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Recycled food for thought: 'Designing for sustainability' as an ideological category

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In his address to the Era '05 World Design Congress in Copenhagen, Slavoj Žižek (2005: unpaginated) argues that “in today’s epoch which presents itself as ‘post-ideological,’ the disavowed ideological dimension is inscribed precisely in what may appear as a ‘mere design’”. This is to claim that design is that which “directly materializes ideology” even when it is misperceived as being simply utilitarian (Žižek 2005: unpaginated). This echoes Tony Fry’s (1999: 5) observation that “[d]esign is everywhere as the normality of the made world that is rendered background”. The very ubiquity of design implies the unfamiliarity of the familiar. Arguably, one of the most prominent materialisations of ideology today is found the form of discourse, for indeed theory is one dimension of this materialisation, and praxis around ‘designing for sustainability’. This materialisation, however, does not mean that the ideological dimension is more apparent, but rather that it is even more obscure and therefore more difficult to disentangle. The more prominent it becomes, the more it recedes into mere scenography.

Today, sustainability is treated as a fact or necessity rather than as construct or contingency. The issue of sustainability has become so obvious and so self-evident that, to borrow a metaphor from Žižek’s favourite theologian GK Chesterton (2003: 159), it is fast becoming like a “dead body [hidden] in a field of dead bodies;” its very grotesqueness is concealed in plain sight by an already-grotesque world. It is therefore

not its presence that makes it invisible, but one's own hermeneutic biases. Bearing this in mind, the following essay explores design for sustainability in terms of two aspects of Žižek's thinking that are intricately interwoven, namely ideology and ecology. In so doing, I begin to set out a three key ideological co-ordinates within which designing for sustainability — or what Nathan Stegall (2006: 56) calls “ecologically intentional design” — functions. The first two of these co-ordinates, I argue below, are untenable. The third, however, offers a way to rethink the place of design within the debate. Since my focus is on the ecological aspects of sustainability, socio-economic considerations must be set aside for discussion elsewhere.

To begin with, it may be helpful to briefly outline what is meant by *ideology* in this paper. Ideology exists as a “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable, as well as changes in this relationship” (Žižek 1994: 1). In Žižek's view, it is too simplistic to suggest that ideology merely resides in the realm of consciousness or ideas, since our actions often operate as contradictions of what we are conscious of. Hypocrisy, one could say, is our pathology. Žižek (1994: 4) argues instead that “ideology is the exact opposite of [the] internalization of the external contingency: it resides in the externalization of the result of an inner necessity, and the task of the critique of ideology here is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency”.

In what follows, therefore, I assume that ideology may be considered in terms of two complementary components: belief (the invisible dimension of ideology) and its obverse, action (the visible dimension). Furthermore, ideology may be understood in terms of two statements: (1) *They don't know it, but they are doing it*, and (2) *They know full well, and yet they are doing it*. Together, these statements indicate that ideology at its purest is that which proclaims its own neutrality. The first statement, which is close to the Marxian notion of *false consciousness*, relates to ignorance in that we tend to be blind to some of the norms according to which we act; ideology, after all, is that which normalizes or naturalizes things that are not necessarily normal or natural (Eagleton 1991: 45) — i.e. it turns connotation into denotation, and denotation into myth. Then, the second statement relates to what may be called *disavowal* in that sometimes we act in ways that are contrary to what we already know; it follows the formula “*I know, but ..*” as, for example, in the statement, *I know that smoking is bad for me, but I choose to smoke anyway*. Of course, this disavowal is clearly the structure according to which our relationship with the environment and therefore to the ideology of sustainability is aligned: “I know that it is better for the environment if I walk more

than drive, but I choose to drive anyway”. This posits ideology as the consciously ironic gesture in that my actions become the means by which my beliefs are parodied.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that writers on design for sustainability always begin with a very particular ideological conception of the world. Whether any actions necessarily follow from this conception is a matter for another debate. In key texts like Victor Papanek’s *Design for the real world* (1971, 1984) and *The green imperative* (1995), William McDonough and Michael Braungart’s *Cradle to cradle* (2002), and David Orr’s *Ecological literacy* (1992) and *The nature of design* (2002), the world is always framed as something alien to and alienated from humankind, something we intrude into and disturb. It is, in Lacanian terms, the big Other. Since this is the dominant view, it therefore becomes reasonable enough to see “being human [as] a design against nature” (Flusser 1995: 52).

The common view, which carries echoes of Cartesian perspectivalism, is that human beings are somehow utterly separate from the world and are therefore entirely guilty of affecting the world negatively. This view does not take into account the possibility that human and environmental ecologies have become so intertwined in the natural that removing the human presence could cause an even more “catastrophic imbalance” (Žižek 2008: 442). This brings to mind Eugene Thacker’s discussion on three possible ways in which we may try to conceive of the world. In the first place, there is the “world-in-itself”: the world before human intrusions and interpretations (Thacker 2010: 4). It is, as John Cavelli (2007: 17) would put it, a world “before ... stuff”. However, Thacker (2010: 4) notices that this idea is paradoxical, since “the moment we think of it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself” and becomes the second way in which we may conceive of the world, namely “the world-for-us”. This is to offer that the world-in-itself, as a supposedly neutral form, does not exist, but is always only something found alongside the intervening human presence.

The third way in which one may conceive of the world is as a “world-without-us” (Thacker 2010: 5). This is the world, as imagined for instance by Alan Weisman (2007), minus the human presence. As in the case of the notion of a “world-in-itself,” this world dwells only in the realm of an imagined possibility. In the end, we “cannot help but to think of the world except as a human world, by virtue of the fact that it is we human beings that think it” (Thacker 2010: 2). It is for this reason that ecology becomes such a central concern: because it challenges the way in which we understand the world especially when it manifests itself in terms of some kind of impending catastrophe. Nevertheless, contemporary debates on ecology tend to oscillate between the fantasies of the world-in-itself and the world-without-us, rather than acknowledging that these are really just manifestations of the only way in which we are able to perceive the

world; they are still expressions, one more optimistic and one more pessimistic, of the world-for-us. The notions of the world-in-itself and the world-without-us implicitly suggest that we really are able to think of sustainability in merely factual terms, distanced from our fallible subjectivities. They allow for us to get to a “simple truth” like the one offered by Anita Gordon and David Suzuki (1990: 3) who claim that “we are the last generation on Earth that can save the planet”. But, as Stuart Walker (2011: 2) points out, “[t]his statement is an assumption and a warning, but it is not a proven fact — and it is anything but a ‘simple truth’”.

Indeed, Walker (2011: 8) offers that sustainability is a myth that we have “created ... for our own time and in language that we can accept”. He argues that it is widely assumed as a secular re-articulation of older religious concerns and ideals, albeit in slightly less nuanced, more actively utilitarian language (Walker 2011: 2). Sustainability seems to have undergone a process of sacralisation in that it has achieved the apparently unchallengeable status of a transcendent entity. John Meyer (2001: 22) argues that environmentalism seems to have been constructed to be a new “dominant, encompassing worldview” proposed as an alternative to existing worldviews, and therein begins the problem. Surely ecocentrism does not necessarily have to be proposed as an alternative to other worldviews? Why is it not offered as an extension or supplement to, or even as a natural outworking of existing ways of seeing? Nevertheless, if it is the case that ecocentrism has come to replace other societal myths, then there seems to be an implicit call to not just simply ask whether this myth is true or not in some scientific-empirical sense, but instead to ask what it might mean (Walker 2011: 8). I would say, to begin with, that it presents a prime example of what Žižek (2004) calls “decaffeinated belief” — it is “belief without belief” or belief without God. He writes in *God in pain* that a danger arises when

in the absence of any divine limit, [one imposes] a *new* pseudo-limit, a fake transcendence on behalf of which I act ... Even ecology constantly functions as ideology the moment it is evoked as the new Limit: it has every chance of developing into the predominant form of ideology for global capitalism, a new opium for the masses, replacing the old religion by taking over the latter’s fundamental function, that of assuming unquestionable authority which can impose limits” (Žižek & Gunjevič 2012: unpaginated).

This may seem to state the case too strongly, but one soon finds that religious rhetoric is firmly embedded in discussions on designing for sustainability. Take, as one instance, Stegall’s (2006: 63) statement that “[o]ur goal as designers *must be* ... a sense of kinship and *spiritual connection* with all life around us, and the practical

competence to create sustainable solutions” (emphasis added). Often, the very urgency with which the issue of sustainability is addressed, as in the case of Gordon and Suzuki above, closely resembles the cry of the nineteenth century evangelical preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon: “Turn or burn!” If we do not do something now, there will be a literal hell to pay: the human race will no longer be able to thrive. Another example of this is found in Orr’s (2002: 50) assertion that “[t]he very idea that we need to build a sustainable civilization *needs* to be invented or rediscovered, then widely disseminated, and put into practice *quickly*” (emphasis added). The fact that this rhetoric is presented in terms of hasty *musts* and *needs* inherently clouds the issue: the injunction is not to think, but to simply act. (I would argue that in the face of the apparent doom that we have brought upon ourselves by merely acting without thinking, perhaps it would be better to prioritize thinking before acting.)

The above brand of religious fervor is perhaps nowhere more forcefully articulated than in Roland Emmerich’s film *The day after tomorrow* (2004), which dramatizes the way that global warming could result in utterly calamitous effects in the form of a new ice-age. The premise of the film is that this could take place not in some remote future, but in the very near future. The message of the film is clear: nature will fight back against human plundering, punishing humankind for their misdemeanors against her. This hypothetical fact is made even more transparent by the way that the global cooling in the story only seems to drastically affect the Northern Hemisphere; poorer, less industrialized countries in the Southern Hemisphere are let off the hook. Nature, in this film, as in a great deal of discourse on sustainability, is almost personified as a deity. The “ecological catastrophe is seen as the revenge of the Mother Earth or Gaia for the wounds afflicted on her by humanity” (Žižek 2012: 373). Another example of this personification is found in M Night Shyamalan’s *The happening* (2008), which personifies nature to such a degree that the human presence is rendered completely impersonal by nature. In Shyamalan’s B-movie, nature releases a neurotoxin into the air that causes those exposed to turn momentarily into emotionless zombies who then actively seek to kill themselves. Of course, this suicidal action symbolizes what we are allegedly already doing to ourselves by maltreating Mother Nature, and the fact that people are numbed in the process seems to suggest that this Mother Nature is capable of being ‘humane’ by providing an anesthetic for her victims.

Emmerich’s more recent film *2012* (2009) offers a slightly more terrifying contention than in his earlier films: if the end of the world were to happen, it is very likely that it would have absolutely nothing to do with our human interventions. Unlike *The day after tomorrow*, where nature ‘naturally’ seeks harmony and equilibrium, *2012*

presents a natural world that is brimming with latent violence — a natural realm that is impersonal and uncaring. But, as in *The day after tomorrow*, there is an escape plan for a few of the human subjects. A number of arks — a reference to various flood legends, from Atrahasis to Noah — have been built to rescue a select few. These arks are a means by which the human race can continue its self-propagation. In those ancient flood legends, the ark is a symbol of divine providence to a select few, but in Emmerich's film, the ark is a symbol of human ingenuity and autonomy. While on the surface we find that *The day after tomorrow* and *2012* present contradictory representations of nature — nature in the one is intelligent, personified and ordered, and in the other is reckless, mindless and apathetic — Emmerich's faith in the Enlightenment is loudly proclaimed: if we are to be saved, it is by our faith in science. The scientists in his stories still seem to have the upper hand. This brings to mind John Gray's (2003: 19) observation that "science is a refuge from uncertainties, promising — and in some measure delivering — the miracle of freedom from thought, while churches have become sanctuaries of doubt". Surely it is worth reminding the one with unshakable faith in science of Thomas Kuhn's (1996: 146, 200) contention that the sciences are emphatically not theory neutral, no matter how forcefully, compellingly or empirically they seem to be presented?

These films, which I use to mirror some of the more academic arguments of scholars, reflect what Žižek (2009: 153) refers to as the "temptation of meaning," which is the temptation to "disguise the impact of the trauma with a symbolic significance". By embedding the catastrophe in deeper meaning, the "brutal reality" of ecological crisis is covered up, or, to use religious language, atoned for (Žižek 2009: 153). What makes design for sustainability ideological is its tendency to mystify the nature of ecology, as well as the nature of nature itself. Žižek (2008: 442) contends that

the first lesson to be drawn is the one repeatedly made by Stephen Jay Gould: the utter contingency of our existence. There is no Evolution: catastrophes, broken equilibria, are part of natural history; at numerous points in the past, life could have taken a turn in an entirely different direction. The main source of energy (oil) is the result of a past cataclysm of unimaginable dimensions.

This reference to fossil fuel seems to put forward the idea that catastrophe, perhaps even death, is somehow intrinsic to the production of energy. Žižek (2008: 442) continues by writing that what needs to be accepted is the very "groundlessness of our existence: there is no firm foundation" and there certainly is no "place of retreat, on which one can safely count". This statement, which also carries a very potent ideological charge, is what Emmerich will not or perhaps cannot accept. In his view,

there is always a plan for escape, no matter how implausible it may seem even within the state of suspended disbelief required of his audience.

This same belief in escape is articulated, albeit slightly differently, in the true stories of Timothy Treadwell, as told in Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly man* (2005), and Christopher McCandless, as told in Jon Krakauer's book *Into the wild* (1996). Both Treadwell and McCandless, blinded by their own complex, reckless idealism, look for an escape in nature. To them, man, not nature, is the antagonist. Indeed, nature is perceived as a complete, harmonious whole according to the patterns of which man needs to act. Its darker forces — volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods and the like — are forgotten. One example of this idealisation of nature is found in a passage in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the woods*, highlighted by McCandless:

All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality ... The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning and evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of rainbow which I have clutched (quoted in Krakauer 1996: 48).

Nature in this passage is highly spiritualized, similar to the way it is spiritualized in James Cameron's almost hallucinatory *Avatar* (2009). However, as we know, both Treadwell and McCandless come to terrible ends. Treadwell ends up being mauled to death and eaten by a bear and McCandless ends up starving to death after having been poisoned by the seeds of the wild potato called *Hedysarum alpinum* (Krakauer 1996: 192). No matter how much these two men attempt to reconcile themselves to the supposedly harmonious whole of nature, inevitably they are overcome. Unlike the scenarios sketched in Emmerich's films, there is no escape plan. While it still remains that these men could have survived, the point is that they did not.

Almost as if to counter the escape-plan worldview of Emmerich and other disaster movie writers, Lorene Scafaria constructs her film *Seeking a friend for the end of the world* (2012) with a stubbornly nihilistic edge. While still imbued with other ideological, Hollywood tropes, the doom of the world is rendered utterly secure in Scafaria's vision; absolutely no one gets out of life alive. The film opens with a radio announcement that an *Armageddon*-style attempt to destroy the meteor that is hurtling towards earth has failed, meaning that the very last hope has gone, and when the movie ends, we know that it ends because the world itself has ended. Scafaria's narrative clearly stresses that there is no world-without-us; if we go, the world goes too. This accent on groundlessness, which has somewhat Heideggerian overtones, is

preempted by an anecdote about Scafaria's interest in writing, which was born when as a high school student she would write up a monthly report on books that did not exist (Plyler 2005: unpaginated). This absence of a ground for writing continues in Scafaria's film, which is reflective of Žižek's (2008: 442) contention that "nature does not exist," which is to say that "'nature' *qua* the domain of balanced reproduction, organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally throwing its circular motion off the rails, is man's fantasy ...". Nature, as reified "authority, harmony, purity, neutrality and mystery" is a fiction of our own creation (Morton 2010: 3). One reason for proposing an 'ecology without nature' (decaffeinated ecology, perhaps) is to point out that notions of nature may bewilder more than explain the character of the impending catastrophe that is nipping at our heels:

Our attitude here is that of the fetishistic split: 'I know very well (that global warming is a threat to the entire humanity), but nonetheless ... (I cannot really believe it). It is enough to see the natural world to which my mind is connected: green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun ... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed? You talk about the ozone hole — but no matter how much I look into the sky, I don't see it — all I see is the sky, blue or grey!' (Žižek 2008: 445).

In fact, not only is catastrophe inevitable, but it is already here. The situation is already dire. Again, there is, counter to ecological discourse, no longer any division between man and nature (Žižek 2008: 445). There is no nature-in-itself, nor is there any nature-without-us; there is only nature-for-us, which may be as doomed as we are. Any reliance upon science or common sense seems only to fail to notice what is actually going on: "The scientific mind advocates a cold objective appraisal of dangers and risks involved where no such appraisal is really possible, while common sense finds it hard to accept that a catastrophe can really occur" (Žižek 2008: 445). Two ideological needs traditionally offered by religion, censorship and hope, are now fully endorsed by the ideology of sustainability.

Returning to the story of Treadwell, Brad Bolman (2011: 13) writes that Treadwell's death exposes the failure of "language to stop the bear [that killed him] is also a failure to adequately understand the natural world through language — to understand the aspects of it that exceed that linguistic capacity. This very same point is made by McCandless's death. McCandless dies because he trusts in the mediating power of language too much; in a state of desperate hunger, he takes absolutely seriously the scientific text, Priscilla Russell Kari's *Tanaina plantlore*, that tells him that *H. alpinum* seeds are non-toxic, and thus unwittingly ingests what is later to be

discovered by other scientists to be toxic. The irony is horrific: it is the very thing designed to promote life that ultimately takes it. The very *pharmakon* ingested as 'medicine' (a temporary cure for hunger) turns out to be poison. In Treadwell's case, the horror is found in the fact that nature is openly antagonistic, whereas in McCandless's case, the horror of nature is found something seemingly innocuous.

I recognize, of course, that the above examples are not the most obvious examples of design, but they do represent something of the mediating function of design with regard to sustainability. Design, as the willful manipulation of visual and material language, is well suited to uphold this kind of ideological scaffolding: "This is what design is truly about: designers articulate the meaning above and beyond the mere functionality of a product. And even when they try to design a purely functional product, there is already a reflexivity of meaning at work" (Žižek 2005: unpaginated). Design, as that which mediates between the sciences and common sense, as well as between the world of culture and the consumer, seems primed to fall into the temptation of meaning. The global development and implementation of national design policies acts as one case in point. These design policies, which are intended to "[promote] technology and design as a means of gaining economic advantage by enhancing national competitiveness" (Heskett 1999: 108), are purportedly rooted in the assumed triple-bottom line of social, economic and environmental sustainability (Amir 2004). But there is an irony in this connection of design and technology to ecological intentionality. Timothy Morton (2009: 26) notices that there is a strange link between "imminent ecological catastrophe and the emergence of virtual reality, since both ... are about immersive experiences in which our usual reference point, or illusion of one, has been lost". This, in my view, is to point to the possibility that it is exactly the embeddedness of design within this ideological landscape that prevents it from coming up with suitable solutions to the ecological crisis. Its rootedness in the ideological edifice, in other words, is the primary reason for its disconnection from the ecological. Since this triple bottom line is taken as a given, it becomes difficult for design to do anything except conform to the *status quo*.

And the *status quo* — the primary co-ordinate according to which design functions is this: design is that which actively participates in removing the trauma of the Real. Design is the addition that subtracts. It is, to borrow Morton's (2009: 10) assertion, "to use the aesthetic as anesthetic". It is what is added in order to take away, as in Žižek's famous example of the design of toilets. The design here functions to remove excrement. Rationally, we realize that waste must go somewhere, but the plumbing system has been designed in such a way that what is 'out of sight' soon becomes 'out of mind' as well. It is difficult although not impossible to imagine that cars

pollute the air, because carbon emissions are invisible even though the exhaust pipe of a car is not. But it is even more difficult to imagine that airplanes cause any damage to the environment, because there is no obvious exhaust pipe. It is difficult to thinking of what is going on behind the scenes — animal's slaughtered for our nourishment, child-labourers used to produce our clothing, minimum wage workers farming food for us, and so on — because of design's subtractive nature.

From the design of toilets to garbage removal systems, design has a lot to do with presenting the world-for-us as sanitized and refined. It actively argues that there is a problem without ever letting the problem come to light, like the boy who cries wolf without letting anyone see the animal to which he is referring. Design therefore operates like the bathing suit that covers up those areas of the body used for excretion and procreation: it acts as a distraction even as it draws attention. The design process is one example of the hidden socio-economic dimension of excretion and (pro)creation. Even the entire painful, harrowing process involved in getting the designed object out into public view is invisible. The designer may have suffered for her art, but what everyone sees is the so-called work of art, not the working that made the work. It is no wonder that it becomes easy to believe that designers could have the cure for the various problems of sustainability. Even if, as Walker (2011: 7) points out, “[t]he vision of a sustainable society ... seems ... much more of an ideal than a feasible possibility,” design functions to promote its feasibility by means of its very ontology. By its very nature, design proclaims that the problem has somehow, mysteriously already been taken care of. The ideological disjunction between belief and action becomes highly apparent here: *We believe* that there is a crisis, and we may even *design/act* as if there is a crisis — by introducing systems and life-cycle thinking, for example — but somehow our very design objects portray the message that everything is under control. This adds a third dimension to Žižek's notion of disavowal: (1) I know full well what is going on, (2) therefore I act accordingly, (3) but the results of my actions negate both my actions and my beliefs.

This problematic may be understood through Morton's (2009: 30) observation that the more “I” try to describe with any accuracy what kind of environment “I” am in, “the more phrases and figures of speech I must employ. The more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end up with”. The more I try to point away from the page, to draw your attention to what may be found beyond the page, the more I end up with stuff on a page. The more one attempts to “break the spell of language,” the more involved one becomes in constructing that very same spell (Morton 2009: 30). This is the very same paradox that design discourse needs to confront. The more design attempts to speak of the impeding world-without-us as if it

were speaking of objective truths of environmental crisis, the more it becomes the construct that is the world-for-us. The more design discourse presents itself as seeking solutions to ecological problems, the more immersed it becomes in the ideological system that will cause further crisis. The surprise here is that design, by adopting the role of the savior, positions itself with nature against humanity, and in so doing ironically only affirms its own complicity in the human system.

The first co-ordinate according to which ecologically intentional design functions, namely what I have suggested is the refusal to acknowledge that design as an ideological apparatus itself is the problem, works hand-in-hand with a second co-ordinate, namely the assumption that all the complexities of a sustainable system can be understood, mediated, and facilitated by design. This can be seen in Daniel Wahl and Seaton Baxter's (2008: 72) assertion that "[d]esign is fundamental to all human activity. At the nexus of values, attitudes, needs, and actions, designers have the potential to act as transdisciplinary integrators and facilitators". Somehow, "global visions of sustainability" are deemed possible even in the light of a "complex dynamic system in which we all participate, co-create, and adapt to interdependent biophysical and psycho-social processes" (Baxter and Wahl 2008: 72-73). Whereas the first co-ordinate of designing for sustainability places nature as the sovereign, disturbed Other that needs to be mediated, this co-ordinate positions design as the sovereign mediator that will, somehow, manage to control this unsettled Other. In this vision, designers are those who are able to construct possible worlds through "meta-design" (Baxter and Wahl 2008: 73), especially with regard to how "the whole of the human environment should be" (Buchanan 1995: 25). Is it not this same kind of hubris, this over-optimistic elevation of the nature of design that acts as a catalyst for further ecological catastrophe? Should the emphasis not rather be on true complexity of the dynamic socio-economic system within which design for sustainability operates?

One response to this over-inflation of the power of design (as linguistic mediation) comes in the form of Žižek's interpretation of the biblical story of Job. The story goes that a successful man named Job loses everything — his wealth, his servants, his family and his health — in a series of tragic circumstances. Three of his friends soon show up to offer their own hasty explanations of his fate, but their arguments are little more than common "ideological sophistry (if you are suffering, you *must* by definition have done something wrong, since God is just)" (Žižek 2003: 125). The flaw in their argumentation is found in that they assume that there must be an explanation, for, surely, everything happens for a reason? Job, however, stands defiant against the rationallyisations of his friends: "Job insists on the utter meaninglessness of his suffering ... In this way, the Book of Job provides what is perhaps the first

exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history, laying bare the basic discursive strategies of legitimizing suffering” (Žižek 2003: 125). But what I want to focus on here is not, as Žižek does, the fact that God takes Job’s side in the end, “claiming that every word Job spoke [about the meaninglessness of his suffering] was true, while every word the three theologians spoke was false” (Žižek 2003: 125), but rather the way that God shows up to address Job by drawing attention to the natural.

In chapters 38 to 41 of the Book of Job, God speaks primarily, not with answers to any of Job’s questions, nor with a formal rebuke of the shoddy reasoning of his friends, but with a series of impenetrable questions. The questions, however, come in the form of God’s musings on the world that he has made: “He unrolls before Job a long panorama of created things, the horse, the eagle, the raven, the wild ass, the peacock, the ostrich, the crocodile. He so describes each of them that it sounds like a monster walking in the sun” (Chesterton 2011: 100). And as Chesterton (2011: 100), to whose interpretation of the Book of Job Žižek refers, points out, in God’s reply it becomes evident that “[t]he maker of all things is astonished at the things He has Himself made”. This is to say that if the natural, as the way things actually are, is astounding to God, astounding enough to render God “an instant blasphemer” and a seeming “atheist,” then it should be even more astonishing and perplexing to the finite intellect of the human subject (Chesterton 2011: 100). God does not offer an “explicable world” but insists that the world is “much stranger ... than Job ever thought it was” (Chesterton 2011: 100). With relation to ecologically intentional design, the issue is that every single one of our attempts to understand the mind-blowing complexities of the system are inherently expressions of our failure to understand it. The big Other does not exist, as Lacan would say; there is neither a deified nature, nor a deified design: the first two co-ordinates of discourse around designing for sustainability are illusions drawn up to avoid what is really going on.

Žižek (2008: 454) points out that the “problem today ... is that, although our (sometimes even individual) acts can have catastrophic (ecological and so forth) consequences, we continue to perceive such consequences as anonymous/systemic, as something for which we are not responsible, for which there is no clear agent”. This is exactly what discourse around ecologically intentional design does: it constantly positions the problem at this systemic level by insisting that what needs to change is the entire worldview according to which the larger culture operates. The proposal is that this change of the system will filter down until minds and then actions change as well. But the fundamental mistake here is the assumption that ideology functions only at the level of ideas, whereas in design it functions, firstly, at the level of the designer, secondly, at the level of the object, and thirdly, at the level of the audience’s

participation with that object. Only then can some cultural, economic or social systemic vision be considered. Put differently, the issue is not primarily systemic, but personal. Ecology is not found in nature or in design, but in the third and most important coordinate according to which ecologically intentional design functions, namely the individual.

Of course, I recognize that this can seem a bit like a cop-out, especially if taken as the contention of a tree-hugging hippy, but, to be clear, I do not mean this with even a hint of optimism. To explain, I turn to one often-overlooked aspect of disaster movies. When the disaster arrives, when the catastrophe is accepted as absolutely unavoidable, what is exposed in sharp relief is what the individuals in those narratives actually value; and what is valued is seldom if ever what is strictly useful or even timeless. In other words, value is discovered as something intrinsic; something that persists even if its end is declared certain. While these value-imperatives are only narrative constructions and thus fictions stemming from the worldviews of their authors, the truth is nonetheless unmistakable: crisis brings about a question of what truly matters. This, I believe, is the lesson of Jean-Pierre Dupuy's formula, to which Žižek (2008: 459) refers: "We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny — and, then, against the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past". Surprisingly, what Žižek seems to do here is argue in favour of the old aphorism that if you want to change the world, you should start with yourself. This is to say that destiny is not something out there; rather, we are destiny. What makes this position truly traumatic is that it places the onus squarely on the individual. Only our acknowledgement of personal responsibility stands a chance of fighting against the tide of doomsday determinism. In the end, ecology is less about "global warming, recycling and solar power" and the "everyday relationships between humans and non-humans" than it is about "love, loss and despair" (Morton 2010: 2). Ecology has less to do with macro-level considerations of a world-in-itself or a world-without-us than it has to do with the very personal experiences that we have and the decisions that we make in the world-for-us. This is to say, ecology should be understood as an essentially human need, rather than as a worldview that renders humanity merely as an annoying cog in a machine desperately in need of repair.

Richard Buchanan (1998: 3) argues that when "central values are *essentially contested* ... the fate of design does not lie within the framework of design culture or within the hands of a few gifted individuals. It lies within the framework of culture as a whole". In this essay, I have argued, with reference to Žižek's work, that the problem is

not that central values are essentially contested, but that they are not contested enough, especially in the case of myths around sustainability. Moreover, the mere invocation of yet another big Other — whether nature, design or, in Buchanan’s case, culture — is not sufficient or radical enough as a response to the problematic of environmental sustainability. The above Žižekian reading of the issue of designing for sustainability offers that while Buchanan would be right to suggest that the fate of design is certainly affected by larger systemic concerns, he is wrong to suggest that culture acts fatalistically as an impersonal and therefore decipherable web of interrelated concerns. The reality is that design, like ecology and humanity, has no absolutely predetermined fate; it is as impenetrably complex as a life. Even if we pretend, as Dupuy suggests we should, that our demise is certain, our current position is more akin to that of Job; we are simply individuals faced with a barrage of questions that do not have any absolutely certain answers.

Žižek warns against the temptation of meaning, but, to conclude, I want to suggest that there are two additional temptations that one needs to be aware of when addressing the issue of ecologically intentional design. The first is the temptation of meaninglessness, which is the temptation to think that all values attached to our ecological concerns are entirely fictitious. Indeed, as can be seen above, I would argue the opposite: it is our confrontation with crisis that makes the search for value and our desire for the recovery of values more apparent and perhaps even more urgent. This urgency, however, should not mean quickly slipping back into ideological stupefaction, but should demand deeper thought and reflection, especially on the ways that design materializes ideology at the most basic level, rather than at some macro-level. The second temptation in the face of design’s finitude is the temptation of powerlessness, which is the temptation to think that all attempts to intervene into ecology are misguided or wrongheaded. In fact, this kind of thinking is what Žižek suggests is a new secular version of the religious doctrine of the fall. In the end, my aim in this essay has not been to argue that designers cannot do anything about the ecological crisis, but rather simply that designers cannot do everything.

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