

# RESPONSIBILITY OF THE IMAGINATION

**Fabrizio Gay**  
University of Venice  
Department of Architecture and Arts  
[fabrizio@iuav.it](mailto:fabrizio@iuav.it)

## ESSAY 10/01

IMAGE THEORY  
IDEATION TECHNIQUES  
MORPHOLOGY OF THE ARTIFACTS  
ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT

From a “manifesto” –textual genre of the “activist” or “revolutionary document”– we expect a declaration (often without any justifications) of aims and procedures to implement a “different” vision compared to a given situation, and we expect above all the indication of the actual stakes.

Here the “given situation” is that of the studies on representation cultivated in design schools, studies that are documented by a vast scientific literature with its unstable boundaries between “design studies” and “visual (cultural) studies”, between “techniques of the (graphic and eidomatic) representation” and “sciences of perception and cognition”. But what is at stake in this dispute among knowledge boundaries on

the practical ground of the technical and artistic project? I believe that these “stakes” consist, first of all, in knowing why our artefacts for aesthetic use have the shape they have, but I do not believe that a satisfactory answer may come separately from history or from the natural sciences.

Anyway, we must give an answer here because the question has its own essential necessity: we cannot avoid it because it guides (in an ethical way) our design activity by modelling our ideation techniques.

The answer that I present here is biographical and assertive: it proposes a “Simondonian” manifesto, that is, a horizon of the task that must be a matter, in our opinion, of the discipline of “Disegno”.

## MORPHOLOGY OF ARTIFACTS AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT

In the mid-nineties I left my professional career as an architect almost at its beginning to focus on “*Disegno*” [drawing for design] intended as a technique for the conception of artefacts, and as part of that long tradition of studies that the naturalist D’Arcy Thompson summarised with the Goethian term “Morphology”, intended as the «Science of Form which deals with the forms assumed by matter under all aspects and conditions, and, in a still wider sense, with forms which are theoretically imaginable» (Thompson, 1942, p. 1026).

This idea of a “morphology” as “science of the possible shapes” can be suspected of total naivety: it includes everything by explaining nothing. However, it should be noted that, according to D’Arcy Thompson, morphology is an absolutely “materialistic” discipline; it concerns only the matter in itself, since he rejects the dualism of form and matter or any distinction between soul and body.

As Gilbert Simondon will better explain at the beginning of the main of his two doctoral theses, the notions of “form” and “matter” indicate nothing but two opposite orders of magnitude –the inter-elemental and the infra-elemental ones– with which we get to know the same physical individual. Therefore, the “morphology” as “science of the only possible shapes” is not a psychedelic delirium of hallucinatory images. On the contrary, it is a careful critique of the feasibility of the possible implemented through a particular exercise of the imagination. It is a “science of the necessary and the potential” that presupposes a full “realism of the imagination”, namely the ability and the adequacy of imagination to grasp the limits that the incorrigible reality tightens around the facts and the feasible.

Trained as an architect, I was particularly interested in the limits that physical and historical reality imposed on the meaning of buildings and urban artefacts. I was not so interested in the history of architecture and the city, rather I was

interested in their underlying morphologies, or, better said, in their “archaeologies”.

Let me explain. My interest in architectural and urban morphologies was essentially practical and political.

By dealing on the morphology of objects I thought I had only postponed the appointment with the construction sites in order to study aspects of a much wider site. Cultivating a little more my passions as a student trained in the previous decade through Gramscian readings, I believed that, even in the concrete (artistic and technical) design practices, the real issue was ideological and political criticism. My (perhaps unrealistic) ambition was to work as a designer in a different way compared to the professional one: by making the archaeology of the current design knowledge that operates in the various forms of design and in the production of aesthetic artefacts.

By “archaeology of knowledge” I literally meant the one outlined by Michel Foucault in the homonymous 1969 text –*Archéologie du savoir*– that, since my passionate reading during the first year of university, has offered me the point of view through which I approached the courses at IUAV that really trained me –those of history and aesthetics held by Giorgio Ciucci, Manfredo Tafuri, Franco Rella, Paolo Fossati and Massimo Cacciari– and that asked me (karst) questions to which, in the following decades, I sought answers, especially in the “semiotics of discourse and practices” formulated by Jacques Fontanille (2003, 2008) and in the theory of iconicity by Jean-François Bordron (2011).

In short, in more than a quarter of a century, my research has been carried out as if had to meet two appointments: i) as if Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge (1969) had given an appointment –forty years later– to Fontanille’s semiotics of practices (2003, 2008), that is the generative model of the expression plane; ii) as if the Morphology of D’Arcy Thompson (1942) had given an appointment –eighty years later– to René Thom’s Semiophysics (1988), that is, to a “Morphology of the artificial”.

These two “appointments” between discourses very far apart may seem delirious, but I will –in paragraph 2– explain

how they are possible thanks to the mediation of Simondon's thought. Meantime, it is not easy to briefly explain why I believe that the concrete discipline of "Disegno" is based on a semiotics of the visible, somehow already implicit in Foucault's text. First of all, it must be remembered that Foucault's "archaeology" was proposed as an essentially political and Enlightenment-based point of view –although it is inscribed among the fury of a post-modern Nietzscheanism– focused on the "ideological" theme of the relations between "knowledge and power", trusting (from an "enlightened" point of view) in the critical (deconstructive) and emancipatory (constructive) power of rational and positive (documental) knowledge.

That particular type of "knowledge" was called "archaeology" precisely because it dealt with the theme of the relationships between "knowledge and powers" not as much in the dimension of the "history" (of the epos, of the story) as in that of the "genealogy", that is, of the archaeological reconstruction of the networks of concrete technical lineages between discourses, practices, conceptual devices, procedures, institutions. In other words, making the "archaeology of the present" meant to suspend the authority of the great historical and aesthetical tales, forcing oneself to the naked positivity of the document, to its "traceability", thus safeguarding –as "images" and not "words"– the network of possible relationships between the bare finds of history.

Since the finds on which this "archaeology of the present" works are relationships between physical objects and social objects –between performances and competences, between bodies and documented knowledge– it was completely logical for me to use an "archaeological" point of view in order to analyse the (more or less historical) objects of our present –the city, clothing, home, tools, parks, cockpits, works of art, museums, hospitals, ...– and the "skills", the practices, scenes, of their use in the social domains of arts, architecture, design, religion, everyday life, etc. Therefore, dealing with "Disegno" I have done nothing but alternate and correlate historical

and empirical research on real aesthetic artefacts – especially by drawing and studying the genesis and reception of architectural artefacts – to theoretical investigations into the categories and models that try to explain why those artefacts “have the shape they have”, identifying the aspects of those shapes that allow the functioning of the valences on which the current valorisations of those objects are played.

These studies led to concrete and specific results, plausible in each case and, in their episodic and chaotic tangle, highlighted the need for a unitary theoretical background.

#### A REALLY GENERAL THEORY OF IMAGES

The text that –considering it fundamental– I would place at the top of the short bibliography of my presentation is “*Imagination et invention*”, the concise summary of the psychology course that Gilbert Simondon held at the Sorbonne in 1965-66 and which can now be read in a new 2008 edition. It is a surprising text because it treats the image as an intermediate reality between a being and the world and it deals with that in all its phases and modes of existence, both in individual organisms and in social communities. It begins by defining the embryonic mode in which the image consists of a “scheme of action”, which is self-generated in the pre-conscious psychic life of a living being (or a machine), before perception and environmental adaptation.

This is an “*a priori*” image that only then, during the environmental adaptation of the organism, can become a real “infra-perceptive” image, that is, “*a presenti*”. In this infra-perceptive stage “image” is a form of reception of environmental stimuli in the perceiving subject while he interactively learns his internal and external environments. Here the image becomes a plurality of images –in the different sensory formats– integrated in order to form, for the organism, an *analogon* of its environment. In this phase of its being, the image is a sort of “model” in continuous stabilization. For the

subject, during the reticular stabilization of models and categories of the world, the images are memorized as facts that are valid “*a posteriori*”, they properly become emotional-affective “symbols” of the experiences that generated them; they constitute the materials on which the imagination works, producing, in its inventive activity, “anticipatory” images, that is, still valid “*a priori*” to guide the action.

Simondon thus describes the complete cycle of the phases of existence of the image, from its neurophysiological origin to its individual and collective memorization, up to its physical and documental concretization in (physical or ideal) artefacts, in objects and world events. Each “conceived” object derives from technical genealogies of ideas (images) and makes itself their bearer—for better or worse and because of images—participating in the phylogeny of the artificial.

On the phylogeny and ontology of technical objects, Simondon had published, eight years earlier, his most famous pages: the dazzling thesis *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. But with the course on *Imagintion et invention* he marks a further step: he includes in a single vision the ontogeny of the image and the phylogeny of the imagination, clarifying how images become “social objects”—as they are intended by Maurizio Ferraris (2009)—or—according to Eco (1997)—“cognitive types”. In other words, Simondon clarifies how “ideas” exist and evolve regardless of us—not (platonically) *a-priori*, but *a-posteriori*—just like natural species. As a consequence, “ideation” is not infinite and unconditional fantasy, but it is the—responsible or irresponsible—exercise of the design imagination that is measured according to the incorrigible and unique reality of ideas.

#### THE HORIZON OF A PRACTICAL (ETHICAL) TASK

As Belting’s anthropology of images (2004) and Simondon’s techno-aesthetics (1992), above all, made it clear to me, many aesthetic artefacts function as “image-objects”, that is,

as bodies conceived or used as a support for images intended as “social objects”, not only and always as representations.

Thus, understanding the meaning of these “image-objects” is something that, in my opinion, concerns the informative specificity of *Disegno* – an activity that in turn produces other image-objects – and forces the research on *Disegno* to oscillate between bodies and theories, between “physical objects” and “ideal objects”, because this is the only way to grasp them together in their unique and incorrigible reality of “social objects”. The Morphology of the artificial is “Really” an archeology of knowledge. This is, therefore, the reason why I deal with *Disegno*, intended as the study of the responsibility of imagination, based on an adequate theory of “images” as “social objects”.



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