

Born from the Periphery—Gui Bonsiepe’s Contribution to a Symbolic Production of Design within the Cultural-Political Context of Salvador Allende’s Chile

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- [F] What are the social, political, and economic preconditions for Bauhaus reception? And how do they vary from one period or country to another?

conditions of industrial design—
metropolis vs. periphery

construction of a «third world»
critique of capitalism

German designer and theorist Gui Bonsiepe (*1934) summarized the collective experiences and achievements of his advisory work for Salvador Allende's government in *Design im Übergang zum Sozialismus. Ein technisch-politischer Erfahrungsbericht aus dem Chile der Unidad Popular* (1974). Bonsiepe wrote this book in Argentina in 1973, after leaving Chile in the wake of Augusto Pinochet's military coup against Salvador Allende, the democratically elected Marxist-Socialist President.¹ Allende's government was the first democratically elected government in the world that attempted to implement modern Socialism. This undertaking had already triggered covert CIA operations on the part of the USA when Allende was elected.² This article examines Bonsiepe's professional activity during this extraordinary Socialist era in the context of the debates conducted around international Modernism, addressing topics such as the metropolis, periphery, and *arte popular* [folk art] in Latin America. As well as adapting the functional design developed by the Bauhaus and the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm to the non-European context of the so-called «Third World» at an early stage, Bonsiepe also sharply criticized Latin America's «exploitative dependency» on capitalist countries, i.e. the «First and Second World».³

- [F] The restructuring of Chile by Allende's Unidad Popular government between 1971 and 1973 demonstrates how Gui Bonsiepe's European-influenced design ideas fell on particularly fertile ground in Chile in the course of the growing technologization of the environments in which people lived. The contribution made by Bonsiepe and his research team at INTEC (Instituto Tecnológico de Chile) determined new product manufacturing for the home and the agriculture, mobility and communication sectors, and also found resonance in the writings of the Brazilian intellectual and Marxist Mário Pedrosa (1900–1981). Pedrosa was in exile in Chile from 1970 to 1973 and even stayed with Bonsiepe for a few days during the turmoil of the military coup.⁴ Pedrosa indirectly compared the military suppression of the new historical project of democratic Socialism with the cultural repression deployed in Brazil, which had been under military rule since 1964, and highlighted the suppression of folk art as symptomatic of this phenomenon.

- [B] What do we understand by taking a stand regarding architecture and design, and particularly of the Bauhaus and Modernism?

Gui Bonsiepe's Journey from the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm to Chile

Gui Bonsiepe had studied painting in Munich and Hamburg before transferring to the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, founded in 1953 by Inge Aicher-Scholl, Otl Aicher, Max Bill and others, from which he graduated in 1959 in the Information Department under Argentinean Tomás Maldonado. The HfG Ulm, as the successor institution to the Bauhaus, which closed in 1933, was opened in the presence of Walter Gropius and designed by Max Bill; it saw itself as a politico-cultural democratization project that was intended to continue a tradition interrupted by National Socialism and war. After his studies, Bonsiepe worked at the HfG Ulm until it was closed in 1968, initially as a member of Development Group 6 and later as a lecturer on product design and visual communication. Maldonado, Dean of HfG Ulm from 1964 to 1966, introduced a more scientific basis for the teaching concept, now known as the «Ulm model».⁵ This entailed deliberately turning against political references to the historical idea of the Bauhaus that had been consolidated by Max Bill. Against the backdrop of Maldonado's teaching model, the modern professional profile of the industrial designer developed, with a self-image that also includes a critical attitude towards the role of the market and styles in industrial manufacturing. Maldonado is also regarded as one of the first to associate design with themes of sustainability and holism.⁶ His activities at the HfG Ulm, as well as later in Chile, raised Bonsiepe's awareness of regional developments in sustainable and anti-capitalist design production and of the problematic relationship between metropolis and periphery. Bonsiepe advocated developing a new concept and ecological understanding of design, which he considered to be an important political instrument. He took the view that the ecological crisis was closely linked to product manufacturing technologies that trigger environmental pollution. For Bonsiepe, design, or rather the designer, held collective responsibility for proposing solutions to foster ecological behaviour.⁷ With his globalization-critical perspective, Bonsiepe also anticipated important problematic issues that arise from the prosperity gap that divides nations today, at least from the design research perspective.

self-image of the architect and designer

[B]

sustainability

environments—cybernetic visions and systemic approaches

value-based concept of design

[E] What are the political prerequisites for socially engaged architecture or design?

Cybersyn—A Futuristic Control Room Combining «Design for Values» and «Socialism by Design»

After a trip with Maldonado to Argentina in 1964 and the HfG Ulm's closure in 1968, Bonsiepe was invited to participate in a United Nations project to promote development of small and medium-sized industry in Chile from 1968 to 1970.⁸ Subsequently, from 1971 to 1973, he headed the INTEC product development group of the Unidad Popular government, which was a coalition of Socialists, Communists and some other left-wing parties ^{Fig. 1}. Allende's economic policy gave rise to agrarian reform and nationalization of natural resources. Fixed prices were introduced for basic foodstuffs and schooling and health care were provided free of charge. These policies led to massive inflation, followed by Pinochet's military coup and Allende's suicide in 1973.

INTEC's work included, inter alia, the design for *Cybersyn* (*Proyecto Synco*) ^{Fig. 2}, an emblematic interface in the form of a control room.⁹ The interface, developed by the English engineer and management cyberneticist Stafford Beer, functioned as a data-network-based economic control system rooted in scientific and cybernetic organizational techniques, and was intended to guide the new nationalized industrial enterprises. *Cybersyn* is considered an advanced example how new technologies were used in the early 1970s to steer economic developments.¹⁰ *Cybersyn* also incorporated what was known as the *Cybernet* telex network, which connected some fifty nationalized companies and other organizations to a computer in Santiago and was used to transmit key figures every day. It could be called a kind of pre-Internet. Construction work on *Cybersyn* continued for a year but the telex network was the only part that was ever completed.

In Gui Bonsiepe's view, the *Cybersyn* project aimed to «[...] avoid the failures and pitfalls of the centrally administered planned economy [of Russian origin, authors' note]—there was an awareness that this did not work, given the reality of the situation in Socialist countries. The team was looking for a way to democratize consumption [i.e., to ensure the state's ability to supply the Chilean population through a reactive system that continuously processed economic data, authors' note], as the market, as the dominant institution, gave and gives no guarantee of this. This

second-order cybernetics

environments—cybernetic visions
and systemic approaches



Fig. 1
The INTEC Industrial Design Group,
with Gui Bonsiepe in the last
row at the left, undated, circa 1971

Fig. 2
Cybersyn, control room, 1973

- [D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?

obviously did not meet with sympathy amongst the established circles of power, for whom any attempt to change the rules of the game is a provocation that deserves to be punished. In extreme cases, this may involve resorting to military intervention, as was the case in Chile.»¹¹

Cybersyn, which looked like a futuristic control room in the INTEC design group's blueprint, amalgamated a political and technological utopia. Allende and Beer were seeking to ensure controllable decentralization of power and to shape a new political and technological reality with the help of cybernetics.¹² The system was intended to regulate the state economy in real time and increase economic production with assistance from technology, while at the same time not causing unemployment.¹³ Despite Socialist proclamations on working-class equality, its critics viewed *Cybersyn* as a symbol of the separation of power between functionaries and workers and as a means of permanently controlling production. American computer scientist Eden Medina noted that this project enabled the Allende government to capture data on its «revolutionary subjects», which was tantamount to monitoring of the Chilean workforce.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Medina sees *Cybersyn* as a very important historical example of how a value-based concept of design that reflects democratic processes («design for values») can be linked to the idea of Socialism realized through design, making industrial products that were primarily reserved for the elite affordable for lower income groups too («Socialism by design»).¹⁵ It transpired that ultimately all that emerged through *Cybersyn* was a form of design developed in the periphery that determined economic and political circumstances, despite—and even especially—fostered by the possibilities arising from the country's changed political situation.¹⁶

[D]

value-based concept of design

critique of capitalism

conditions of industrial design—
metropolis vs. periphery

dependency and periphery
as a concept

Bonsiepe's understanding of capitalism critiques becomes clear in his examination of the metropolis and the periphery, and of living and production conditions in so-called emerging economies. To a much greater extent than almost any other designer in this period, he addressed the question of the conditions for product design that would enable the «dependent countries» to liberate themselves from production in the so-called «First World». In his book *Design im Übergang zum Sozialismus* (1974), he explains that, because of its «[h]istoric origin in the capitalist metropolis, it stands to reason to brand industrial design as another diabolical instrument from the arsenal of capitalism's techniques of domination, which serves to increase the cultural dependence of the

- [G] Which ways of taking a stand can we discover in processes of Bauhaus transfer, translation, and transformation?
- [I] What can we learn from the history of the Bauhaus and Modernism when facing current issues? And how can this enable us to gain new insights into the past?

periphery and tie it to the interests of the metropolis. This suspicion cannot be dismissed in advance as the result of a rattling verbal radicalism—however disturbed and skewed its relationship to technology, i.e. the productive forces—when one considers the strategic role that industrial design plays in increasing the circulation of goods and consumer orientation in late capitalism.»¹⁷

- [I] As a developer in Chile, Bonsiepe dealt with the question of how design can make up for the periphery's technology deficit and influence society—in line with the ideas of the Bauhaus and the HfG Ulm. Which preconditions determine the extent to which production of design in the periphery also becomes a form of «symbolic capital»—to use Pierre Bourdieu's term—that leads to social recognition? Bonsiepe vehemently denied the assumption that the periphery is not capable of producing its own design.
- [G] In the approach he adopted, design was an instrument for overcoming dependence and a means of increasing the periphery's significance,¹⁸ also in the spirit of a critique of the world's division into different political blocs and the constitution of a «Third World».¹⁹ Bonsiepe pointed out that Max Bill's «*gute Form*» or «good design» movement was rapidly identified as «cultural imperialism» and a relic of the educated bourgeoisie that bypasses the needs of the periphery.²⁰ As well as saving currency reserves, Bonsiepe saw the «creation of approaches to a material culture of one's own» and satisfying the population (in his words of the «proletariat») as goals of project development.²¹ In his writing, he describes the process of «decolonization»—which he expressed a «*Deskolonisierung*», a Germanized term with which he picked up on the Latin American intellectual discourse on «descolonialización»²² that had gained ground in the 1970s—as a design practice that can only unfold within the «framework of drastic changes in society as a whole», such as the creation of products with their own cultural identity, tailored to the country's needs.²³ Through the idea of «*Deskolonisierung*» he contradicted the concept of universal design principles that had been articulated in the Bauhaus period as a defence against a narrowed national focus and the appropriation of art, and subsequently handed down in Bill's concept of «*gute Form*», which drew on this approach. In Bonsiepe's view, «criticism of the concept and practice of «good form» had already been formulated at the HfG Ulm around 1957. Later, in Latin America, I criticized the imitation of this concept for its one-sided and even exclusive emphasis on the external aspects of

«good design» as a concept

cultural imperialism

hfg ulm's criticism of the bauhaus

demand to decolonize design

identity formation

a product, without taking a number of other—technological, social and economic—factors into account».²⁴

In Bonsiepe's view, industrial design could only really contribute to the modernization process in Latin American countries that were beginning to enter the global scene if it picked up on the specific characteristics of local problems to find solutions and at the same time broke away from standard international design. «However, this decolonizing potential can only develop in the context of radical and fundamental social transformations. The conditions that influence project practice, which is very different in the metropolis and on the periphery, in turn imply a different project perspective. In the metropolis, industrial design has at its disposal a mature technology and a whole range of materials, manufacturing processes and highly qualified workers. [...] In the periphery, exactly the opposite is produced. The volume of requirements is far greater than the means to meet them. The level of development of productive forces is relatively low: they do not manage to meet demand. [...] Other needs, other priorities, other cultural traditions, another level of productive forces, other economic constraints are imposed on the industrial design of the periphery».²⁵

Alongside implementation of Socialist ideas such as job creation, income distribution and rationalization of the product range, central aspects in his concept of «Deskolonisierung» included above all adaptation of products to local needs and possibilities, a preference for local materials, use of technologies that do not require any investment, and an appraisal of environmentally harmful factors and the cultural context, because: «Industrial products make up a constantly growing part of the human artificial environment. They are the expression of a culture (in the anthropological sense), its representational, material expression. Designing implies the creation of a cultural identity of its own, thus reducing the degree of cultural dependence».²⁶

As well as record players, agricultural machinery, furniture, and crockery, Bonsiepe explained the example of a measuring spoon for milk powder ^{Fig. 3} commissioned by the National Ministry of Health. A study had shown that milk powder was not dosed correctly as household spoons of different sizes were used and that children were therefore not properly nourished. One of Allende's goals was to provide enough protein to Chile's children.²⁷ Bonsiepe's team was therefore given the task of developing an aesthetically pleasing and functional solution that would respect the

resolving problems
at regional and local level

demand to decolonize design

conditions of industrial design—
metropolis vs. periphery

dependency and periphery
as a concept

resolving problems
at regional and local level

environmental awareness

cultural identity



Fig. 3
Measuring spoon for milk powder,
Design: INTEC Design Group, 1972

[E] What are the political prerequisites for socially engaged architecture or design?

relevant technological and economic conditions. The solution was a hemisphere, a shape that was easy to produce, and also prevented milk powder from sticking.

Mário Pedrosa—Art as a Means
of Cultural Revolution and
the «Chilean Model of Socialism»

Mário Pedrosa wrote two essays on the Socialist wind of change in Chile, one about the Chilean Model of Socialism and the Front of the arts—«O modelo chileno de socialismo e a frente das artes» (1971)—and the other one about cultivated art and popular art «Arte culta e arte popular» (1975). They provide an overview of his experiences in Chilean exile during Allende's brief period in government, during which Pedrosa, together with Spanish art critic José María Moreno Galván, founded the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende (Museum of Solidarity) in Santiago in 1971, which is now one of the country's most important institutions.

Pedrosa understood art as a means of cultural revolution that could be deployed to create a Socialist society. In his essay on the «Chilean model of socialism», Pedrosa supported Allende's programme, noting that rather than repeating the mistakes of the 1917 Russian Revolution, it would build on a «democratic pluralism» of the working class. The «cultural revolution» would in his view enable the rural population to go through a «technical, scientific, aesthetic, moral, political» process that would defuse the numerous inequalities within society.²⁸ He saw the «Chilean approach» as an alternative to both bureaucratized art in the style of the Russian model and the high levels of consumption in imperialist, capitalist metropolises, subject only to the logic of «efficient work».

Pedrosa once again articulated his hope for a classless society, which he also associated with a renewal of modern art around the world in a lecture held in Mexico City in 1975, published as «Arte culta e arte popular».²⁹ Here Pedrosa also describes a new category of aesthetic objects, which are neither folk handicrafts nor elitist objects that have assumed the status of capital, for the value of these new objects lies in their social relationships. He judges the «arte culta», «scholarly art» or «art of the bourgeoisie», to be power preserving; it is used for speculation with a view to accumulation of wealth.³⁰

emigration and exile

thinking from the perspective
of diasporic conditions

art as a means
of cultural revolution

[E]

new unity of art and the people

When it comes to seeking new points of reference for artistic and local production with stronger collective meaning in its aesthetic manifestations, craftwork has, in Pedrosa's view, historically had an advantage over art. Moreover, the phenomenon of folk and handicraft art has assumed a more significant position since the wave of modernization in the 1920s, if not before, and can be identified as an important reference point in many Latin American countries. Nevertheless, Pedrosa makes a point of addressing the danger of fetishization of folk art and craftsmanship by pointing out that this «is not always a creative form of the people. [...] On the contrary, it often expresses an ideology of dependence, insofar as it is a production destined to satisfy the tourist market's interest in folklore. This interest reflects the colonizing image that the capitalist countries impose on our America. At other times it served fascist ideology.»³¹ For Pedrosa, craftsmanship only attains revolutionary value if it helps to smash the class structure.

Addressing income redistribution policy, Pedrosa points to processes of change for the most disadvantaged social groups, including achieving «creative freedom» in craftwork. Pedrosa notes that this «new state of the artisan» also motivates the bourgeoisie to «engage in this activity, which until then was considered unworthy of its class. Any craft trade seemed inappropriate for the upper bourgeoisie and the so-called «middle class», except, of course, for the trade in objects that could be considered artistically valuable and were thus attractive to the market—such as what were known as costume jewellery shops. With this designation, the purported artist intended (and still intends) to distinguish his production from that of the worker-jeweller, in terms of both status and economics. [...] The distinction between craftsman and artist fades and the craftsman takes on the social situation of the artist».³² Pedrosa's report also aims to link Mothers' Centres in Chile (COCEMA) to the cultural flourishing of folk art as a political success of the Allende government. According to Pedrosa, craftsmanship gained prestige; even the Chilean bourgeoisie, especially its left-wing members, acquired a taste for craftsmanship as a means to give visual expression to their national identity. During the Unidad Popular period, many craft groups emerged, and numerous cultural centres were established, setting up workshops for weaving, painting, and other disciplines. With these increasingly bottom-up cultural activities, one can even speak of a quiet cultural revolution. This served the purpose of aesthetic education, but

dismantling arts' hierarchical order

national identity construction

- [E] What are the political prerequisites for socially engaged architecture or design?
- [O] What is the significance and relevance of the Bauhaus and Modernism today—a historical phenomenon or a resource for the present? And what, if anything, constitutes their current relevance?

also fostered exchanges and conviviality. Pedrosa had no doubt that precisely these centres would be closed or at least more closely controlled after the fall of Allende, because «they represented a further form of progress that people made during the Allende experience».³³

Mário Pedrosa and Gui Bonsiepe and the Vision of Production from the Periphery Inspired by Cultural Policy

In the early 1970s, Mário Pedrosa and Gui Bonsiepe were observers, co-creators and intellectual forces who also reflected on peripheral differences, at the same time as the Socialist Democrat upheavals. Both agreed that the solutions implemented in Chile, adapted to local conditions, could make an important contribution to improving living standards for ordinary people. Both crafts and peripheral design were developed with a focus on saving resources, i.e. «sustainably», and were adjusted to meet the needs of the population and reflect the anti-capitalist specifications of Allende's government in Chile. In adopting this focus, they led to production of Latin American design that was intrinsically motivated by cultural-political concerns, in other words, to peripheral design.

resolving problems at regional
and local level

sustainability

- [E]
- [O]

Notes

- 1 The secret police imprisoned Gui Bonsiepe and accused him of Marxist thinking. He was only released thanks to the intervention of the West German vice-consul. E-mail to the authors, February 11, 2020.
- 2 Jonathan Haslam, *The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende's Chile: A Case of Assisted Suicide*, New York: Verso, 2005.
- 3 Gui Bonsiepe, *Design im Übergang zum Sozialismus. Ein technisch-politischer Erfahrungsbericht aus dem Chile der Unidad Popular (1971–1973)*, Hamburg 1974, p. 11, 21.
- 4 E-mail to the authors, February 11, 2020.
- 5 Felicidad Romero-Tejedor, «Tomás Maldonado. Seine Aktualität für das designwissenschaftliche Denken», in: *Design und Gesellschaft: Wandel der Lebensformen*, (ed.) President of the University of Applied Sciences, Lübeck, Kassel 2014, pp. 74–82.
- 6 René Spitz, *HfG Ulm. Kurze Geschichte der Hochschule für Gestaltung / Concise History of the Ulm School of Design*, Zurich 2014, p. 84 f.
- 7 Gui Bonsiepe, *Teoría y práctica del diseño industrial – elementos para una manualística crítica*, Barcelona 1978, p. 48.
- 8 James Fathers, «Peripheral Vision: An Interview with Gui Bonsiepe. Charting a Lifetime of Commitment to Design Empowerment», in: *Design Issues*, 19, 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 44–56.
- 9 Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries. Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile*, London, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2011, https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Eden_Medina_Cybernetic_Revolutionaries.pdf (Consulted May 11, 2020); Eden Medina, «From Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile», in: *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 48, 1 (2015), pp. 109–117.
- 10 David Maulén de los Reyes, «Interfaz y heterarquía: diseños de interacción locales para la independencia colaborativa descentralizada», in: *Revista Chilena de Diseño. RChD: creación y pensamiento*, 1, 1 (2016), pp. 65–78; Hugo Palmarola, «Productos y Socialismo: Diseño Industrial Estatal en Chile», in: 1973. *La vida cotidiana de un año crucial*, (ed.) Claudio Rolle, Santiago de Chile 2003, pp. 225–295.
- 11 E-mail to the authors, August 10, 2019.
- 12 Medina 2011 (as Note 9), p. 3.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 14 Medina 2015 (as Note 9), p. 117.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 116.
- 16 Fathers 2003 (as Note 8), p. 48.
- 17 Bonsiepe 1974 (as Note 3), p. 12.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 19 Cf. also Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development—The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton/Oxford 1995.
- 20 Bonsiepe 1974 (as Note 3), p. 14.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 22 Pablo Quintero, «Notas sobre la teoría de la colonialidad del poder y la estructuración de la sociedad en América Latina», in: *Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios en Etnolingüística y Antropología Socio-Cultural*, No 19, 2010. The term also appears in Bonsiepe 1978 (as Note 7), p. 68.
- 23 Bonsiepe 1974 (as Note 3), p. 40.
- 24 E-mail to the authors, August 10, 2019.
- 25 Bonsiepe 1978 (as Note 7), pp. (64) 69 f.
- 26 Bonsiepe 1974 (as Note 3), p. 41.
- 27 Jakob Schmidt and Jannis Funk, «Chiles kybernetischer Traum von Gerechtigkeit. Projekt Cybersyn», Deutschlandfunk, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/chiles-kybernetischer-traum-von-gerechtigkeit-projekt.3720.de.html?drum:article_id=471842 (Consulted May 11, 2020).
- 28 Mário Pedrosa, «O modelo chileno de socialismo e a Frente das artes», in: *Política das artes. Textos escolhidos*, São Paulo 1995, p. 318.
- 29 Mário Pedrosa, «Arte culta e arte popular», in: *Política das artes. Selected texts I*, (ed.) Otilia Arantes, São Paulo 1995, pp. 321–332. The essay was first published in the journal *Arte em Revista* (1971–1984), Nr. 3.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 328.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 328–329.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 331.