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A Critical Approach to Roma Design: Analyzing Objects by Meşteshukar ButiQ

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Ágota Szilágyi-Kispista majored in design at the University of Arts and Design of Cluj, then studied management of arts and design at MOME Budapest. Since the beginning of her studies she has been interested in criticality in design. During an exchange program at Elisava Barcelona she was co-curator of a critical design exhibition at the London Design Festival. She became familiar with Roma contemporary art while working at the Gallery8 in Budapest. Currently she is a freelance project manager in various international projects.



Abstract

In his 2016 book *Notes on the Ontology of Design*, Arturo Escobar asks whether it is possible to talk about the existence of a “critical design theory”. He states that if by “critical” we mean the application of a series of critical theories and approaches in the fields of design, and a certain connection to cultural studies, then we can talk about the ongoing development of a “critical design theory”. Based on an analysis of a set of objects by the social enterprise Meșteshukar ButiQ (Bucharest, Romania), I analyze the role of design in the construction and representation of Romani identity. Generally, design is interpreted as a representation of the self, however it has a significant role in constructing it too. According to Penny Sparke, “design is seen as being part of the dynamic process through which culture is actually constructed, not merely reflected” (2013: 4). Through an analysis of the products created and sold by Meșteshukar ButiQ and its collaborators, I examine the role of design not just in expressing but also in creating meanings, and thereby, I emphasize the design process’ importance in identity politics.

Keywords

- Critical design theory
- Design studies
- Self-empowerment
- Roma design
- Cultural representation

Introduction

This paper aims to be a theoretical experiment on the possibility of critical analysis in design theory as applied to two case studies of objects belonging to the category of *Roma design*. As we will see, this approach is problematic in many ways, since there is neither a widely accepted definition of what exactly *Roma design* means, nor an acknowledged theoretical framework for critical analysis in design; both are merely emergent fields. As such, an article on a *critical approach to Roma design* can only be an experimental one. Yet, considering the significance of design in contemporary society, I argue that a critical approach is urgently necessary.

For my master's degree at the Moholy-Nagy University (Budapest, Hungary) I examined the role of design management in sustainability, arguing that sustainability is a complex ecological, social and cultural issue while design management is an important tool for the synchronization of these different aspects. The analysis of Mesetshukar ButiQ as a kind of “best practice” was part of this research, and whilst in the thesis there was no room for experimenting with a possible “critical design studies” approach, this paper is the implementation of the questions that rose in the original research.

In the first chapter of his book *Design and Culture* (2010), Márton Szentpéteri uses the definition of “design studies” by Rachel Cooper and Mike Press, which characterizes it as a field that examines the social, philosophical and cultural aspects of design, and uses methodologies from design history and cultural studies.^[1] Szentpéteri (2016) analyzes the evolution of how design history and cultural studies relate to one another, and examines how design studies, which he describes as a “relatively new discipline” (14) was born out of these two, and also covers many of the theoretical aspects of this new discipline which are still quite unclear. He talks about two processes which have been central in the emergence of design studies: the “design turn” in cultural studies, when everyday objects became the interest of cultural analysis, and the “cultural turn” in design history, when theoreticians of design became more interested in the social, cultural, political, economic context in which objects are born. Referring to Clive Dilnot, one of the foundational figures of design studies, Szentpéteri (2016) writes that the “real meaning of design is not to be found inside the design world but rather in the broader social context which provides the circumstances that define the work of the designers, and the conditions which influence the emergence of certain designers” (62).

Recently, significant research has been carried out on Roma cultural practices and cultural representation, as well as on the emancipation of contemporary Roma art and culture.^[2] Postcolonial approaches have created space for defiant Roma intellectuals – authors, artists, scientists – seeking to dismantle stereotypes about the population. On this level of consciousness, the following questions arise: how can Roma

1. Szentpéteri refers to the article by Copper and Press, “Academic Design Research”, which was published on the British Design Council website, but is not accessible anymore. For further reading see Cooper and Press, 2003, *The Design Experience*.

2. Here in particular I refer to: Junghaus, 2013, *Az „episztemikus engedetlenség”*; Kovács, 2009, *Fekete testek, fehér testek*, and to the presentations given at the international conference, *The Image of the Roma in Art History*. Goethe Institute of Budapest, 3–4 April 2017 (<https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf/117/conferenceprogramv9.pdf> Accessed 21-03-2018).

traditions be passed down from one generation to the next? How can Roma knowledge be preserved but also modernized? This latter question is particularly important as we see the emergence of Roma design projects such as the fashion brand Romani Design (Budapest) and Meseshukar ButiQ (Bucharest). We are no longer talking about a constricted ethnographic interpretation of traditional Roma culture, where Roma people are the subject of ethnographic and folklorist research conducted by majority society; rather, Roma are now themselves the initiators of a progressive interpretation of their own heritage. As stated by Tímea Junghaus in an interview conducted by Szilvia Artner (2016) of Hungary's Goethe Institute:

‘The decolonization movement means the totality of all initiatives for the cultural, political, economical equality of Roma. In cultural terms this means that Roma art comes up with concepts on how to reveal and exhibit the Western colonial discourse imprinted in our minds – by depriving it of its energy and unveiling it as a historical legend.’

In my attempt to engage in a critical analysis of Roma design I will follow Márton Szentpéteri's theoretical framework of design studies as presented in the above-mentioned book, combined with viewpoints borrowed from the analysis of representation of Roma in art history and in contemporary Roma art. Thus, my focus is on creation / representation of the identity and self-representation. My aim is to highlight some connection points between the two disciplines, which could serve as starting points for the development of a critical design theory.

1. What is Design?

All men are designers. All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. Any attempt to separate design, to make it a thing-by-itself, works counter to the fact that design is the primary underlying matrix of life. [...] Design is the conscious effort to impose meaningful order (Papanek, 2006: 3).

Design is a process that is strongly embedded in the sociocultural context in which it takes form. Although not new to the field of design, the idea of social responsibility of design is gaining more and more popularity today.^[3] Since the 1990s numerous movements and trends have started to take form, contradicting the idea of design as a means of sustaining capitalist consumer culture and emphasizing instead that design should find alternatives. This has given way to concepts such as: ecodesign, slow design, open design, critical design, inclusive design, circular design, recycling, upcycling, new craft, design for all and so on. “Social design”, in particular, is becoming trendy today and the term itself reflects the biggest problem with these movements: it suggests that only design projects belonging to the category of “social design” have an impact on society.

3. The term “socially responsible design” originates from the 1960s–70s, its most well-known advocate being Victor Papanek (2006). See also: Clarke, 2016, *The Humanitarian Object*.

If we take Papanek's definition of design as a "conscious effort to impose meaningful order" (2006: 3), an important question arises: whose order are we talking about? This should be one of the key questions of critical design studies.

2. Critical Design Studies

In his 2016 book *Notes on the Ontology of Design* Arturo Escobar asks whether it is possible to talk about the existence of critical design studies. He states that if by "critical" we mean the application of a "panoply of critical theories and approaches" in the fields of design, and "a certain kinship with the project of cultural studies as a whole", then we can state that the field of *critical design studies* is emerging: the critical analysis of design's relation to capitalism, gender, race, development and modernity is not yet done, however we can certainly talk about a growing interest in these fields (Escobar, 2016: 28).

Escobar points out that this interest in criticality is increasingly emerging from practitioners, rather than from academics alone.^[4] As examples for design practice which incorporate a critical approach, Escobar talks about design as emerging through interaction, informal technologies and creative practices, the overturn of the reductive dogma of the form-function relationship, or rethinking design's relation to ecology (some of these approaches are related to the "social design" trends that I mentioned above, but with more emphasis on a critical approach).

Based on examples from Latin America, Escobar analyzes power relations between globalization, alternative modernization and non-capitalist / non-liberal actions, and argues that the development of an "ontological" or "autonomous design" is a way towards more collaborative practices and thus, more sustainable and capable of promoting a fairer social order. He elaborates a complex system of principles and values for "autonomous design", from which the relation to the history of decolonial efforts of indigenous and Afro-descended people in Latin America I found useful in my attempt to create a critical analysis of Roma design.

3. Creating Identities through Design

Meștешukar ButiQ is a social enterprise from Bucharest, born in 2011 with the aim of reinterpreting and promoting traditional Roma crafts, and is a project of the Romano ButiQ association. It is a network connecting Roma craftspeople with international designers who create products that are sold under the brand name of Meștешukar ButiQ. The project was preceded by research about traditional Roma crafts in Romania (2010),^[5] which resulted in a study that identified 14 different crafts across the country: coppersmiths, cast pot makers, ironsmiths, tinsmiths, silversmiths, brick makers, woodcarvers, spoon

4. Perhaps the most well-known example for critical thinking in design practice is IDEO (<https://www.ideo.com> Accessed 19-02-2018), which, together with the Allan MacArthur Foundation developed a platform to support designers in creating more sustainable projects. See: The Circular Design Guide (<https://www.circulardesignguide.com> Accessed 19-02-2018).

5. <http://romanobutiq.ro/proiecte-2/dezvoltarea-retelei-Mesteshukar-butiq> Accessed: 24-02-17.

makers, weavers, florists, harness makers, sievers, hat makers, fiddlers. According to the authors of the study, traditional craftsmanship is a “welcome capital of appreciation, which could contribute to changing attitudes towards the Roma, and an equally welcome economic capital which, once revitalized, could turn into the right answer to the poverty problems that many Roma communities are faced with” (Chirițoiu, Ivasiuc and Necula, 2013: 8). In the collective consciousness of Romanian people the idea is still alive that, “among Roma there are honest, skilled craftsmen” (ibid.).

Meștешukar ButiQ’s initial concept of connecting an active craftsperson with a potential customer through an online or offline platform did not prove to work, however. One of the key steps in the development of the Meștешukar ButiQ was thus to include designers in the project from the beginning: the initiative started to be successful once the craftspeople started to collaborate with designers in the creation of the objects. This is an example of how design works as a connecting link between production and consumption, facilitating the customer’s desires to be satisfied by the products available on the market (Sparke, 2013: 56).

3.1 7000 blows

The title of the exhibition held on the occasion of Vienna Design Week in 2015, *7000 blows*, refers to the technique used by coppersmiths in which they create their products exclusively through blows of their hammer. This exhibition was a collaboration between designer Nadja Zerunian, coppersmith Victor Caldarar and Meștешukar ButiQ, and consisted of a limited-edition copper, silver and brass collection. As described on the designer’s website:

7000 blows is our first limited edition in copper, silver & brass. chased by hand. complemented by found treasures. reworked objects create small sensual landscapes, based on the traditional competence of the caldarari – a roma community in transylvania, working for centuries in metal crafts. It takes 7000 rhythmic blows & seventy times in the fire until the final shape evolves. a year-long cooperation with victor clopotar redefining traditional forms. the result: a collection of product-landscapes that examine material, an ancient craft & a new cultural reference (Zerunian and Weisz, n.d.).

Designers Nadja Zerunian and Peter Weisz, who have experience creating high-end products, joined Meștешukar ButiQ for this exhibition.^[6] In an interview Nadja Zerunian talked about how she sees a way of reinventing the luxury market through collaborations with traditional craftspeople, especially in light of current trends that see a growing consumer need for products that “tell stories” (Observator TV, 2016). Specifically, she explained how products created by Roma craftspeople in hidden Romanian villages and working with traditional techniques represent exactly what luxury consumers are looking for. This raises the

6. Nadja Zerunian previously worked as a senior designer for Kelvin Klein and as a creative director for Georg Jensen and Swatch. Peter Weisz has worked as a creative director and stylist for brands like Scaufenster / Die Presse, Diva, Woman, Aheas, Attitude / GB, and Palmers. Since 2015 both of them have worked as experts with the Erste Foundation and they also founded the design group zerunianandweisz.

issue, however, of the cultural representation of Roma, as well as issues concerning responsible, sustainable design. One of the risks of so-called “social design” is that “the strategy built behind the principles of sustainability or traditionalism creates a process contradictory to those: overpriced, fetishized products” (Schneider, 2018: 28) where sustainability becomes more an element of branding than a principle. Even though a postcolonial approach created the space in which Roma intellectuals could express attitudes of resistance, including for example methods for rejecting being stereotyped, the art of the Roma minority in Europe is still typically categorized as naïve or folk art. This leads us to one of the challenges Roma design must face: are the objects made by Roma craftspeople today – specifically those marketed in the world of luxury goods as an item that tells an “exotic” story – in fact any different from the nineteenth century image of Roma communities as a kind of “wild” entity that fed the artistic imagination (Kovács, 2019)? Design, as a relatively new discipline brings new possibilities; however, it also carries the risk of re-creating existing stereotypical patterns. It is not my goal to answer this question in this essay, but rather to point out the necessity of such a question in the critical analysis of a design object.

3.2 PICNIC

With the occasion of the 2016 Vienna Design Week, Meşteshukar ButiQ and the design group zerunianandweisz presented the PICNIC collection, which was inspired by the nomadic lifestyle:

Permanent movement plays a momentous role in the history of the Roma people. The new product group by Meşteshukar ButiQ harks back to this nomadic tradition, simultaneously demonstrating a cross-section of the Roma people’s centuries-old handicraft skills. So just as friends meet for a picnic the PICNIC series represents a meeting place: works by different craftspeople complement one another, sets can be used themselves alone or in combination – individual parts of them even in the household (Meşteshukar ButiQ, n.d.).

The collection consists of stools, bowls, glasses, plates, spoons, etc., wherein these objects are related to a meal and mostly made of wood, copper or created through a weaving technique. Such objects which are taken from the “traditional world” and brought into the “design world” become means of self-representation for the Roma community. Thus we must consider the issue of representation in the context of contemporary design culture. In his book *Design and Culture*, Márton Szentpéteri examines the relationship between cultural research and design, asking whether design is a cultural product, a cultural representation, or even both at the same time? As Szentpéteri highlights, following Peter Burke’s (2004) thoughts, cultural representations do not simply reflect social reality, but rather the actual *creation* of reality, which include realms such as, knowledge, class, disease, time, identity and so on.

When talking about the above-mentioned collection as being inspired by the nomadic lifestyle, it is important to state that this is not an attempt to preserve the nomadic lifestyle (as in an ethnographic collection, for example); its intention is instead to render it contemporary. By using traditional techniques and the shapes resembling traditional objects, the pieces of PICNIC collection bring to life values connected to a lifestyle of permanent movement. It embodies elements and values of the Roma community, which are represented through the objects in symbolic ways.

In terms of design theory, we can say that referring to the key elements of a particular cultural heritage in the creation of a set of contemporary objects is an example of the principle of using local resources and already existing knowledge in creating sustainable products.^[7] According to Escobar, sustainability is the protection of a whole lifestyle, that is, the complex system of living-knowing-acting (Escobar, 2016: 78). In other words, “recycling” techniques, shapes, ideas or values that represented a community in the past, in the creation of objects for daily use, reveals to us how objects, according to a cultural studies interpretation, also create certain cultural values and thus, shape the values system of a community.

Conclusion

The two examples discussed above show design’s possible roles in cultural representation as well as the potential of identity-formation through design. As stated in the introduction, this essay is an experiment that aims to bring together ideas and approaches from critical studies, design theory and contemporary art by analyzing objects of Roma design.

To sum up, I’d like to emphasize two questions: what role does design have in the self-representation of a community? What role does self-representation have in the creation of a good product? In regards to the two cases presented here, we are left to ponder several other important questions: does the involvement of traditional Roma craftspeople in the design process provide a certain “authenticity” to the stories behind the objects? Does the *7000 blows* collection have extra value beyond of the luxury design world *because* of this “authenticity”? Are these products, or the ones in the *PICNIC* collection, objects of “resistance”? It is such questions, I believe, that should be asked as the starting point for a critical analysis of design.

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7. See Thackara, 2005, *In the Bubble*, and Szentpéteri’s (2014) interview with John Thackara, *Elhalasztott világvége*.

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Appendix

Image 1. *PICNIC*, Meşteshukar ButiQ. Photo by mbq.ro



Image 2. *Full House*. Limited edition, zerunianandweisz. Photo by Raphael Sammer

