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# Designers and paradoxical injunctions

How designerly ways of thinking are faced with contradiction

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Abstract: In 1956, anthropologist Gregory Bateson developed the concept of “double bind” in order to explain the mechanisms of communication in schizophrenia, in which the individual must constantly deal with conflicting demands. This “Effort to Drive the Other Person Crazy”, as said psychoanalyst Harold Searles in 1959, is a particular way of thinking that can be called “paradoxical thinking”. Nowadays, in a changing world faced with global issues, everyone agrees on that Design has a major role to play in re-inventing the future. In such a context, designers from all countries are faced with a dramatic responsibility: they are expected to be able to solve all problems. This is why modern designerly ways of thinking tend to turn into a kind of creative “paradoxical thinking”. In this paper, we try to briefly describe three of those designerly paradoxical injunctions and try to focus on how, from a psychological point of view, thinking as a designer today is a true tightrope walking exercise.

**Key words:** *Designerly paradoxical injunctions, Designerly ways of thinking, Design Thinking, Paradoxical thinking, Double Bind, Paradoxes, Contradiction*

## 1. Paradoxical thinking

In 1956, Palo Alto (USA), psychologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson published a famous article entitled “Toward a theory of schizophrenia” [1]. Combining communication, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and anthropology, this paper proposes “a communicational theory of the origin and nature of schizophrenia”, presented as “one of the most puzzling of the mental illnesses”. It is based on the notion of “double bind” and the hypothesis that “a person caught in the double bind may develop schizophrenic symptoms”. In this approach, schizophrenia “is essentially a result of family interaction”. The double bind is usually inflicted by the mother to the child. It consists in the repetition of the following situation, made of three superimposed injunctions : *a primary negative injunction* (e.g. “Do not do so and so, or I will punish you”) ; *a secondary injunction conflicting with the first* at a more abstract level (e.g. “Do not see me as the punishing

agent”) ; *a tertiary negative injunction* prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field. The result is what is called a paradoxical injunction. The repetition of this situation leads the child to learn to perceive his universe in double bind patterns, which creates a breakdown in his ability to discriminate between Logical Types. According to Bateson, “this is the sort of situation which occurs between the pre-schizophrenic and his mother”. It is the same than what psychoanalyst Harold Searles called, in 1959, “the effort to drive the other person crazy” [2]. Three general characteristics of the double bind situation can then be defined: first, “the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated” ; second, “the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship

is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other” ; third, “the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond” [1]. Psychologist of communication Paul Watzlawick gave many illustrations of, coming from real clinical facts. For instance, a mother buys two neckties for her little boy, one green and one blue. The next day the child is in a hurry to sport the green necktie. The mother: “So you don't like the blue tie I gave you?” The next day the boy puts on the blue tie and draws the symmetrical response: “So you don't like the green tie I gave you?” So, on the third day, the child tries to find a compromise solution in order to satisfy his mother's two demands: he puts on the two ties together. And his mother comments: “You poor boy, you're out of your mind. You're going to drive me crazy” [3].

Iconic mode of families in which there is a schizophrenic bind, the “paradoxical communication” can still settle in other contexts, which can be varied, for example in the workplace or in the politician rhetoric. We can find it even in some very simple examples of everyday life phrases (e.g. “Be spontaneous!”) or in usual signs (e.g. a sign that would display the words: “Ignore this sign”).

Our hypothesis in this paper is that there does exist between the designer and the contemporary time such a paradoxical communication or double bind situation. Through the requirements of schools and universities, the needs of companies and institutions, the expectations of users or of the market, modern Society constantly addresses the contemporary designer a speech made of conflicting claims. These paradoxical injunctions introduce a new tension in the designerly ways of thinking, which we will call the paradoxical design thinking

## **2. Paradoxical design thinking: three designerly paradoxical injunctions**

### **2.1 The meta-market injunction : “Be at once a socialist and a capitalist!”**

The design is based on a structural and historical contradiction. On the one hand, it is a socialist invention: it was born in the nineteenth century in England from the revolt against the ravages of industrialization on the man (William Morris). On the other hand, the design is a capitalist invention: it was born in the early twentieth century in Germany from the acceptance of industrial production (*Deutscher Werkbund*) and it grew up in the United States in the middle of twentieth century under the name of *industrial design* (Raymond Loewy). This structural contradiction is unique: no other activity crystallizes at this point such a political ambivalence in its very definition. To be at once a socialist and a capitalist, here is what the designer is nowadays asked to be. Indeed, companies ask the designer to design products, but schools and universities ask him to give his projects a higher purpose than just design products. Marketers ask him to sell, but users don't want to be considered only as consumers. Therefore, the designer is both asked to make industrial design and not to compromise himself with industrial logic. He must be able to submit to the law of the market and to refuse to submit to.

### **2.2 The disruptive injunction : “Be innovative!”**

There is not a single school of design in the world that does not require its students to be innovative. There is not a single design conference in the world that does not engage contemporary designers to be innovative. There is not a single company in the world that does not demand its designers to invent the future. However, to require someone to be innovative is as absurd as to require him to be spontaneous. Because innovation can not be imposed *a priori*, it is always revealed *a posteriori*. It is when innovation happens that innovation is visible. It can not be planned in advance. You can not make innovation the primary purpose of a project. Innovation always

comes in addition, when it appears that the purpose of the project was from the beginning in accordance with the expectations, needs or desires of the users. Certainly, innovation can be stimulated, encouraged, prepared. But it can not be programmed. When it comes up, it is always after the fact, according to factors external to the project. The injunction to innovate is, par excellence, a paradoxical injunction.

### **2.3 The global problem-solving injunction : “Save the world!”**

Nowadays, in a changing world faced with global issues such as sustainability, overpopulation, energy transition, climate change, digital revolution, everyone agrees to believe that the Design has a major role to play in re-inventing the future. It is even said that the twenty-first century will be the century of Design. That's why Tim Brown and his colleagues introduced a few years ago the concept of “Design Thinking”. Design considered as a *thinking* methodology is a great contemporary tool for reshaping the world : “design, Brown said in 2009, is getting big again and that's happening through the application of design thinking to new kinds of problems, to global warming, to education, healthcare, security, clean water, whatever” [4]. In such a context, designers from all countries are expected to be able to solve all problems. They are asked to find solutions to sustainability, overpopulation, energy transition, climate change, etc., although those problems are largely politic, economical or social issues as well as design issues. Therefore, it looks as if the society was currently asking the designers to be able to save the world although, as designers, they do not have enough efficient tools for that.

### **3. Conclusion : contradiction is the heart of the contemporary designerly way of thinking**

How to be creative when you must constantly face with contradiction? Those three designerly paradoxical injunctions are true antinomies of creative reason. They reveal that the contemporary designerly way of thinking is fundamentally made of paradoxical thinking because designers are more and more asked to be able to solve unsolvable contradictions, even it it's not part of their power or skills. It does not mean that contemporary Design drives the designers crazy. It only means that the contemporary designerly ways of thinking are made of deep paradoxes and antinomies, which causes necessarily a creative stress. Making design today requires designers strong psychological skills to be able to ponder on contradiction. The difficulty is at once to be enough idealistic in order to keep trying to change the world and enough realistic in order to keep in mind that designers are not omnipotent magicians. Thinking as a designer is more than ever a tightrope walking exercise, which is close to be impossible as much as it is brilliant.

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