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I "CLASSICI" DELLA STORIA DEL DESIGN. RILETTURE FRA PROGETTO DELLA STORIA E STORIA DEL PROGETTO.

Ais/Design Journal

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WE HAVE NEVER BEEN HUMAN.
DESIGN HISTORY AND QUESTIONS OF HUMANITY

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In this essay, I challenge the concept of *humanity* and the false universalisms proposed in relation to design that are key to *Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design* (2016). Once the critiques of humanism laid out by Sylvia Wynter, Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova and others are taken into account, it is clear that design writing of the sort exemplified by *Are we human?* reproduces claims that are grounded in coloniality. I argue that in spite of the recent date of its publication the book reproduces the tropes of the well-established Western design history canon and therefore can be considered a *classic* – in spirit if not yet by renown. With this essay I want to argue that we need to continuously re-examine and challenge *the canon* and the classics in order to dismantle the normative gaze that reproduces Eurocentric and colonial interpretations of *the human*.

> *Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe.*
> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963

1. A tiny yellow book with a huge question

Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design was published in 2016. It is a compact, pocket-sized book, and despite its bright yellow colour, which begs for attention, it would appear modest, given its size and the simple typography of its cover, were its simplicity not juxtaposed with the grand question: *Are we human?*. In the introduction, the authors explain, "The notes *just* try to consider the role of design in defining the human animal. If the human is a question mark, design is the way that question is engaged" (p. 5).[1] Not only do these lines firmly position the book within a post-humanist discourse, they also present the different texts as *notes*, implying that they are tentative in nature and indicating that theirs is only a limited attempt at addressing the issue at hand. Yet the aim of *Are we Human?* is nothing less than the reconstruction of an *archaeology* of design in relation to the discursive formation of *being human*, which involves applying the Foucauldian archaeological method to a series of historical discourses on and of humanity in order to trace the role of design in their construction and vice versa. This takes place across sixteen field notes, starting with the origins of *the human* and concluding with a chapter on social media as architecture.

The construction of such a vast chronological scale seems to function to position the phenomenon of design as central to humanity. Constructing an archaeology of design is a grand ambition for such a thin book, and yet the tone of voice throughout is at once effortless, compelling, and provocative.

The sixteen different chapters are organised semi-chronologically. The claim on the book's back cover, that "the question *are we human?* is both urgent and ancient", is substantiated by an attempt at a quick survey of human history from the origin of the species to our contemporary culture and the role of design. In the first five chapters the origin of the human species is explored through archaeological findings, and this is followed by an exposition of Darwinian evolutionary theory. The subsequent chapters are organised thematically, each revolving around a specific question that has occupied modern designers at one time or another, such as the fear of technology, which is relevant to the entire discourse of *design*. According to the authors, "The word *design* was called on in the 1830s to explicitly negotiate between human and machine in a discourse that again started in England [...]. The concept of design [...] remains a nineteenth-century product" (p. 77). Chapters six to sixteen consist of loose elaborations that focus on connecting different iconic designers within modernist design discourse with some lesser known references, entertaining examples and amusing details. These chapters move back and forth between different time periods, but nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernist design discourse is dominant. The excerpts in between the chapters hold a middle ground between stream-of-consciousness writing and prosaic ranting on design and humanity. The writings are accompanied by luscious imagery: colourful photos and scientific illustrations of renowned icons from the histories of design and architecture. The citations that are inserted between the chapters are drawn from an eclectic set of authors and theorists ranging from Honoré de Balzac, Sigfried Giedion, Marshall McLuhan, Henry van de Velde and Victor Papanek to Judith Butler and Donna Haraway. The overall design of the book merges glossiness and seriousness and is a visually pleasant composition – a delicious piece of eye candy.[2]

Upon first glance, the book does not reveal that it was published on the occasion of the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, curated by the design and architectural historians (and wife and husband) Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley. This fact is mentioned only in the introduction and on the last page of the book, where Colomina and Wigley explain that the book "gathers our thoughts when preparing the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, ideas that guided the project, grew during it, and go beyond it" (2016, p. 287). Yet, it seems as if it was a strategic decision to leave the book ostensibly free of any markers of the biennial, as if it was meant to live a life of its own well beyond the scope of any time-bounded event. This in itself perhaps aptly signifies the decontextualization and universalism that are symptomatic of and central to this book.

This essay is not necessarily a review of *Are we Human*?; rather, I am interested in seeing the book as a case study through which to explore the extent that Eurocentrism has been and is still central to design discourses, particularly when it comes to discussions of *the human* and *humanity*. Departing from an understanding of how *the classic* relates to canonisation, I argue that the book reproduces the dominant, normative design historical canon. Through a critical discourse analysis, I will attempt to analyse the book by rereading it alongside the work of Sylvia Wynter, Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano and Tony Fry, and asking: what are the paradoxes and problems of a humanist discourse – of *talking of Man*, as Fanon writes – in relation to design history?

Fig. 1 – First copy of Are we human? next to cast of Neolithic footprints being produced at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums for the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, 2016 (© Poyraz Tütüncü; courtesy of IKSV).

2. A classic?

At first, the publication *Are we human?* is not an obvious example of a design history *classic*. It is too recent to be considered a classic, as it was only published in 2016. It may become very influential among particular circles of readers, perhaps mostly among design practitioners, because, first of all, it *looks good*; secondly, it is easy to read; and thirdly, its scope is seemingly comprehensive, covering both *design* and *humanity*. In fact, on a content level, the scope of this book is so broad that some readers may argue that it "comes to represent the whole universe, a book on a par with ancient talismans" (Calvino 1999, p. 18).

But if this book could be considered a design history classic, it would be because of the way that a sense of *the classic* is attached to certain canonised texts on design history. The book aspires to the definition of a *classic* in the sense that "even when we read it for the first time [it] gives the sense of rereading something we have read before" (Calvino, ibid.). The book is a compilation of well-known references within design history, only regrouped and retold in a new configuration, and as such will be incredibly familiar to a specific group people who are already well informed on its subject.

Among the lessons of the postcolonial critique produced in the field of literary studies is that notions of *the classic* cannot be considered in isolation from the power dynamics and

cultural dominance at play in the processes of canonisation. The literary scholar Ankhi Mukherjee, for example, has explored the canonisation of what are considered to be *core texts* and, with reference to Gayatri Spivak, raises the question of epistemic violence, or how the "colonial canonical norm" has determined what counts as valuable knowledge and thus what can be considered a classic (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 45). In other words, canons are always produced in accordance with a dominant vision that attributes authority in the process of knowledge production.

3. The horizons of design history

Design history and design studies in themselves are fields established and mostly dominated by white Western scholars, and thus the knowledge production of these fields should be critically examined to understand the way it serves to reproduce a biased episteme through the recycling of specific iconic references and conceptualisations while refuting other examples, conceptualisations, voices, authors, and practices. In 2016, the *Decolonising Design* platform was founded by a group of design researchers, academics and practitioners.[3] It was "born out from a general frustration with how design ontologies and epistemologies are constituted and validated within and outside academia" (Disclaimer, 2016). This platform aims to counter dominant narratives and perspectives on design. In their editorial statement they write, "to date, mainstream design discourse has been dominated by a focus on Anglocentric/Eurocentric ways of seeing, knowing, and acting in the world, with little attention being paid to alternative and marginalized discourses from the non Anglo-European sphere, or the nature and consequences of design-as-politics today. This narrowness of horizons and deficiency in criticality is a reflection of the limitations of the institutions within which design is studied and practiced, as well as of the larger socio-political systems that design is institutionally integrated into." (Editorial, 2016).

Although some scholars may claim that *Are we human?,* because of its popular tone and unscientific format, cannot be considered as *design history proper*, it does in fact reproduce a set of references that are unquestionably familiar to the horizons of canonised design history. In what remains, I will explore how the question of humanity is positioned in the discourse of design history.

4. The *we* in the *know* and the powers that be

According to Colomina and Wigley, the relationship between humanity and design is simple: "Design always presents itself as serving the human but its real ambition is to redesign the human. The history of design is therefore a history of evolving conceptions of the human. To talk about design is to talk about the state of our species" (p. 9). The book is full of such sweeping, provocative statements. The question *Are we human?* prompts two counter-questions in return: *Who is we?* and *What is human*?

The *we* in the book remains undefined. But clearly, the *we* is not just any *we*. While it arguably functions here as a rhetorical device – as a way to create intimacy between the authors and the reader – the *we* seems also to target an audience of people that are already *in the know* about design and its specific canon. The examples given in the book are by well-known designers, but some of these examples are not necessarily their best-known works. It seems as if Colomina and Wigley want to rewrite the established canon in such a way that it is interesting to those who already are *design literates*.

The examples given are almost exclusively European and American. There are a few exceptions. For example, in the chapter on the human species, the authors argue that the origins of homo sapiens and its predecessors are located in Africa, which is accompanied by the somewhat ironic observation that, "The human is not a European invention after all" (p. 68). Or, when discussing measuring systems, the Indian *Vastu Shastra* is mentioned as an ideal system for proportions (p. 149). Another example is an image of the Algerian nudes that Le Corbusier allegedly was obsessed with (p. 190). The rest of the book, however, is dedicated to Western design, Western thought, of which the majority is produced by men. Many of the photographs of individuals depict white men and the objects presented are mostly by white male designers or architects. All citations included in the book are by white, Western men and women. This retelling of the history of humanity and design is interwoven with examples from the *usual suspects*, such as William Morris, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Eileen Gray, Duchamp, Walter Gropius, Charles and Ray Eames, Rem Koolhaas, Siegfried Giedion, Lina Bo Bardi and others. Overall, the book, its content, in text and image and its references, resemble a very specific kind of *we*, an overly Western, white, male, bourgeois *we,* and it seems to project this image on their targeted audience as well. Does this *we* reflect humanity?

Fig 2 – Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design, pp. 20-21.

5. Man 1 & Man 2 vs. empirical man

Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter is one of the key thinkers problematizing the conceptions of humanism and *the human* prevalent in Western thought. In her 2003 article *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument* she sets out to claim that the "struggle of our times" is the struggle against the overrepresentation of *Man*. Wynter makes a distinction between *the empirical human* and (Western bourgeois) *Man* (p. 260). According to Wynter, there are several conceptualisations that served to transform the earlier figure of *the Christian* to, first, *Man 1* (the secularized, scientific, rational, political subject), and subsequently to *Man 2* (the bourgeois *homo oeconomicus*) (p. 282). The construct of *Man* comes into being through the negation of different Others: from those *races* conceptualised as inferior, such as the *Indian* or the *Black* in opposition to Man1 and the poor, the jobless, or the refugee in opposition to *Man 2* (p. 266). The result each time is a normalised and very dominant social construct, *Man*, that, though it represents only one "genre of being human", is nevertheless institutionalised as representative of humanity (p. 269).

In *Are we human?* a homogenising sameness is constructed through the use of a rhetorical *we*, but the questions raised for this *we* are very specific and stem from the particular mode of being human that belongs to Man 2. We are all human, but some of us are slightly more human than others. The bourgeois, first-world, luxury problems that designers have occupied themselves with for the *sake of humanity* are plenty, and a corresponding outlook on the world is reproduced by the authors. For example, in describing the new lifestyles that emerge after WWII, Colomina and Wigley argue that "the interior becomes a showroom full of objects. Shock is absorbed through the consumption of design" (p. 100), and that "[t]he evidence of the expansion of the human is the very lightness of modern design as a kind of camping equipment – what Eileen Gray would term *le style camping* when talking about her own *mobile furniture* designed for her E1027 house of 1927 and the need for a new kind of domestic interior that addresses human needs" (p. 128). Similarly, on one of the final pages of the book: "Everybody has the fantasy of being an independent producer, self-employed in the permanent project of constructing oneself. Self-design has become the main responsibility and activity." (p. 273). The human needs of Man2 seem to be of a very specific kind, distinct from that of the empirical human. These examples not only show limited and narrow conceptualisations of what it means to be human, they also display a sheer disinterest in other ways of living and relating to the world, of other urgencies, aesthetics and interests.

6. The epistemological legacy of modernity/coloniality: universalism

In a recent issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*, the decolonial thinker Madina Tlostanova states that "the sensing and thinking subject, which is Western/Northern by default, occupies a delocalized and disembodied vantage point that eliminates other possible ways to produce, transmit and represent knowledge, allowing for a worldview to be built on a rigid essentialist modern/colonial model that hides its locality and represents itself as universal and natural" (Tlostanova 2017, p. 52). The *modern/colonial model* refers to an idea posited by Walter Mignolo in his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011). Mignolo explains how modernity and coloniality work in tandem; according to Mignolo, modernity could only come into existence because of coloniality.

Decolonial scholars such as Tlostanova, Mignolo and Anibal Quijano theorize persistent domination exercised through colonialism as *coloniality*, which plays out on different axes, including, notably, the epistemological: "the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual" (Quijano 2007, p. 169).. The production of knowledge in Western thought does not acknowledge *pluriversality*, which entails "a coexistence, correlation and interaction of many intersecting non-abstract universal and countless options grounded in the geopolitics and corpopolitics of knowledge, being and perception" (Tlostanova 2017, p. 54). There are a multitude of concepts that most people in the West are not aware of, and when they are addressed, these ideas are more often than not considered to be traditional, primitive, exotic, nonsensical, spiritual, and so on. Other ways of knowing and being are hardly taken seriously. *Are we human?* shows little awareness of any world beyond the specific perspective of the Western, white, bourgeois human or beyond Western modernist design history. This is how modernity/coloniality plays out: it suppresses any form of thinking, making, doing, being human, relating to the body, relating to design, materiality, that does not adhere to modernist design epistemology, or anything that is produced by it. Instead, an epistemological hierarchy is reproduced in which Western thinking always takes the moral high ground. And because of its inherited superiority, Western thinkers are not even trained to question the Eurocentrism that allows them to make universalist claims. The design historian Tony Fry reminds us that "our collective actions in the coming decades and centuries will determine whether our species, as a finite being, is going to be reduced or extended, whether we will survive or die" (p. 103). And he urges us, both designers and thinkers, to rethink the practices of design: to undo the violent and destructive logic of coloniality and capitalism and instead focus on *sustainment* and *futuring*, which he understands as the "project of a culture of modesty and thoughtfulness" (Fry 2012, p. 238). According to Fry, only then can we start to become human through design. In *Design in the Borderlands* (2014), edited by Fry and design scholar Eleni Kalantidou, a series of essays present more concrete case studies and *alternative* understandings of design and design epistemologies around the world.

7. Posthumanism – extending *Man's term at the office*?

The book allegedly traces a history of humanity and design that ends with posthumanism and the anthropocene. "Human design eventually redesigns the human. We are gradually redesigned by our tools" (p. 36). If the world and its atmosphere are, like the human species itself, increasingly influenced and *designed* by humans, in what ways can humans still be considered to be just one species among many? Posthumanist attempts to abandon the anthropocentric distinction between the human and the rest of the world have produced scholarly discourse on cyborgs, robotics, artificial intelligence and climate change, among other concerns. However, what is problematic in such work, according to critics like Sylvia Wynter, is that many posthumanists are quick to make grand statements for *all* of humanity. These critics argue that humanity has been denied for so long to the majority of the people in the world: to minorities, non-white people, women, the poor, refugees. Disguised as a discourse aimed at addressing the ethics of living in the world, the output of most posthumanist scholars fails to acknowledge the very limited conceptions of the human that have predominated throughout Western history.

Neil Badmington, in his book *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (2004), states that "there is nothing more terrifying than a posthumanism that claims to be terminating *Man* while actually extending *his* term in office" (Badmington, p. 117). This critique can only be understood through coloniality/modernity and the power dynamics present within the construction of Man1 and Man2; it was a *specific* part of humanity that set into motion the colonisation of land and people, the industrial revolution and the extraction of the Earth. Moreover, while it is true that the Anthropocene impacts all of humankind around the globe, the effects of climate change are unequally distributed. The authors of *Are we human?*, like many Western scholars, are not interested in understanding *the empirical human* or the politics of *the human* as they have emerged in the course of humanism and the transition from Man1 to Man 2, and instead jump too quickly to the homogenization of all humanity, making assumptions on behalf of all of us.

The human might be the only species to have systematically designed its own extinction, and seems to be getting close to accomplishing the goal. Yet it largely acts as if it cannot do anything about it, staring at the prospect of its own demise as if transfixed, even with a lingering sense of pride in this massive self-destructive accomplishment. It is as if the image of a vast sublime natural world overwhelming the human attempt to comprehend it has been reversed. The human itself is now the overwhelming spectacle.

Enveloped in all the nets of its own making, the species constantly watches itself, as if fascinated by what it has become, increasingly aware that it is the very force that is making its own occupation of the planet, and that of most other species, ever more fragile. The human animal spends a remarkable amount of time looking at itself and its artifacts from an ever-increasing number of angles at every scale from the whole planet to atomic and now subatomic details. Conventional media channels provide continuous self-surveillance by bringing real-time images from every corner of the globe. The Internet offers multiple interfaces tracking the global movements of satellites, space junk, aircraft, ships, tweets, viruses, migration, and remittances. Millions of fixed webcams enable specific locations to be monitored from isolated stations in the Antarctic, desert highways, building sites, laboratories and apartments, to orbiting space stations. Instantly uploaded video from cellphones means the eyes with which we watch and are watched have multiplied exponentially. Live video feeds from cellphones in bedrooms, bathrooms, and battlefields have become the front lines of contemporary life. Once deeply private spaces are now accessible online. Personal actions and thoughts are experienced by global audiences. Individual movements, purchases, and communications are continuously detected, recorded, and analyzed throughout the day and night, as if constituting a massive collective selfie.

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Fig 3 – Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design, pp. 14-15.

8. We have never been human
Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design may not necessarily be your average *design classic* or even meant as *design history* per se, but it echoes the well-established canonical examples common to design history. Written from a Western, Eurocentric,

white, bourgeois perspective, it fails to acknowledge its positionality and instead universalizes the white/Western gaze as the norm for humanity. It does so not only in its conceptualisation of *humanity* but also in its understanding of *design*. Who gets to be recognized as a *human*? Who gets to be recognized as a *human* that designs or as a *human* worth designing for? What designs are considered relevant? Through Wynter's conceptualisation of Man1 and Man2, *humanism* and *humanity* are problematised and the mechanisms of exclusion at work on multiple levels are made legible.

The book presents itself as *an archaeology of design*, echoing Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, aiming to reveal the historical context conditions that validated particular approaches and understandings of design in relation to a certain aspect of *being human*. It thus understands itself to be exploring the *discursive formations* of humanity and design throughout history, yet, as we have seen it does so only from a very specific perspective. Taking into consideration that *Are we human?* was published in the context of the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, it is all the more troublesome that it conveys such a strong Eurocentric and American approach to design, given that Turkey itself has a longstanding history of design research (Bayazit, 2009). The low number of Turkish participants in the biennial (ArchDaily, 2016) gives rise to the question of whether the entire biennial was perhaps thought up, planned and pre-packaged in New York and then transplanted to Istanbul. The situation is perhaps symptomatic of the invasion of positivist and imperialist *design-thinking*, as well as of the globalized gentrifying force of biennial culture.

When *we* thought we had departed from *modernism*, Bruno Latour reminded us that "we [had] never been modern". Similarly, this book reminds us, upon critical rereading that we have never been human. I want to argue that we need to continuously re-examine and challenge *the canon* and the traditional approaches to design history if we want to dismantle the reproduction of the normative gaze produced by eurocentrism and universalism, even when, or particularly when concealed in seductive book design. I am not proposing the absolute dismissal of canonical Western design history as such. However, what I am opposed to is the denial of different genres of being human and of doing design. To end with Fanon: "Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connexions must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized" (Fanon 1963, p. 313).

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NOTE

1. Italics are mine.↵
2. To take into account the design of design history books seems to be fundamental – any design historian would probably agree that the form in which a collection of design historical knowledge itself is presented, designed and marketed will undeniably influence the perception of it and will define who will read it.↵
3. The platform was founded in 2016 by Ahmed Ansari, Danah Abdulla, Ece Canli, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Matthew Kiem, Pedro Oliveira, Luiza Prado and Tristan Schultz.↵

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