

Book Review

Speculative Everything – Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming

Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby (The MIT Press, 2013)

Book review by Tau U. Lenskjold,
University of Southern Denmark, Kolding, Denmark.

DESIGN AS A CATALYST FOR CRITICALLY REDEFINING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH TECHNOLOGY

According to the book's preface, *Speculative Everything – Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* began as a manifesto of sorts where designers, design researchers, and educators Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby took it upon themselves to differentiate between an A-list of design, as it is usually understood, and a B-list of their particular perception of design, as it has developed and blossomed over the past 15 years since their first collaborative publication, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* in 2001. There are striking similarities between the two books; both contain a manifesto, and both are fundamentally concerned with framing and forming a counter-narrative of that which lurks "beneath the glossy surface of official design" (2001, p. 2), and providing the proverbial B-list to the A-list of contemporary design tropes. The first, and most important corrective on the A/B-list is a move from "affirmative" to "critical." Important because it encapsulates the notion of Critical Design, which more than anything else has become synonymous with Dunne and Raby's *oeuvre*, despite their concerted efforts to attribute the notion to a much wider range of practitioners. By their own definition, critical design denotes a position in conceptual design "that uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and gives about the role products play in everyday life" (2013, p. 34).

From the mid-nineties, when Dunne and Raby began working as researchers at the Royal College of Art's newly established Computer Related Design Studio and onwards, their experiments have mainly been directed towards what they perceive as design's often uncritical – or affirmative – application of new technologies to our everyday lives. Their work includes, among many other things, publications

and projects about alternative ways of living with electronic objects (*Hertzian Tales*, 1999 [2009]), the cultural impact of electronic objects (*Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects*, 2001), robots (*Technological Dreams Series: No. 1, Robots*, 2007), and biotech (*Evidence Dolls*, 2005). These are but a few of the technologies that have been put under scrutiny by Dunne and Raby through the means of speculative products and scenarios, devised to evoke "complicated pleasures" (2013, p. 44) and provoke debates about our relationship with emergent technologies.

POSSIBLE FUTURES, PHYSICAL FICTIONS, AND COMPASSES – NOT MAPS

Speculative Everything – Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming can be read as a comprehensive compendium of Dunne and Raby's impressive contributions



Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades, Hugable Atomic Mushrooms: Priscilla (37 Kilotons, Nevada 1957), 2007- 2008.

Photograph by Francis Ware

and their place within the historical and cultural landscape of radical design. Newcomers to their work in particular, and more broadly to design as a conceptual medium for exploring ideas in general, are well advised to start here. But for readers who are already familiar with this niche in design and design research, the book also has plenty to offer. For some, critical design may seem to be conspicuously absent from the title where it has been replaced by the somewhat oblique catch-all phrases, speculation, fiction, and social dreaming—though, in all fairness, critical design is given its dues as chapter three is devoted to a detailed discussion of design as a particular form of critique. This shift may be indicative of a concern voiced throughout the book to stay open, and embrace plurality and participation rather than to be viewed as a proprietary style or label within design.

Speculating through design is key to this attitude as it opens up a dynamic space between possible futures and preferable futures—or between reality and the impossible—where fictional scenarios and social dreams, grounded in everyday situations, can become catalysts for public debate. This is the ambitious program Dunne and Raby lay out in their book.

To find inspiration and explanatory prowess, they look beyond design and tap into other cultural and artistic arenas, such as cinema, fine arts, and sci-fi literature, as well as an eclectic collection of design work that reflects or explores related practices of speculation. This lineup includes Dunne and Raby's own projects and those of former students and colleagues, but they also enlist a dizzying array of interesting object and exotic projects from the crossroads of science and technology or SciArt, to extend the range of speculation. From a gargantuan flying ship envisioning real utopias, the Lun-class Ekranoplan (2013, p. 167)—exemplifying the ingenuity of bygone Soviet military technology in harnessing the “ground effect,” to a stitch-less leather jacket grown from living cellular culture (p. 55), technology and science in various fields and modes of application are summoned to map out the impact of speculation. Their own projects are often framed as museum exhibitions aimed at “sparking discussions and debate about possible technological futures” (p. 153).

In an exhibition project, *Designs for an Overpopulated Planet: No. 1, Foragers* (2009), for example, a group of marginalized future foragers utilize a series of speculative prosthetic devices to extract nutrition from otherwise non-digestible



Dunne & Raby, from *Designs for an Overpopulated Planet*, No. 1: Foragers, 2010.

Photograph by Jason Evans

food sources. Dunne and Raby explain that the aim was to explore the idea of a future when rampant overpopulation has encouraged people to seek control of their own evolution and make up for the scarcity of commercially available food with artificial digestive devices (2013, p. 151). Through the use of props, photos, and text, the oblique view into a fictional world prompts the audience to contribute themselves by piecing together their own ideas to complete the scenario.

It is characteristic for Dunne and Raby's distinct style of writing that it effortlessly draws together various kinds of knowledge and experiences. Accounts of their own projects and research are mixed organically with examples and theoretical references from a vast array of disciplines. It is a style that almost holographically reflects its subject matter and insists on a thoroughly “designerly” way of putting different knowledge regimes on equal footing in the extrapolation of design speculation. It can be read equally as a portfolio of Dunne and Raby's merits, a piece of cultural scholarship on the ideas and approaches of speculation in design, or

as an ideological call to arms against the “hyper-consumerist” stasis of contemporary design and in favor of social dreaming.

Incidentally, the seeming lack of coherence and identifiable genre markers fit perfectly with the interlaced and multifaceted set of concerns and considerations that *is* design. In this respect, the book should be celebrated as an attempt to dissolve distinctions between writing *into* design and writing *through* design – to paraphrase Christopher John Frayling.

From this also follows, somewhat unsurprisingly, that the book, like a cephalopod, stretches its tentacles in many directions and thus should appeal to a wide readership in academia, among design practitioners, educators, and not least design students. With Dunne and Raby’s insistence on drawing a sharp distinction between their approach conceived as design rather than art, it is more uncertain whether the book is destined to attract a following outside of design altogether. But then again, that never seemed to be the intention.

SPECULATIVE EVERYTHING: AN OVERVIEW

The book has nine chapters. In the first chapter, Dunne and Raby outline the historical precursors in Radical Design and conditions of late modernity that require a rearticulating of the capacity to dream rather than just hope for a better future. They further demonstrate their interest in exploring possible futures amidst different approaches to the future, ranging from the probable to the possible.

Chapter two charts the wider spectrum of conceptual design with respect to its history and impact on design and technology. Chapter three recounts the critical implications of design speculation and updates critical design to the intended purpose of this book. The central point made in this chapter is that design as critique is a positive endeavor hinged upon the production of alternative visions of the future, designed to unsettle prevailing preconceptions and ultimately help people “navigate new sets of values” accompanying technological change. The following chapters, four and five, detail, respectively, the application of *design as critique* to break through fields of science such as biotechnology, and provide a review of different methodological strategies employed in speculative cultures—from Lubomír Doležel’s theory of “fictional worlds” to the use of “What-if” scenarios and counterfactual stories.

The next two chapters look at the physical materializations of fiction as design objects, or props, in order to attain a voluntary suspension of disbelief in the audience, and continue on to examine what aesthetical tools designers have at their disposal when making representations of *unreality*. In chapter eight, Dunne and Raby discuss exhibitions—in particular museum exhibitions—as the preferred setting for disseminating their work. And finally in chapter nine, eponymously entitled *Speculative Everything*, they endeavor to extend imaginative thinking to “seriously large scale issues” (p. 159). This bold proposition entails a “move beyond speculative design to speculative everything-generating” (p. 161).

But thinking big is not without its precedents in the history of design, or in the history of the last century, for that matter. Only today, Dunne and Raby argue, has the social dimension of radical changes been “replaced by science, technology, and logic.” In a recent project—*United Micro Kingdoms: A design Fiction* (2013)—described as a thought experiment, they set out to explore the prospect of re-imagining England devolved into a fragmented nation of divergent groups with competing social and political models. The fictional reality developed from this scenario exemplifies social dreaming



Dunne & Raby, Train, from *United Micro Kingdoms*, 2013.

Photograph by Jason Evans

extended to the scale of nation building and thus ends the book not with a conclusion but rather a departure in a new direction.

DESIGN SPECULATIONS IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIAL DREAMING

For designers—or “fictioneers in denial” (p. 88), as Dunne and Raby tauntingly put it—the book is a refreshing provocation, launched with an unapologetic insistence on the powers of the imaginary and the reinstitution of utopia to contemporary design practice. The idea that utopia and social dreaming should be taken seriously once again as a way to evoke possibilities beyond capitalism echoes a wider refutation of the post-political or “the end of history,” as declared by Francis Fukuyama. A recurring reference in the book is to Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), a book that, in a similar fashion, argues for a re-articulation of socialist utopias in the social sciences.

The book’s main contribution is the translation of this line of arguments to the domain of design. And the main obstacle in changing the outlook of designers accordingly, Dunne and Raby tell us, is that designers are prone to favor the real over the unreal, despite their aptitude to engage with the latter. It speaks volumes to the qualities of the book that it not only serves convincing arguments for the relevance of speculation in design to unsettle the discipline, gridlocked as a handmaiden of capitalism, but also sheds light on the fact that the unreal, the impossible, and the unbelievable are resources that designers already are fully equipped to channel into their transformation of reality one micro-utopia at the time.

There are limits to the praise, of course. Dunne and Raby have, from time to time, received flak for being overly elitist in their approach and propagating an unquestioned “first world” perspective on design. There is nothing in the book in the way of a consideration or rebuttal of these concerns. This need not be a problem in itself, but I share the concern insofar as it risks impoverishing the “real” they seek to explore and unsettle, if it only ever exists in the closed circuits of museum galleries, design schools, and in a first world perspective. Or, to put it in terms of a what-if prompt, what-if a design speculation were to begin from life as it is lived in the streets of Calcutta, Nuuk, or Nairobi?

However, the overall impression is that *Speculative Everything – Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* is a book that deserves to be widely read, discussed,

and appropriated, but also debated and subjected to critique in the spirit of critique as a constructive endeavor that the book so convincingly argues for.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Tau Ulv Lenskjold, University of Southern Denmark, Department of Design og Kommunikation, Universitetsparken 1, 6000 Kolding, Denmark
E-mail: tau@sdu.dk

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