

“RAINBOW DESIGNER”: FOR GLOBAL AND MULTICULTURAL DESIGN

What do the designers tend to achieve? To relate themselves to the reality by producing visual registers of emotions and thoughts, or by projecting and producing objects that are functional, adapting technologies to daily needs. That requires that a designer be a keen observer of his physical surroundings and have a fine sensibility to cultures, enabling him to disassemble the latent forms of the reality and cultural symbolisms in order to perceive the order underlying them and the principles of their composition and unity. Only then could he reproduce the nature and respond to cultural callings. In this process of understanding the surrounding reality of nature and cultures, a designer always moves, generally without being aware of it, between two processes: identity search and self-identification.

When a designer distinguishes between graphic expression and graphic representation, he is practically referring to the aforesaid dual process. Graphic expression can be regarded as an ontological exercise of identity search, and it will never be accomplished fully. It requires the ongoing process of identification, which is an epistemological operation and corresponds to graphic representation. It takes the designer outside himself to inter-relating identities, and the more successful his identity dialogue with the reality of nature and cultures around him, the more creative designer he will become by coming ever closer to the ideal “Rainbow Designer”! He will be able to distinguish the colours that retain their identity while dovetailing into each other, in perfect harmony with each other and with nature, making the user of the object feel comfortable and at ease with the object produced.

Teotonio R. de Souza

Departamento de História, Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias

My brief reflections have been provoked by Thomas Berry's *The Great Work: Our way into the Future* (N.Y: Bell Tower, 1999), wherein he raises the problem created by the modern sciences which lead us to think of the universe as a *collection of objects* rather than as a *communion of subjects*. We frequently discuss the loss of the interior spirit world of the human mind with the rise of the modern mechanistic sciences. The more significant realization, however, is that we have lost the universe itself. We have achieved extensive control over the mechanistic and even the biological functioning of the natural world, but this control has not always had beneficial consequences.

We have not only controlled the planet in much of its basic functioning, we have, to an extensive degree, extinguished the life systems themselves. We have silenced too many of those wonderful voices of the universe that spoke to us of the grand mysteries of existence. Such a mechanistic conception of the universe can make the best designer's atelier a factory of exotic creations, but hardly attuned to the "organic" concept of the universe, wherein every component, with its *differentiation* and *identity*, is intimately *interlinked* and *identified* with every other component, missing thereby the ultimate goal of a Rainbow Designer.

The Rainbow Designer is not limited by any systems or techniques of production, because he is conscious of his identity with the universe to which he *belongs* and from which he is minimally alienated. Perhaps the oft-quoted Manfredo Massironi's dictum: "seeing through design", comes close to this. It is certainly not the "seeing to believe" of a doubting Apostle Thomas. It is rather similar to the Indian Upanishadic vision invoked in Sanskrit as "asatoma sadgamaya", which is equivalent to Psalmist's expression "In thy light we see light" (p. 36).

Among rare Portuguese talents, we could recall one young architect, Francisco Conceição Silva, who manifested in 1951 the capacity for understanding "organic" design through his *Exposição de Decoração Moderna* at Jalco House, where he combined the traditional crafts with whatever little was available in Portugal as technical progress. He later applied the same talent to architecture and equipment, designing «Rampa» shop at Chiado, and producing fine complexes in which architecture matched the natural surroundings at Sesimbra and at Troia. It was an example of how modern design could be made attractive and saleable without being tied down to historical and folk inspirations that were fiercely defended by the Estado Novo and its Politics of the Spirit.

The officially over-publicised luso-tropicalism was far from being appreciative of the multicultural wealth of the colonies. It promoted a museification of live cultures, as it was made particularly obvious at the *Exposição Colonial do Porto* in 1934.¹ Fortunately for Portugal, Conceição Silva left behind sufficient traces of his inspiration before deciding to move out of the country, just at the time when it had been freed from the trammels of pseudo-design through which the Estado Novo had succeed in convincing itself, rather than the world at large, that "Portugal não é um país pequeno".

Whatever the Portuguese literary and artistic reactions to the Estado Novo, extending from neo-realism to surrealism, abstractionism and other imported exotic imitations, one notices throughout the Portuguese artistic modernism a manifest incapacity to dialogue with itself, and consequently, to dialogue with and learn from others, including the cultures of its former colonies. What it succeeded in doing at times is introducing some elephants in the design to make it pass as Indo-Portuguese art in the catalogues of its World expositions. The many Indo-Portuguese works

1 Filipa Vicente, "The colonies on display: representations of the Portuguese Estado da India in exhibitions abroad", in *Estudos do Século XX: Colonialismo, Anticolonialismo e Identidades nacionais* Coimbra, 2003), pp.37-55.

exhibited in London in 1881 became, as a result, the element of distinction of the Portuguese contribution to the world’s art history. What was Indian turned out to be the identifying trace that Portugal needed to be distinguished from the Spanish.²

The incapacity to dialogue with itself has a much longer background. We know of the *balseiros* of the Casa Pia and the Academies of Arts “modernizing” the Portuguese art through models borrowed from Italy, France and Northern European countries. A sociology of Art in Portugal is yet to become a field of full-fledged research in its own rights. In the meantime, the efforts of Professor José-Augusto França have done much to arouse interest in this regard and in convincing us that history of art cannot be reduced to studying biographies of artists and some esthetic appreciation of the objects of art.³ Capacity and willingness to copy from others cannot be the end result of a creative cultural dialogue. For our present reflexions, it will not lead to a multicultural rainbow designing. Rainbow is not a mere juxtaposition of colours!

Design is a visual and tactile interaction with the reality and the consumer. It can be creative, rather than merely reproductive when the designer drinks from his own inner well. This is more than mysticism: it is a well of the deep collective unconscious and myths wherein lies the source of creativity of any culture. What should bother the Portuguese designers is this identity search which should lead them to discover the deep cultural roots of their creativity and inspiration. Otherwise they are condemned to imitate and reproduce. Their many efforts at exploration and discoveries have been often a way of escaping from this responsibility. In 1383-85 the Portuguese national leaders saw their desire of retaining their newly gained independence and combining it with prospects within the Iberian peninsula thwarted for good. They then sought to bypass, rather than confront and overcome the internal social contradictions by taking the long route to India and engaging the common people in a project of expansion overseas. It turned out to be truly a watery project of oceanic magnitude. As Padre Vieira once said: “We Portuguese have a small country as our cradle, but the whole world as our graveyard”.

Contrary to what commemorative propaganda made us believe, for five centuries we were not dialoguing with other people and cultures, but rather seeking ourselves. No one can dialogue without capacity to learn something from the other. We should listen to what Eduardo Lourenço has to say in his *O Labirinto da Saudade*: “Os portugueses vivem em permanente *representação*, tão obsessivo é neles o sentimento de fragilidade íntima inconsciente e a correspondente vontade de a compensar com o desejo de fazer boa figura, a título pessoal e colectivo... Os portugueses não convivem entre si, espiam-se, controlam-se uns aos outros; não dialogam, disputam-se, e a convivência é uma osmose do mesmo ao mesmo, sem enriquecimento mútuo, que nunca um português confessará que aprendeu alguma coisa de um outro, a menos que seja pai ou mãe...”⁴

As we stated at the very beginning, the identity search is an ontological and an ongoing process which is never completed. It is also never too late to begin. As Eugénio Lisboa wrote recently: “A luz que ilumina a diferença do outro, do mesmo passo nos destapa melhor a nós próprios... a epopeia pode arrastar consigo, também o sofrimento, a perplexidade e um agudo auto-conhecimento”.⁵

2 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

3 José-Augusto França, *A Arte em Portugal no século XIX*, Vol. I (Lisboa: Bertrand Editora, 1990), pp. 7-18.

4 Eduardo Lourenço, *O Labirinto da Saudade* (Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1992) p. 76.

5 Eugénio Lisboa, “Triunfo, Medo e Silêncio”, in Francis Dutra e João Camilo dos Santos (eds), *The Portuguese and the Pacific* (Califórnia: Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies, 1995), pp. 271-272.

Instead of distracting themselves with the prospects of new forms of easy gains within the European Union, the Portuguese should “stop running” and begin a serious exercise of introspection to find their own genuine cultural depth (why not in the “trovas de Bandarra” who traced the ascendance of the Portuguese kings to Tubal, a grandson of Noah, who had the first direct vision of a “rainbow”?!) after filtering the “pronto-a-vestir” mythology, designed during some centuries by the Inquisition and during the recent fifty years by the Estado Novo.⁶

As the Book of Proverbs (5:15) advises, we need to drink from our own cisterns, from the flowing water of our own well. But this “our own” need not be confined to individual national cultures and the national myths. In the globalized world of today it is all the more important that we drink from global culture, the culture of humanity. There exist common myths, like the Deluge Myth which recounts how the humanity survived through the Babylonian Gilgamesh, the Chaldean Xisuthrus, the Zoroastrian Yima, the semitic Biblical Noah,⁷ the Indian Manu, the Greco-Roman couple Deucalion and Pyrrha, the Aztec Tapi, and so on. The myth is a sedimentation of the trauma of interglacial experiences in the collective unconscious of all peoples. This myth permits us to use the inter-cultural symbol of the rainbow as a symbol of ecological design, transmitting hope to all mankind. It is a symbol which retains its universality while respecting the individual cultural identities. A “Rainbow Designer” is the one who draws his inspiration and creativity from myths that combine the appeal for individual cultures and their local markets, without losing a wider appeal to humanity and the global market.

We could conclude from the above reflections that designing is much more than the application of techniques to transform objects. The techniques are merely the means to give expression to what we define as the well-being of our subject-clients. A “Rainbow Design” is therefore our way of defining the well-being in a largest arc or in a widest spectrum possible, embracing the manifold cultural definitions of well-being. Such well-being cannot be limited to satisfying short-term consumerist needs, ignoring long-term consequences for sustainable development. A “rainbow designer” cannot assist mass-production, because it will never sustain the masses in the long run.

Mass production and global market has contributed to excess-garbage, a serious ecological threat to the developed countries and calls for recycling. The developing and poor countries need “appropriate” technology. “Rainbow design” alone can respond most effectively to these challenges by harmonizing functionality, aesthetics and ethics. Closely linked with “well-being” is the concept of “development”. When we talk of development by design, the “rainbow designer” would be the one who is keenly aware of what model of development his client-society needs. Design for a more equitable world is the crying need in order to balance the designers who serve a discriminatory globalization. The Indian case of “Jaipur foot” is a marvellous example of such a design that permits thousands of victims of landmines in India and elsewhere in Asia and Africa to recover their mobility within the limits of their economic constraints.⁸

6 Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, “O poder e a memória nacional. Heróis e vilões na mitologia Salazarista”, *Penélope*, nº 15 (Lisboa, 1995), pp. 121-139.

7 *Genesis 9:11* – “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (RSV)

8 It is an artificial leg, developed at the Mahaveer hospital in Jaipur, India. The unique component is the Jaipur foot, a clever combination of wood and various densities of rubber vulcanised into a realistic looking brown foot. The Jaipur limb is hard-wearing and will last for three or four years, longer if worn with a shoe. One of the major differences between the Jaipur technology and western technology is the cost – whereas a western limb will cost between £1,000.00 and £2,000.00, a Jaipur limb can be made and fitted for as little as £25.00 Cf. Tim McGirk, “Jaipur’s Fancy Footwork”, *TIME* – Asia December 22, 1997 vol. 150 nº. 25.

To conclude, did you know that no two people can see the same rainbow, and it needs the sun behind you to see *your* rainbow? What applies to persons applies to cultures. This realization should suffice to convince us of the simultaneous necessity and dependence of our individuality (always culturally conditioned) to produce a multicultural rainbow design. It is a revelation of every individual's capacity to produce such a marvelous phenomenon called “rainbow”, if only he or she is willing to turn its back to the sun. Just as you will not see a rainbow at noon, and you will rarely see it in winter, you will miss seeing and contributing to a cultural rainbow if you are contented in basking in the sun of your own culture and forgetting that there are summers in this world during your winter. Hence, rainbow designing has its natural (including cultural) constraints. It requires collaboration with nature and other cultures, not confrontation and domination of nature and cultures!

Alongside Greenpeace's “Rainbow Warrior”, globalization calls for a “Rainbow Designer”. But do not forget that Rainbow Warrior got itself bombed in Auckland by the French intelligence services, not by any savages! Beware my “Rainbow Designer”, beware of the consumerist and marketing designers! And of those who wish to train you for their ideal of SUCCESS!

