

*Futuristic Gizmos,  
Conservative Ideals:  
On ~~Speculative~~  
Anachronistic Design*

NOTE: This article is an expanded and revised version of “Questioning the ‘critical’ in speculative and critical design” and “Cheat-sheet for a non- (or less-) colonialist speculative design”, published online in 2014. These are available at [www.a-pare.de](http://www.a-pare.de)

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Luiza Prado de o. Martins and Pedro j. s. Vieira de Oliveira

Speculative design is going through a troubled adolescence. Roughly fifteen years after interaction design duo Dunne and Raby first started talking about “critical design,” the field seems to have grown up a bit too spoiled and self-centered. Being a fairly young approach to product and interaction design, it seems to have reached a tipping point of confusion, rebellion, contrasting opinions and confrontations. Presently, from practitioners to theorists there seems to be little consensus about what the field is able to offer—and whether it is of any use at all. In this article we hope to pinpoint some reasons why this is so, while at the same time offering not possible, plausible or probable but *preferable* developments for the field.<sup>1</sup>

Before introducing what we consider to be *truly* critical about speculative and critical design (from here on referred to as simply SCD), context is paramount. SCD made its first appearance

<sup>1</sup> We are referencing physicist Joseph Voros’ *Futures Cone* (2003), recurrently employed by speculative and critical designers to position their projects (as seen in Dunne and Raby’s *Speculative Everything* (2013, p. 5), for example).

as “critical design” in the late 1990s in the corridors and studios of the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. It envisioned design as a tool for critique, and aimed to explore the metaphysical possibilities of the designed object in order to “provide new experiences of everyday life, new poetic dimensions” (Dunne 2005, p. 20). Even though the idea in itself was not new—with other practitioners already

undertaking similar endeavours without necessarily defining them as “critical design”—this was perhaps the first time that criticality was proposed as a deliberate attitude to product and interaction design, “a position more than a method” (Dunne and Raby 2008, p. 265; 2013, p. 34). In the following years speculative proposals became a strong driving force and a trademark of the Design Interactions programme at the RCA—under the direction of Dunne—and a few other schools in northern Europe. Across

the Atlantic, practitioners and authors such as Julian Bleecker and Bruce Sterling, as well as curators such as MOMA’s Paola Antonelli, began taking interest in these new perspectives on design; in the us the discipline was rebranded as “design fiction”—though it maintained most of critical design’s core goals.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growing number of practitioners and the interest that this approach has garnered in the design community since its inception, the discourse in the field has remained suspiciously static. In *Hertzian Tales* (2005), Dunne passionately argued for an exploration of the metaphysical possibilities of the designed object, focusing on its potential as embodied critique, political statement or activist provocation. His proposal rejected design as a discipline exclusively focused on servicing the industry, though it was equally careful not to align itself with Marxist ideals (ibid., p. 83). Distancing its speculative proposals from “market-led agendas” (Auger 2013, p. 32) emerged as the motto of Design Interactions’ output, with a good number of the programme’s alumni becoming mainstream references for what speculative design is able to achieve. Their projects follow a clear path of dreaming about the uncanny implications of tricky subjects such as birth,<sup>3</sup> death and social anxieties,<sup>4</sup> only to name a few. Yet, they are predominantly expressed through aesthetics of consumerism, still contained within a clear neoliberal framework. Fifteen years on, the field seems to have taken this fear of left-wing ideals at heart.

<sup>2</sup> It is unclear who coined “design fiction”—although science fiction author Bruce Sterling is commonly credited. Dunne and Raby (2013, p. 100) remark that even though similar in nature, design fictions are “rarely critical of technological progress and border on celebration rather than questioning.” For a comprehensive account of design fiction, refer to Bleecker (2009) and Sterling (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ai Hasegawa’s project *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* explores the possibility of humans birthing other animals: <http://aihasegawa.info/?works=i-wanna-deliver-a-dolphin> (Accessed October 14, 2014)

4 Auger Loizeau explore “the harnessing of our chemical potential after biological death through the application of a microbial fuel cell, harvesting its electrical potential in a dry cell battery.” in their “Afterlife” project: <http://www.auger-loizeau.com/index.php?id=9> (Accessed October 14, 2014) Sputniko’s project *Crowbot Jenny* dreams of trans-species communication as a solitary girl’s way of connecting with other living things: <http://sputniko.com/2011/08/crowbot-jenny-2011/> (Accessed October 14, 2014) Auger Loizeau also explore social anxieties in their project *Social Telepresence*: <http://www.auger-loizeau.com/index.php?id=11> (Accessed October 14, 2014)

This reluctance in cutting its ties with the industry might be the effect of a narrow view of design’s agency in everyday life. Whereas Dunne and Raby’s famous *A/B Manifesto* (2013, p. vii) makes sure to differentiate their approach as directed towards “citizens” rather than “consumers”, the authors reinforce in their most recent publication (*Speculative Everything*, 2013) that it is basically through *what people buy* that futures are brought into existence. In other words, a shopping window packed with near-futures, ready to be chosen and consumed (Dunne and Raby 2013, p. 37, 49, 161; Tonkinwise 2014; Kiem 2014). Furthermore, for Dunne and Raby, the political sphere of critical design ends where the design profession ceases its responsibility, that is, at the moment a consumer

product (or a prototype thereof as “critical design”) comes into being (2013, p. 161). Yet contrary to what they affirm, we argue that designers are as politically responsible and accountable for their practice as for their actions as citizens; there is no separation between one role and the other. When this simple assumption is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the art gallery is not the most appropriate space for these “provocations” and discussions to take place — it needs to penetrate public discourse beyond the “art and design exhibition” setting in order to become an instrument of the political (Fry 2011; DiSalvo 2012; Keshavarz and Mazé 2013).

It is precisely because sCD’s productions — and the debates they aim to incite — rarely leave these specific environments that they stall. The field’s preoccupations are directed towards little more than an alleged “lack of poetic dimensions” in our

relationship with designed objects (Dunne 2005, p.20). sCD is made *by, for* and *through* the eyes of the Western — and typically northern-European and/or us-American —, intellectual middle classes; the vast majority of work currently available in the field has concentrated its efforts on envisioning near futures that deal with issues that seem much more tangible to their own privileged audience. Projects that clearly reflect the fear of losing first-world privileges in a bleak dystopian future abound, while practitioners seem to be blissfully unaware (or perhaps unwilling to acknowledge) the existence of different realities.<sup>5</sup> This myopic vision of the world has led the field to limit itself to superficial concerns, and stunted the development of its once-ambitious political aspirations.

Clear examples of these problems can be found in the visual discourse of sCD: the near-futures envisioned by the great majority of projects seem devoid of people of colour, who rarely (if ever) make an appearance in clean, perfectly squared, aseptic worlds. Couples depicted in these scenarios seem to be consistently heterosexual and bound by traditional notions of marriage and monogamy. There are no power structures made visible that divide the wealthy and the poor, or the colonialist and the colonised. Poverty still happens *somewhere else*, while the bourgeois sCD subject copes with catastrophe through consuming sleek, elegant, futuristic, white-cubed and white-boxed gizmos.<sup>6</sup> Gender seems to be an immutable, black-and-white truth, clearly defined between men and women, with virtually no space for trans\* and queer

5 Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta’s *Republic of Salvation* suggests a dystopian future in which citizens are fed rationed meals by the government. The designers seem to be unaware that this is already a reality for many countries in the developing world. Its inclusion in MOMA’s *Design and Violence* online curating platform ignited a long debate on the validity of sCD and served as the starting point for this and other essays. The thread is available at <http://designandviolence.moma.org/republic-of-salvation-michael-burton-and-michiko-nitta/> (accessed October 10, 2014).

6 As Tony Fry remarks, “[f]or the privileged, defuturing often happens under an aura of elegance.” (2011, p. 27)

<sup>7</sup> Whereas Sputniko's *Menstruation Machine* attempts to tackle the subject of transsexuality and queerness, it still employs questionable terminology and representation of queer identities (cf. Prado de o. Martins 2014).

identities (let alone queer and trans\* voices speaking for themselves).<sup>7</sup> Between these narrow depictions of reality and whitewashed formulations of near-future scenarios, sCD seems to be curiously apathetic and apolitical for a field that strives to be a critical response to mainstream perceptions of what design is, and what it should and could do. In truth, the only message that this apathy can convey is that society is fine as it is.

The question is then whether it is possible to expand from these superficial concerns and provide more thoughtful perceptions and analyses of the world. While the majority of criticism towards the field remains highly sceptical (and perhaps rightfully so), we still believe sCD can be transformed into a strong political agent. For this to happen, however, it needs to be tested, spread out, modified, re-appropriated, bastardized. sCD's hesitation in acknowledging its problematic stances on issues such as sexism, classism or colonialism, to name a few, need to be called out. Projects promoting and perpetuating oppression should not be tolerated, and those not willing to second-guess their own decisions need to be held accountable for their political decisions. Assuming that the (white, cisgendered, male, European, etc.) gaze is 'neutral' or 'universal' is not only narrow-minded, but also profoundly reactionary.

Many of the problems we have highlighted within sCD stem from the tenuous grasp that the field seems to have of the humanities and social sciences. In its ambition for envisioning how technology reflects social change, it assumes a very shallow perspective towards what these social shifts mean; it avoids going deeper into how even our core moral, cultural, even religious values might—or should—change. While sCD seems to spare no effort to investigate and fathom scientific research and

futuristic technologies, only a small fraction of that effort seems to be directed towards questioning culture and society beyond well-established power structures and normativities. This is, perhaps, the most defining trait of a teenaged field: the ironically anachronistic nature of a practice that creates futuristic gizmos for profoundly conservative moral values. In order to overcome this, we believe designers have to look beyond given socio-economical and political structures and inquire *how* and *why* our societies got there in the first place. One way to do so is to get closer to research in the critique of science, feminist and queer theories, sound studies and other scholarship that dare to question the hierarchies of privilege that constitute the world as we know it today. More than that, sCD should offer a helping hand towards making these tricky questions visible and tangible to public discourse, well beyond exclusionary spaces such as academia, museums and art galleries. This needs to be done without fearing a dialogue with the so-called "mass culture" or "mainstream" so often neglected and avoided through the use of purposefully cryptic language.

While the issues highlighted in this article are not the only ones worthy of the field's attention, demanding meaningful engagement and thorough research from a community largely stemming from—or with connections to—academia is hardly asking too much. Such an attitude will not only prevent projects from incurring in the same basic mistakes pinpointed here and henceforth failing to address their aspirations, but will also offer some diversity beyond self-indulgent, narrow-minded perspectives. From the moment sCD researchers and practitioners start keeping these issues in mind and holding themselves accountable for their political decisions, the field might finally start fulfilling its promises of critique. Until then, it will remain confined to a vicious circle of navel-gazing and self-appraisal.

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