. Nietzsche (1996, 30, 2002, 14, 1998, 28) frequently pointed out how concepts such as that of matter or atom may function as substitutes for God, as they hold on to the idea of a permanent substratum behind becoming. More recently, authors such as Latour (2013, 106) and Harman (2009, 110) have described materialism as a type of idealism.

One of the benefits of our expanded conception of fiction is to situate us from the start in what Harman (2018) has called a "flat ontology." In it, subjects, objects and words can only come into being together and in relation to each other, so it is superfluous to question which one should have preponderance in our assessment of reality. When considering material culture, this means that discourses, practices, materials, tools, users, functions, qualities, narratives, technologies, authors, etc. are to be seen as equally relevant, implicated in each other and open to being other than they are.

In this way, then, when the subjective activities of prefiguration (which were the heart of design in its modern conception) are taken into account, not only will it not be possible to refer them to a subject (as their supposed source) but also, and more importantly, they will not appear anymore as the privileged locus of agency that could ground and control the processes through which material culture comes into being. At the same time, the object will not incorporate the agency the subject has lost. Subject and object will be treated as masks in the masquerade of design, animated and disturbed by the thing.

Notes

1. "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them" (Ruskin 2005, 84).
2. "[The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears] is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assume here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 1990, 165).
3. "Once we understand that entities and their relations are continuous; once we understand [...] that they are heterogeneous; once we understand that the differences and distributions that are drawn between them could be otherwise; once we understand [...] that their histories and their fates vary widely; then we will come to appreciate that we are all monsters, outrageous and heterogeneous collages" (Law 1991, 18).

4. We will go back to discussing the thing-object relation in the last section of the article. Until then, we will use both terms as synonyms.
5. For a detailed discussion on the history of the term "fetish", see: (Pietz 1987).
6. A factish stands for something made as a fetish and *because of that* real as a fact. See: (Latour 2010)
7. My use of terms here is inspired by Latour's Fifth Lecture in *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Referring to Assmann, the Egyptologist, Latour tells us that in ancient times, a certain pluralism, relativism, or relationism was kept in place by the use of "translation tables:" "these translations offered a practical solution to the moderate relativism with which every adherent to a local cult recognized its relationship to the local cults of the many strangers that lived among them at that time." But this diplomatic solution became impossible with the "Mosaic division," because the one God has absolutist pretensions and negates all others. Latour argues that the same absolutist pretension is at the core of modernism. See: (Latour 2017, 154–155).
8. To quote Willis once more: "The claim here is that human access to 'what is 'can never be direct and unmediated, but is always interpretative. But interpretation is not restricted to rational, conscious, purposeful activities of naming and classifying. It also includes (and for Heidegger, prioritises) everyday interpretative dealings with the world [...]" (Willis 2006, 71).
9. "For a long time it has been agreed that the relationship between one text and another is always a matter of interpretation. Why not accept that this is also true between so-called texts and so-called objects, and even between so-called objects themselves?" (Latour 1988, 166).
10. I thank my friend and lab partner Wandyr Hagge for sharing this short story with me. The teaching is usually attributed to Shankaracharya, an Indian Vedantic philosopher and spiritual guide. Though the chronology of his life is uncertain, many place him in the eighth century of the common era.
11. Of course, there are also similarities between the two. Sometimes the notion of fiction is used, especially in Buddhism, to highlight points similar to ours. Writing about the concept of reality as fiction in Buddhism, Crittenden (1981, 323–333) claims that: "describing reality as fictional can be taken as calling attention to the arbitrariness of the rules of ordinary factual language."
12. Law's expression "outrageous and heterogeneous collage" was taken from the quotation in note 3.
13. In Latour's thought, "figuration" is a concept closely related to those of "actant" and "actor." An actant is that which acts; but in order to be "that," that is, to configure itself as an actor detached from the action, the actant needs a figuration: a name, an image, a set of qualities, a "body," or whatever defines it as a separate entity responsible for an action. See: (Latour 2005).

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