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Vision of the Future: Philips and Post-Modernism

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# Introduction

We have grown up in a world based on the Modernist vision of relentless industrial progress. We are now in need of a more holistic view (Philips Corporate Design, 1996, p.8).

This thesis will deal with theoretical responses to the evolution of modernity and the role of the mass commodity within culture. It will then explore these theories in relation to the development of Philips, culminating in an investigation into their *Vision of the Future* as a project that defines and locates central aspects of what may or may not be post-modernism in design.

In the summer of 1996 Philips released a conceptual design project called *Vision of the Future* under the direction of the head of their Corporate Design Centre, Stefano Marzano. The above quote characterises the idealistic style of the literature that accompanies the visual material in the project. This literature and many of the speeches of Stefano Marzano explicitly claim for the project a wide socially progressive role in society and culture. Taken at face value, these statements would signal a remarkable change in the design philosophy at Philips, re-establishing the kind of socially progressive theoretical framework that design lost after the early work of the Modern Movement. In most forms of cultural activity in the industrialised world there has been a perceived division between what is called modernism and post-modernism, which the above quote from Marzano refers to. Unusually for a large-scale industrial design project, *Vision of the Future* explicitly addresses the broader cultural issues of needs, commodities and consumer policies. These issues have been a continual theme of cultural critics from Marx to Baudrillard, but have been addressed by them from an almost diametrically opposed point of view. 'Critical theory' is a global term, coined by Kellner. This term will be used throughout this thesis to describe sets of ideas critical







of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's social realities. These ideas can be broadly said to be shared by theorists like Adorno, Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard, among others. Critical theory has been the major force in discussion of the past, present and future of modernity. It is an obvious reference point in the analysis of a project that defines itself as a break with modernity; a modernity with which industrial design has been strongly identified. The responses of critical theory have in the main, been deeply sceptical and critical of capitalist culture as it has developed this century. Accordingly, the critical responses to the role of designed commodities within this culture are also negative, but this pessimism strongly contrasts with the fervent utopian tone of the literature that accompanies the *Vision of the Future* and in Marzano's speeches. Critical theory is an area that is rarely addressed within most design literature and can provide radical analysis in the face of writing which does not always question the various purposes of designed objects. The writings of Douglas Kellner and David Harvey were invaluable in helping to navigate through some of the more extreme negative spaces of critical responses, particularly those of Adorno and Baudrillard. Philips were also very helpful in providing primary source material connected with the *Vision of the Future* and copies of speeches that Marzano has delivered. Any evaluation and comparison of *Vision of the Future* and critical theory will necessarily reflect on the validity and accuracy of both, because of the conflicting nature of their ideas and values.

Aside from *Vision of the Future*, Philips provide an excellent example of the development of industrial design in society and within the company. Philips and industrial design can be said to have had broadly parallel and concurrent histories since the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the exceptional changes connected with modernity became widespread in Western society - especially the emergence of urban masses and paradigms for present systems of mass-production and consumption.







Although critical theory and Philips coexist as part of the 20th century, both were anticipated in the radical cultural changes in European industry and philosophy of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century - the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Industrial design's roots clearly lie in the divisions of labour of the industrial revolution. The dialectic methodology of critical theory was framed during the Enlightenment. Social theory and design were strongly connected from the 1850's with the work of William Morris and Henry Cole, this lasted right up until the work of the Bauhaus, following which design lost its socially progressive edge and became an essentially commercial weapon. In *Vision of the Future* we have a project that seems to reconnect itself to the theories of the Enlightenment, which were contemporaneous with the industrial revolution. Product design has always been more visibly connected to the Industrial Revolution than with the Enlightenment.

The first chapter will investigate theories and principles of modernism and post modernism as they emerged from the Enlightenment to find their most direct expression in the work of the modern movement's designers and architects. It will look at the trajectory of the modernity that gave rise to Philips and industrial design and endeavour to show that evaluations of post-modernity must refer in some way to the Enlightenment. Hopefully, a discernible linear path will be seen leading from the Enlightenment to pioneer and commercial forms of modernism. This chapter also outlines the reactions of critical theorists to the condition of modernity, that also elicited the ideas of the Modern Movement. This section will provide the theoretical framework necessary for the discussion Philips and *Vision in the Future* in relation to post-modernism.

Using Philips as an example, the second chapter will attempt to show the steady divergence of the paths of modernism and product design. Philips first explored and then abandoned the model of pioneer modernism of the Modern Movement as a visual style, primarily because it was not suited to commercial interests. The mass production of plastics required and imposed different





aesthetic values. This was replaced with a more commercial style that recast the designer as a part of a corporate team rather than as an individual artist. This new co-operative role for designers shows how the role of design at Philips grew within the company. It became integrated as an increasingly important part of marketing, as the company became global.

The third and final chapter of this thesis will connect the seemingly divergent subject matter of the first two chapters. It will explore some of the more prominent critical theories in relation to Philips' *Vision of the Future* project to see what kind of post-modernism it might represent and what changes it shows from a modernist design ethic. It will look at Philips' project under various headings prompted by readings of critical theory, but will also refer to some of the technological and marketing developments that characterised the development of Philips.

This thesis will look at *Vision of the Future* and examine its relation to contemporary culture, using the serious, but possibly extreme philosophy of critical theory as a yardstick.





# Chapter I

## *Theories of modern and post-modern culture*

### 1.1 Modernism and modernity

There is a mode of vital experience- experience of space and time, of the self and others, that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience “modernity”. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power and transformation.....and at the same time threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are’ (Berman, 1982, p.15),

“[Modernism] is the genuine and legitimate style of our century” (Pevsner, 1936, p.42.).

The above quote from Marshall Berman, illustrates an idea of *modernity* as a mode of existence, as distinct from the broad cultural and design movement *Modernism* that Pevsner describes. Berman’s statement also identifies the contradictory hopes and fears that modernity has created, feelings which go back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and are certainly present today.

Berman lists philosophers and writers, such as Marx, Nietzsche, Joyce, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky who have addressed and tried to deal with the ephemeral, fragmented and continual chaotic change of a modern urban society. Although these writers and theorists lived at different times in various European cities, all were part of an intellectual trend which dealt with the advent of a mass society and industrialised environment and the consequent nostalgia for previous social and cultural ways of life.







For a proper understanding of Modernism as a cultural form, it is important to look at it as a reaction to *modernity* - an attempt to deal, positively and rationally, with an increasingly industrialised environment. This reaction first took place during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in most forms of political and cultural discourse, such as politics, the visual arts, philosophy and design. It is therefore necessary to briefly define and trace the development of the 'modern' society, before assessing design's response to it. This is a vast area to examine, but in any discussion of modernity, contemporary cultural theory can best define terms and provide a context for examining Philips as a post-modern design company.

## 1.2 The Enlightenment; objectivity and rationality

Although the word 'modern' has a separate history of its own, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas describes the "unfinished project of modernity" (Harvey, 1989, p.12) as having its roots firmly in the Enlightenment and in the emergence of the middle classes in the mid- eighteenth century. The Enlightenment began in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and was characterised by intellectuals, philosophers and theologians, (mainly in Britain and continental Europe) taking part in a period of cultural upheaval which has had profound consequences for the modern world. Among the most notable changes were the development of politics, services and goods aimed at the 'masses'. The mass manufacture of goods was made possible by the related Industrial Revolution. Habermas explains, that during this period, it was believed that the use of rational thought and inner logic could achieve universal human emancipation. This intellectual upheaval, led to a huge alteration of perceptions and ideas at the time. It was felt by intellectuals at the time that the scientific control of nature would give freedom from want and environmental disaster and that rational thought and social organisation had the potential to liberate people from fear, religious superstition and oppression.







Enlightenment thinking was in its essence utopian, based on a belief in the progressive nature of technology and science, seeking to modernise continually, deliberately breaking with tradition and history. This involved a conscious separation and categorisation of reality into dual oppositions, the functions of mind against body, human against machine and spirit against intellect.

The Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, agrees that modernity is an extension of Enlightenment principles, but unlike Habermas, who is supportive of “the unfinished project of modernity” (Harvey, 1989, p.12), Adorno sees this extension as having had a profoundly negative effect on contemporary culture. Adorno puts an extreme case forward, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*- stating that the logic of external control and domination of nature, results in oppression in the name of liberation, and led directly to horrors such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the concentration camps of Nazi Germany (Bernstein, 1995, p.9). Whether this view is accurate or not Adorno provides useful examples. In his mapping out of the emergence of mass culture (of which industrial design is an essential part), he shows its roots in the Enlightenment. Adorno criticises the role of mass production under capitalism and his most relevant theories to industrial design concern how the Enlightenment paved the way for the mass produced commodity and the emergence of mass aesthetics, .

The mass manufacture of goods depends on two general ideas: the production of tools and machines with standard interchangeable parts and the division of labour into specific tasks, requiring low skill levels. This division of labour was anticipated by the various binary oppositions created, not necessarily at the time of the Enlightenment, but as an associated historical tendency. and was expressed in the Industrial Revolution. Thus the separation of hand and mind, thought from act, manual and intellectual work, led to the possibility of a division of the manufacturing process into tasks dictated by the production line. Adorno concentrates on the methods and modes of production as the main determinant of mass culture. Conversely, the French cultural philosopher Jean Baudrillard, focuses





on the consumption of objects and images as the basis of contemporary social order.

Throughout *Simulations* Baudrillard is broadly in agreement with Adorno about the importance of the Enlightenment in influencing modern culture (1981), but he divides cultural and economic history since the Renaissance into three different era's characterised by what he calls "orders of simulacra"(1983, p.34 ). These are the

- *Counterfeit* - from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, where fashion was born and signs are freed from meaning..
- *Production* - the second order which was dominated by the manufacture of the standardised object or 'sign' leading inevitably into:
- *Simulation* - the third of order of simulacra and the present 'post-modern' phase of 20th century global culture. This is typified by the mass-production of images *simulating* reality and the collapse of the traditional binary oppositions inherited from the Enlightenment between high and low art, appearance and reality etc.

For Baudrillard this development is most notable for the growth and use of the 'sign' function in objects, when their meanings as symbols of status, wealth, taste etc. are unconnected to their 'use' or 'exchange-value'.

### 1.3 Towards modernism

How relevant are Adorno's and Baudrillard's views on modernity and culture to industrial design as it has developed this century? Adorno's view, that under the influence of capitalism all production has been used for profit, rather than meeting any human need, was anticipated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist, designer and craftsman William Morris. Morris expressed fears about what effects the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and capitalism were having on both artistic expression and society in general,







It is not this or the tangible steel and brass machine that we want to get rid of, but the great intangible commercial tyranny which oppresses the life of all of us, (Forty, 1986, p.61).

This century, life in the Western world has been typified by constant cultural and sociological changes. The main benefits of the newly industrialised urban environment were improvements in transport and the increased availability of new types of goods. However, according to Forty, a feature of industrial capitalism is that progress becomes 'synonymous with the range of changes brought about by industrial capital' (1986, p.11). For all the undoubted material advantages that progress had brought, Morris found it disturbing in terms of the corruption of art and craft, the demise of master craftsmen, urban growth and consequent social problems. These ideas anticipate in a cruder form those of Baudrillard and Adorno, and Morris can perhaps be seen as an early modernist. His views were later very influential at the Bauhaus school. When the leading Bauhaus figures were laying down the rational and progressive guidelines for the direction of mass-production, they took on board his ideas particularly in regard to the social benefits of providing artistic values to ordinary people.

More positive reactions to industrial progress were recorded by those more closely involved in the changes brought about by the industrialisation of European society: the 'modernisers' of the industrial revolution themselves. For example, in the late eighteenth century, British scientists, political economists and entrepreneurs like Joseph Priestly, Adam Smith, Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton recorded extremely positive views of the effects that the Industrial Revolution and capital would have for economics and society, believing that such progress was a beneficial and necessary process that could continue endlessly. Adam Smith was one of most influential people in creating practical theories of capitalism, believing that the "hidden hand of the market would convert even the most dubious moral sentiments into a result beneficial for all" (Harvey, 1989, p.14).





## 1.4 Design and The Modern Movement

*'We must create the mass-production spirit!'* Le Corbusier (1927. 12)

Modernism as a movement, in all its cultural forms, tried to come to terms with and give comprehensible expression to a rapidly changing social and material environment. The architects and designers of the Modern Movement were the most prominent and accessible creators of a language to suit the times, as objects and environments were much more open to the masses than the works of artists and writers within the Modernist tradition such as Marx, Pollock, Joyce and Proust etc. The designers of objects and buildings provided a tangible reaction to modernity, because they were (however indirectly) involved in the actual mass-production processes that were affecting society.

The linking of social change and mass-production aesthetics grew from the doctrines of European movements around the turn of the century like Constructivism, De Stijl, Supremacism, the Deutscher Werkbund and most notably the Bauhaus. The groups that preceded the Modern Movement were idealistic and hopeful, taking previously disparate ideas on style, society and technology and bringing them together with standardisation and mass-production as their central tenets. They had anti-historicist basis and they felt that they were contributing to a new age of human society. The Bauhaus was founded in Weimar, Germany, by the architect, Walter Gropius and from 1919 until its closure by the National Socialists in 1933, it was one of the main centres of European modernism in art, design and architecture. The Bauhaus is perhaps the central symbol of industrial design as it has emerged this century, an attempt at expressing the spirit of reason, progress and social change in manifestos, works of art, objects and buildings. It called for the creation of a timeless aesthetic, to represent through abstract ideas through simplicity and coherence between production and context of use. The designers of the Modern Movement were the first to fully embrace industrial technology to achieve their social objectives. In their search for an appropriate mass aesthetic







they focused on the newly available production processes of the time as central metaphors for developing aesthetic and social organisation. The visual and formal language that they developed in Europe took as its sole metaphor the object that had such a profound effect on culture - the machine. This visual language was based on the reduction and rationalisation of all designed objects into basic geometric shapes for ease of production, so that objects would clearly express their nature and function. Marcel Breuer's *Thonet* chair, 1927, is as close as the modernists got to their ideals of clear and logical shapes based on rational principles. This chair sums up their attempts at the creation of 'type forms'. Its simple canvas seat is supported by tubular steel legs. This was seen as the optimal functional (and hence aesthetic) solution for a practical commodity of everyday use. Products such as the chair were intended to rise above all levels of style and taste to become timeless and universally acceptable objects.



Figure 1.1:  
Marcel Breuer's  
*Thonet* chair,  
1927.

It is important to note that while not all or even most of industrial design this century was conducted in the spirit of the Modern Movement, the importance of the Bauhaus and related groups lies in the fact that an aesthetic role for modern industrial designers was created. Baudrillard cites the Bauhaus as the definitive turning point in the position of the mass-produced object in society, leading to the







commercial product design we have had throughout this century (Palmer, 1996, p.118). The modern movement was one of the first serious attempts to distribute high culture aesthetics to the masses, rationally bringing together the traditional binary oppositions formulated at the Enlightenment, such as beauty and utility, art and industry, high and low culture etc. This is seen by the American cultural critic Frederic Jameson as the first steps in the disastrous implosion or negation of all cultural boundaries that characterises late-capitalist culture, when the mass-produced commodity, was placed within what Baudrillard calls "The System of Objects" (1968, p.14). The Bauhaus defined the aesthetic and functional role of the commodity as a *sign* in itself of technology, a position it first occupied in relation to the domestic environment. This was manifested in with the use of furniture and interiors by the Bauhaus and then later in Philips' emphasis on domestic consumer goods. Up until this point mass-produced products were produced in combinations of *counterfeit* styles, i.e. their decoration represented natural or figurative forms etc. The work of the modern movement marked the start of the universally semanticised environment, made up of this 'system' of designed objects. There was a great emphasis within the modern movement on functionalism in design, on fitness for purpose, but this was not fully reflected in the objects designed by the Bauhaus, which were more symbolic of function than actually functional. The Bauhaus designers only ever produced furniture, textiles, graphics and craft objects. They never fully tackled mass commodities with mechanical or electrical functions. One of the most important cultural effects of the work of the modern movement was in making objects with an industrial aesthetic (and metal as a material) acceptable in a domestic environment.

By the mid 1920's there were versions of modernist activity in most Western countries. However, the Modern Movement's work soon became better known as a visual style in architecture and design. Versions of Modernist principles found their way into a few European companies such as AEG, Philips, Braun and Olivetti , but only in the form of visual language that had connotations of functionalism. This was largely defined by the constraints of production and technology. The vaguely socialist ideology of the Bauhaus was too elitist and politically motivated for the





manufacturing industry's commercial needs, so was abandoned. This resulted in a 'commercial modernism' that was the dominant style in European product design this century with modern tenets inherited from the Modern movement such as an 'artificial' aesthetic that was largely defined by mass production techniques. The division between 'High' modernist utopian theory and commercially driven design disintegrated, this can be seen in the fact that Philips sponsored and provided the lighting for Mies van der Rohe's design of the German pavilion at the 1929 *Exposicion Internacional* in Barcelona. Philips were of course a commercially driven company, but were still loosely influenced by and connected to the modern movement. This influence was summed up by the first director of their Design Bureau, Louis C. Kalff who in 1929 said that "Constant technical improvement will lead to an exterior correct to the last detail and exuding modernity" (Heskett, 1989, p.20). Aside from aesthetic and methodological connections to the work of the Bauhaus, the reality of product design is that it has progressed relatively free of ideology, because of the fact that functional and commercial factors leave little room for theoretical expression.

## 1.5 Critical reaction to Modernism and modernity.

Both the documentation accompanying Philips' recent *Vision of the Future* project and most contemporary critical theory call for a break with the values of Modernism as it has developed from the Enlightenment. This section therefore will not be a discussion of the merits and flaws of modernism, rather it looks at critical reaction to the effects of Modernism in design and culture and how this may or may not relate to postmodernism. The Modern Movement's version of *Modernism* gave direct expression to the rational principles of the Enlightenment, in either a utopian spirit of progress and reason or a more negative one of elitism, social control and alienation, depending on who provides the analysis. The reactions of critical theory are almost all sceptical and critical of both the pioneer and more commercial forms of Modernism, but provide a good example of how the two are linked to each other and lead inevitably (they believe) towards a dominant post-modernism. For







Baudrillard, Adorno, Marcuse and Jameson, modernism is not defined by standard clichés of the aesthetics and style of production, reason, social change and progressive technology. They are concerned with a more negative view, in which all mass production comes under the command of the capitalist rationale. In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard uses industrial design as one of the central pillars of his attacks on political economy and culture as they have developed since the Enlightenment (1988, p.14-21). Here design has become the absolute embodiment of capitalist culture, with no critical tradition of itself or its role in the cultural environment because of its complete integration into profit orientated production.

We see in Adorno's analysis how all production has come under the influence of capitalism (1991, p.4-6). This has resulted in control by the market so that goods are produced and technologies advanced only as a means for the creation of wealth and power. Adorno does not refer directly to specific designed objects, but does refer to general mass cultural commodities. He refers continually to the disintegration of art in contemporary society together with the growing aesthetic role of the commodity:

'Just as art works become commodities and are enjoyed as such, the commodity itself becomes image, representation and spectacle. The commodification of art ends up in the aestheticization of the commodity.' (1991, p.5 )

For Adorno high art was being drawn down to the level of mass or 'low' culture under capitalist production modes, resulting in the devaluation of art. This gave more credibility to what he felt were low cultural forms. So that, under capitalism both high and mass culture can only be part of an ephemeral system of consumption - a cycle of fashion. Baudrillard extends this point going further to state that in the ceaseless mesh of transitory mass communications and objects, art and design have lost any potential to be socially progressive or even comprehensible to the 'masses' (1983, p.18). For Baudrillard art and design come together as the expression of a superficial, but potent aesthetic sign system. The tendency towards post-modernism has been one of replacing ideology with commercial expediency.







In *Pioneer's of Modern Design*, Nikolaus Pevsner defender and champion of modernism in design wrote that the architect or designer,

to represent this century of ours must be colder, cold to keep in command of mechanised production, cold to design to the satisfaction of anonymous clients. However, genius will find its own way even in times of overpowering collective energy, even within the medium of the twentieth century which, because it is a genuine style, rather than a passing fashion, is universal. (1936, p.214-15).

This quote reveals two common prejudices and grounds for the rejection of Modernism; first that it put expert, objective opinion above everyday subjective learning and secondly that it treats all people the same, as part of the objectified 'overpowering' masses defined in opposition to the 'genius', who *must* be cold and rational. Pevsner calls for the already distant relationship between the designer/architect and the design user to be colder, but while much of the work of the European modernists was aimed at the workers as a homogenous class, little of it actually referred to them as individuals. Man was to be 're-educated', elevated and improved (man meant humankind as a whole) from above, with the metaphor of the factory applied to all aspects of life. In Walter Gropius' view; "The repetition of the same things has a settling and civilising influence on men's minds" (Mitchell, 1993, p.6 ).

The critical perception that there were totalitarian, alienating aspects in the modernists attempts at universal values (an issue addressed to some degree, in the literature accompanying Philips' *Visions of the Future* Project), is further addressed by Adorno's belief that the progressive aims of the Enlightenment have produced a rather different, dystopian effect, and that the

'securing of a means for the possible realisation of happiness, come in fact, to entail an irresistible regression.....as the culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above' (Bernstein 1995. 5).

This view ties in with that of Jameson, Marcuse, and Baudrillard who all see deliberate organisation and structures for social control and homogenisation in the workings of the culture industry, so that all aspects in it, (including the people) become 'functional' design objects, all part of a homogenised, "whole environment





that becomes a signifier, objectified as a symbol of signification” where everything ‘must’ have a function’ (Baudrillard, 1983, p.65). Unfortunately, most of the critical theorists mentioned in this thesis express their ideas in a dialectic style without reference to specific artefacts of the society they examine. So that the question remains; can we really view the seemingly innocuous ranges of domestic and personal products released (by Philips for example) throughout this century as representing an ‘irresistible regression’? In the view of Herbert Marcuse, the success of such a seemingly destructive social order, lies in the fact that that the products produced,

carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumer more or less pleasantly to the producer, and through the latter, to the whole (Smart, 1993, p.46).

This is a question which will be addressed later when we look at a contemporary Philips project, *Vision of the Future* in terms of critical theory.

## 1.6 Characteristics of modernism

- Rational linear approach
- Production based aesthetics and culture
- Elitist and purist cultural view, in opposition to the masses
- Ahistorical
- Utopian, idealist and progressive
- Ideologically motivated
- Concerned with oppositions from the Enlightenment
- Industrially based social order
- Serious/intellectual
- Attempted to represent truths for the masses







## 1.7 Postmodernity and postmodernism

It has become more and more difficult to specify what exactly it is that “post-modernism” is supposed to refer to, as the term gets stretched across different debates, different disciplinary and discursive boundaries (Rose, 1992, p.119)

Post-modernism as a concept first gained currency in the late 1970's, in a debate that grew in Europe and North America in political, scientific and philosophical circles and covered a variety of cultural forms such as architecture, literature, art, music and film. From the early 1980's most debate on the subject has been polarised along an axis between groups who seek to celebrate the seemingly inclusive, democratic nature of post-modernism and those who wish to reject it as a meaningless and shallow 'non-movement': defining it as either a new phase of or radical departure from modernism. This controversy is exemplified by a debate that took place in the 1980's between Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francoise Lyotard, and which revolved around the issue of whether the aims originally expressed at the Enlightenment should be rejected or pursued. A turning point in this debate (and subsequent argument on post-modernism) was the publication of Lyotard's essay *La Condition Post-Moderne* in which he expressly deconstructs the meta-narratives<sup>1</sup> which Modernism attempted to formulate and represent. Lyotard contradicts Habermas' view, and rejects his argument that there is any positive or emancipatory potential in the Enlightenment. Lyotard presents a post-modern cultural climate of “scepticism towards all meta-narratives” (Harvey, 1988, p.42), an incredulity he himself holds in common with many critical theorists.

The initial arguments about the ‘end’ of modernity saw it as a major cultural change in the cultural climate of Europe and North America, but because of the complicated relationship between culture and society, only later was the question asked - If post modernism exists as a cultural movement does this mean that the social condition of post-modernity is different to that of modernity? Can we reasonably say that the

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<sup>1</sup> Metanarratives are the self-legitimising myths, supposedly absolute, that are used to justify various courses of action. For example, universal emancipation, through rational thought and technical progress was a metanarrative of the Enlightenment.







experience of post-modernity, as it may have emerged since the 1970's is markedly different to the experience of modernity, or is it as Jameson outlines, a cynical and empty cultural reaction to the intensification of modern society and the domination of all cultural and economic production under capitalism? (Harvey, 1989, p.60-63). The huge global industrial base that accompanied the rise of modernity, is still present and has been extended into other parts of the world and mass media. Thus post-modernity can be seen as largely (but not entirely) continuous with modernity, with clear connections in the roles of mass-culture and mass-commodities in society. Many theorists (Jameson and Baudrillard for instance) define post-modernism as the simultaneous extension and collapse of modernity as it developed from the Enlightenment. Jameson sees this as a natural effect of "the logic of late capitalism" - a new era in itself (1991, p.46). He feels that post-modern culture is a direct consequence of the development and distortion of Modernism. This is characterised within by "a new depthlessness and a weakening of historicity...fragmentation of the subject [individual]" (Smart, 1992, p.17). This intensification of modernity is mainly a result of and expressed by the chaotic change, which is coincident with the acceleration of information technology. Contemporary critical theory identifies post-modernity with the rise and increasing importance of the mass communications media of the Culture Industry. Critical theory maintains the primary function of the mass-media is to shape needs, attitudes and behaviours of the public, integrating them into consumer society. Where modernity was defined by the mass-production of objects, Baudrillard feels that the post-modern era can be defined by the consumption of mass produced images coincident with improvements and refinements of marketing, production techniques and communications technology. There is no unifying meta narrative behind post-modernist culture and this is one of the major differences it has with modernity.

The term post modernism, if it can be said to describe a movement at all, defines itself in the negative terms of being after the 'modern'. It cannot, therefore be looked at as a coherent movement with any particular goals beyond the deconstruction of previous values. For Harvey the most startling aspect of post-





modern culture is its acceptance of the fragmentation and chaos, caused by the intensification of modernity,

Post modernism responds to it in a very particular way it. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it or even to define it.....Post modernism swims in the fragmentary currents of change as if that is all there is (Harvey, 1989, p.42)

## 1.8 Post modernism in design

While theoretical debates of post-modernism go on (largely ignored by wider society), other cultural forms, such as 'Pop' Art were more practical and visible in providing reactions to (post)modernity. A feature of this is the disintegration of the divide between high and low culture, with emergence of transient 'pop' aesthetics. Just as architecture was the clearest expression of modernist principles, it again provided one of the earliest and most visible proclamations of what post-modernism might be in 1966 in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, one of the earliest post-modernist manifestos. Venturi felt the eclectic 'pop' aesthetics of Las Vegas and Disneyland were a truer reflection of what the public wanted from architecture, than had been offered by high modernism. In claiming these places as symbolic of American utopias, he suggested a post-modern architecture that would reject the failed universalism of modernism, whose failure to combat or even understand the nature of capitalist society resulted in their plain glass and steel exteriors glorifying its power structures, ironically a style that had its aesthetic roots in worker housing. Venturi's alternative was to suggest a new direction for architecture, which was exemplified by the ironic, visual language games of Philip Johnson's and John Burgess' AT&T building in New York 1983, which returns to the use of overt symbolism. This building is clad in pink granite and decorated with references to grandfather clocks and Chippendale furniture. It is however, an essentially commercial modernist building in its broader function and conception.









Figure 1.2:  
Philip Johnson and  
John Burges.  
AT&T Corporate  
Headquarters, New  
York, 1983.

A less stylistically based attempt to define a viable architecture after modernism was by architectural theorist Charles Jencks who saw in the increasing complexity of digital information systems reflections of organic systems and possibilities to personalise mass-production, and forward pluralistic rather than universalist values. While some architectural quarters have been defining and describing themselves as post-modern for over 25 years, product design has never been very confident in its approaches to post-modernism and has not had a response to it in the same way as other cultural forms. One exception to this rule (that perhaps emphasises it), is the work of Ettore Sotsass Jnr.'s Memphis group.

Memphis was formed in Milan in 1981 and is one of the most notable examples of an attempt to give an intellectual direction to design after modernism. Like Venturi and Johnson, he visually replaced surface with depth, subjective taste with 'truth', ephemerality with timelessness. Sotsass also used the aesthetics of pop culture in rejecting the oppositions of high/low culture, utility/beauty that modernism represented. This can be seen in his *Carlton* bookcase of 1991, which is covered in plastic laminate, with bright coloured prints. However, from the point of view of







everyday industrial design, the work of Memphis may not be an entirely satisfactory example. As with the Modern Movement, Sottsass and his colleagues chose not to reconcile their ideologically expressive objects with mass-commodities and technical function. In this sense Sottsass could be seen as an ideologically driven design outsider, were it not for the fact that Memphis was a sideline while he worked as a senior consultant designer for among others, Olivetti - one of the original companies to be inspired by modernism. This shows the difficulties of integrating ideology and the technical and commercial constraints of mass-manufacturing functional objects. Although the rhetoric of Memphis was interesting - it's main impact was as a stylistic, rather than philosophical challenge to the control of modernism under commercial design. This approach, although it may have seemed quite pluralistic and opposed to the intellectualism of the Modernists, was in fact quite similar, in that the architects and designers were still imposing aesthetics 'from above' as part of an intellectual elite. While they shared the intellectualism of the modern movement, Memphis attempted to incorporate public tastes into their high design objects.

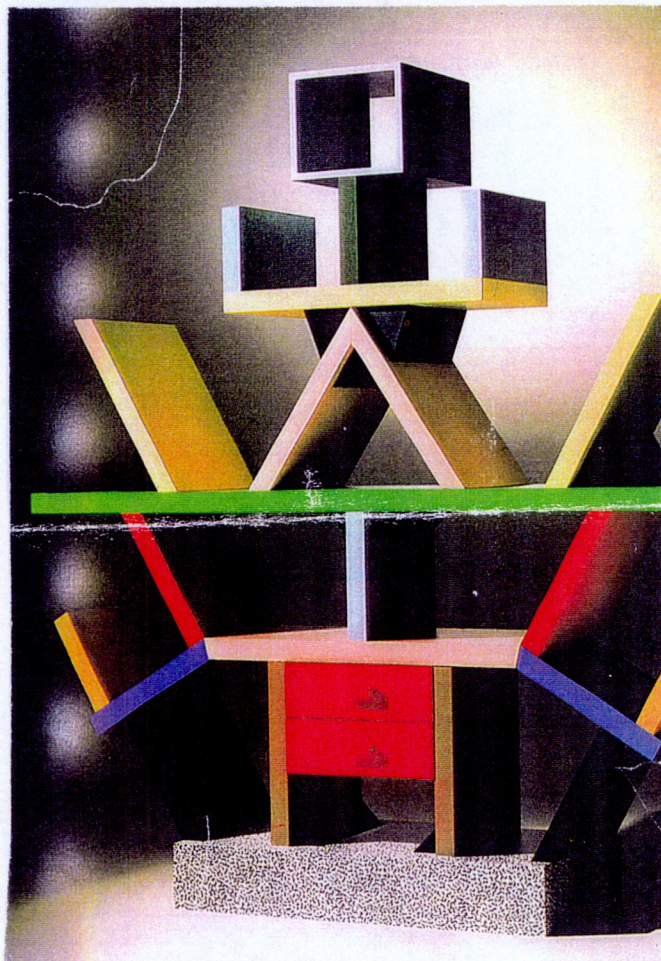


Figure 1.3  
Ettore Sottsass, Jnr.  
*Carlton* bookcase for  
Memphis, 1981.







Thus two views of post-modernism can be seen to have been expressed within design and architecture, Venturi's conception of an eclectic vernacular which doesn't actually challenge the commercial modernist model of architecture and on the other hand a more openly critical one represented by Sotssass, which attempts the deconstruction of modernism's role in consumption and relates to the philosophies of Jameson and Adorno. Neither of these versions of post-modernism presents a challenge to critical theory's view that effectively radical architecture and design are impossible because of their complete entanglement in the world of commerce. In consequence design and architecture can only comment on the subsumation of all production under commercial interest from an intellectual space of high design objects. The work of Sotssass emphasised the position that industrial design is unable to be both critical and commercially successful.

## 1.9 Characteristics of post-modern culture

- Non rational, eclectic approach
- Culturally eclectic and popular
- Consumption based/vernacular aesthetics
- Deconstructs history while claiming to celebrate it
- Crisis of legitimisation
- Commercially motivated
- Witness to collapse of all oppositions
- Post- or super industrial society
- Electronically based
- Ironic/playful
- Crisis of representation





This section, in defining design in relation to postmodernism is deliberately inconclusive so as to allow for the exploration of Philips' project under theoretical evaluations of post-modernism and its effects. In the context of society and mass culture it is best to define post-modernism as either an extension or rejection of modernism as it relates to the Enlightenment. However, in terms of an industrial design project that claims to be a break from modernism it is perhaps more relevant to locate it between the two opposing views of design after modernism.





# Chapter 2

## *Philips and Modernism*

The history and development of the Philips company has occurred in a similar time frame as that of both industrial design and modernism, and provides a clear example of how Modernist principles were adapted to commercial interests and subsequently abandoned in the evolution towards the post-modernism of *Vision of the Future*. This chapter will show how Philips' integration of the design function into the company hierarchy rejected the modernist vision of the independent designer. This provides an excellent example of how the role of industrial design developed and has become increasingly important to the mass-manufacturers of consumer goods, in parallel with the growing importance of aesthetics in manufactured goods.

Philips as a manufacturer of products, services and systems in the fields of lighting and electronics, celebrated its centenary in 1991, and as one of the giants of consumer electrical products is ranked in the 30 largest companies in the world. It is now a truly global company, over 330,000 people are employed in world-wide operations in over 150 countries, putting some 3000 new products on the market annually. Globally, the company operates mainly under its own name, but also has well known local and global brands: Grundig in Germany, Marantz in Japan and Panasonic globally. Philips traditional strengths, according to Heskett (1989, p.2), are in its commercial strategy and technical research, but it is clear that in recent years this has been augmented by a perceived commitment to high quality in the design of its various products.





## 2.1 The origins of Philips

Philips' inception in 1891 was the result of the combining of Gerard Philips' technical expertise in engineering and electrical lighting and the complementary entrepreneurial skills of his younger brother Anton. Gerard Philips' expertise in lighting led him, first to work for The Brush Electric Light Company in Loughborough, England and later with AEG in Berlin. In 1889, on return to his native Holland, Gerard ran an agency in the negotiation of electricity concessions offered by Amsterdam City Council. At that time there were already four light bulb factories in Holland supplying Dutch municipal and nascent mass markets. These companies were benefiting from the great deal of accumulated knowledge of scientific research into the advancing area of electrotechnology which resulted in Edison and Swan's patents for lamps using a carbon incandescent filament. With his expertise and his fathers financial backing, Gerard began experimenting in ways of making electric bulbs and lamps of his own devising and trying to find ways in which these could be efficiently manufactured on a large scale; a task that proved very problematic. However, he was eventually in a position to hire and train staff for the foundation of the company on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1891. This new factory used methods that balanced small-scale craft production and the introduction of new mass-manufacture techniques. As the research and technical aspect was time consuming, in 1895 Gerard asked his brother Anton to come in and manage the business and administration of the company. Gerard was then allowed to concentrate on technical research and production management for the new overseas markets that were being opened. In the early years of the company the Philips brothers constantly strove to increase profits by constantly enlarging the scale of production and progressive improvements in the technical quality of their light bulbs.







Even in the late 1890's, after less than ten years in business, Philips were exporting bulbs overseas into markets in countries such as Britain, Germany and Belgium, so that Gerard's modest target in 1891 of 500 bulbs a day was surpassed annually until Philips became Europe's third largest producer of light bulbs, producing with 2.7 million units in 1901. Until 1918 Philips only produced electric light bulbs and different kinds of lamps, when Anton, as commercial director decided that Philips should aim towards the manufacture of consumer objects. Over the next fifteen years Philips diversified into the production of radio components for self-assembly kits and other companies. The separate manufacture of valves, speakers, power supply units and receivers eventually culminated in 1925/26, when ready to use radio sets aimed at household markets first came on the market. During the First World War, the manufacturing economies of it's neighbouring competitors were brought into the different national war efforts. Holland however, remained neutral in the war, so Philips' expansion continued almost unchecked right up until the Second World War. During this period Philips started producing goods in many new areas and the 1930's saw constant technically led innovations resulting in developments in areas such as televisions, microphones, X-ray machines and medical equipment.

## 2.2 The Emergence of Design at Philips

Aesthetics began to be an area of direct concern to Philips' management, once the company moved into the realm of consumer goods, beyond lighting fixtures, where aesthetics had been defined solely by production and technical requirements. In 1917 the newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblatt* conducted a survey asking artists, architects and manufactures for their experiences and opinions, on collaborations between 'art and industry'. Philips response was that they carried out and were in favour of such collaborations, but that "the artists were expected to be aware of the necessity of mass production of their designs and that profits should be made...advertising material occasionally







mentioned the 'artistic' quality of products, but the references made were always vague, and any artists who may have been involved were never mentioned by name" (Vestegen, 1985, p.286).

Forty describes a process taking place in Britain in the 1920's and 30's, where new technologies were made more acceptable to an apprehensive public, largely through the activities of designers who could provide acceptable visual metaphors (1986, p.201-206). Although he doesn't mention them, his description can be applied almost directly to the early uses of aesthetic design at Philips' radios. The first separate radio components manufactured by Philips, were sold without styling as parts of bare self-assembly kits, until the first recorded attempt at product styling was made, when Philips' technical research department consulted local furniture makers and asked them to provide designs for wooden cabinets that would house the first ranges of household radios produced.

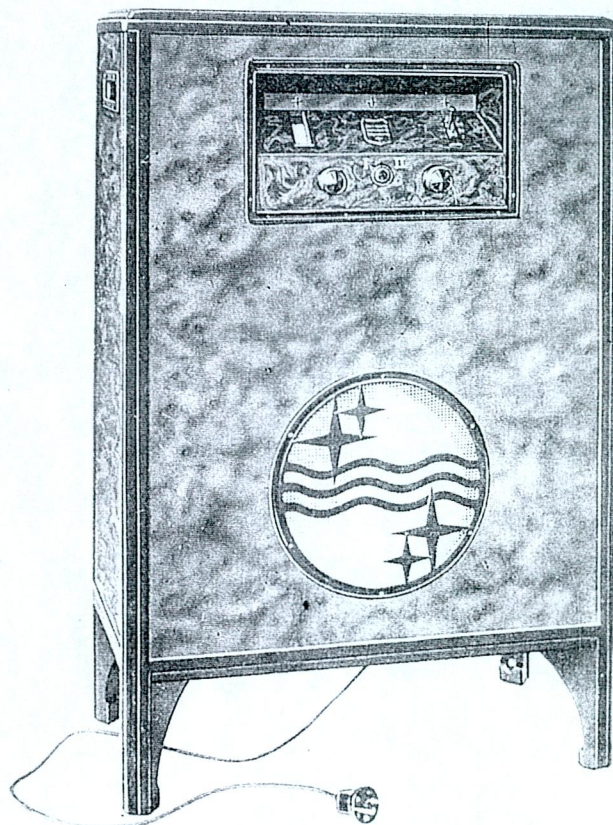


Figure 2.1  
Philips radio,  
1925.

This meant that the radios were initially identified not just as a new technological innovation of mass communications, but also a domestic object,





part of the living room furniture. These casings not only concealed the workings of the device, but also added value to the radio by making it visually attractive. When the Dutch broadcasting system first transmitted in 1919, radio became the only electrical mass-communication medium that the public at the time had access to, and the first complete models produced were sold in both radio and furniture shops.

As the technology became more acceptable and the radio became a true mass product - with 31,000 sets manufactured by Philips' in 1931- the sets were no longer 'disguised' as discrete items of furniture, but were styled as functional objects in their own right with the use of new materials and forms. This meant that the 'artificiality' of radio was soon popularly accepted and an aesthetic with no immediately recognisable basis and with connotations of modernity and progress could be successfully used. This was concurrent with the introduction of plastics into the manufacturing process to reduce production costs.

## 2.3 Philips, new materials and modernism

As well as making technology more acceptable the designers at Philips also played a role in the domesticification of plastic materials and much of the early work can be seen as trying to find a suitable aesthetic for a new material. At first plastics were solely used because they were cheap to buy and machine, allowing the wider distribution of what had been luxury goods to larger audiences, with an accompanying fall in price. The properties of plastic materials in the production process instigated a new visual language away from the aesthetic framework devised by the Bauhaus. Philips first properly used plastics in the late 1920's when these processes dictated that radio and speaker casings would have thick walls (as the plastic was quite brittle) and have no sharp edges, so that housings could be easily removed from the moulds. The unfamiliarity and artificiality of the new materials were a challenge to the







designers at Philips, as was the possibility of innovation offered by the new forms and emphasis on colour in the creation of acceptable visual identity. This resulted in a new aesthetic that tended towards efficiency, simplicity and giving consumers tangible initiation to the modernity that radio represented, while meeting both marketing and manufacturing requirements. This had the result that the plastic radios made by companies like Philips were the first mass produced electrical goods to have their own identities.

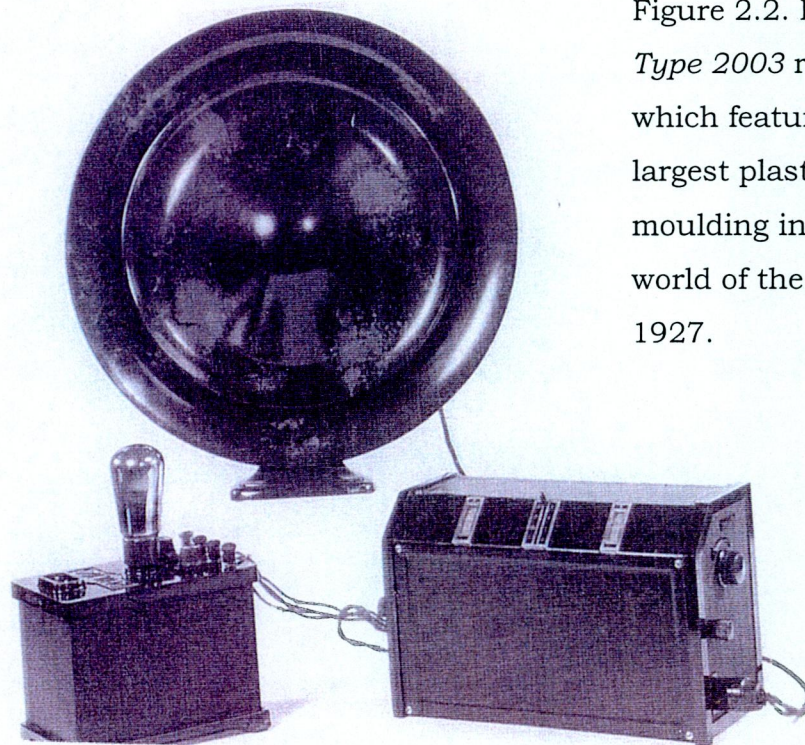


Figure 2.2. Philips' *Type 2003* radio, which featured the largest plastic moulding in the world of the time, 1927.

After exploring emerging plastic materials like Bakelite, Philips' patented their own version of it, a phenolic resin called Philite in 1927. The Philite manufacturing and pressing plant was kept working around the clock. The use of plastic materials was also a major factor in the aesthetic change in the products of Philips and other companies. The use of Bakelite and the later development by Philips of other plastics meant many things for both aesthetics and volumes produced. It loosened slightly, the connection between production techniques and aesthetics. This meant that designers were freed to create new shapes. Philips' design methods at this stage can be seen to be heading away from the modernist conception of the designer as an independent





intellectual with a social duty. This was replaced with the more commercial, American model of design, characterised by built-in-obsolescence and streamlined forms. The effects of new materials on product aesthetics has a very important role in product design and the trends described here are still relevant today.

Philips first directly prioritised design as a discrete marketing strategy, under the direction of the advertising department or 'Propaganda Section' as it was officially titled. With the process of diversification into different product areas intensifying, the need to increase market exposure for new products grew and advertising became increasingly important, so that products used sign value to extend exchange value. In 1928 Philips hired Louis C. Kalff, an architect to head *PC4: the Department of Artistic Propaganda*. Kalff was responsible for the visual aspects of advertising, products, lighting and architecture, and was largely responsible for the look of Philips products and packaging until after the second world war. He was strongly influenced by the proto-modernist work of the Deutscher Werkbund and the Dutch De Stijl movement and saw himself as part of an intellectual, rather than commercial tradition, bringing art to industry. This he expressed by avoiding discussions of the technical aspects of products, claiming "If I can draw it, they can make it" (Heskett, 1989 p.17). Thus commercial industrial design at Philips, was created as an adjunct to advertising, that used some of the techniques and methodology of architecture. This was also a combination of American commercial design and Kalff's German design influences.

At about the same time as Mies van der Rohe and others were presenting the earlier work of Modern Movement as a commercially orientated visual style, signalling an end of the role of European Pioneer or Idealistic Modernism as a force of social change and radical intellectual movement. The changes brought about by the use of materials, increasing electrification in the home and the tacit acceptance of modernist functionalist principles of efficiency over beauty had a profound effect on the visual representation and conception of the





domestic environment, turning it from what Forty describes as a 'place of beauty into one of efficiency' (1986, p.108). This can be seen as having a relationship to Le Corbusier's vision of the home as a "machine for living in"(Mitchell, 1993, p.12) and High-Modernism's concern with design for the domestic environment. The significance the Bauhaus placed on worker housing, furniture and interiors went towards making metal and industrial aesthetics acceptable in the home environment, a role Philips played in the domestication of plastics. Philips at this time mainly produced consumer goods for home entertainment or labour saving devices, resulting in the increased mediation of domestic life through electrotechnology, with ever increasing ranges of products such as radios, televisions electric razors, kitchen appliances and record players. This can perhaps be seen as the extension of their ideas and extension of the modern movements efforts, which created the home as a functional environment.

## 2.4 Post-war design at Philips

It was not until 1945 in the aftermath of the second world war that design was brought to the centre of Philips marketing strategy, when the design department was enlarged and restructured. This coincided with the post-war economic boom in the more developed capitalist countries, which first brought a discernible focus on consumption by both critical theorists such as Adorno and Marcuse and what Kellner describes as "the captains of industry"(1992, p.31). The restructuring was part of the huge rebuilding necessary after the Second World War which had been disastrous for the company and had seen the bombing of the factory and imprisonment of senior directors and members of the Philips family. Within 5 years however, talk of recovery was replaced with that of expansion. Technical research was still the major factor in the development and marketing of new products. Philips began to acquire companies abroad in South and North America, India, and Europe, emerging as







a truly global company, tailoring products for the different nations and setting up foreign design departments. In 1953 the design of consumer goods came under the direction of Rein Verseema, who like Kalff had been trained as an architect. Veersema felt that design's role should be the 'unification of aesthetics and science....in the evolutionary movement towards ever new and more progressive conceptions' (Heskett, 1989, p.20). This shows a degree of continuity with the avant-gardism of the Modern movement, but where the Bauhaus had attempted to progress towards universal 'type-forms', Philips search for more 'progressive conceptions' meant that products would often face aesthetic, if not technical, obsolescence. The passing of Kalff marked a shift within the design and marketing divisions of the company away from the stereotypically European rational model towards a more commercial American style approach with the introduction of market research and a re-acceptance of taste as a differentiator of goods. This shift could arguably signify an early post-modernism with the abandonment of (loosely held) modernist principles. This was manifested in a gradual aesthetic change, made tangible when, in 1953 the American designer Raymond Loewy was hired as an outside consultant to redesign the casing of the Philishave dry-shaver. Loewy was one of the pioneer figures of commercial product styling and his streamlined design was a great commercial success, more compact and refined than the previous model. *Philishave* had been around in different manifestations since the 1930's and has gone on to become one of the world's most enduring product lines, still available after over 50 years of continuous redesign and development.



Figure 2.3  
Raymond Loewy  
*Philishave* for  
Philips,  
1953





From their inception, Philips' emphasis on exporting goods meant that they never defined themselves as a particularly strong part of a Dutch design tradition unlike, for instance, Olivetti who since the 1950's have been identified as an example of a particularly Italian design approach.

Veersema played a major role in integrating design further into the company as an essential corporate function in its own right, from its peripheral origins. In his 14 years in charge he brought ergonomics and the costing of all elements into the design process. He also began the systematic analysis of many aspects of design and attempts to integrate product aesthetics into a family of Philips products, which became typified by a restrained streamlined style.

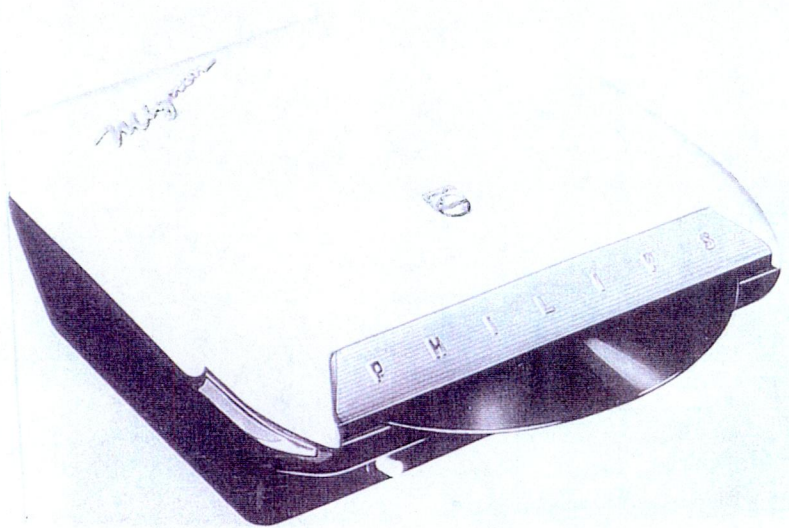


Figure 2.4,  
Philips' *Mignon*,  
record player,  
1956.

The expansion of the role of design and aesthetic styling in the marketing of Philips products for the domestic sector is illustrated in the fact that the design function was split in two in 1950, between products directed at the domestic market and the Professional and Medical Apparatus. Visual impact played a greater role in the domestic sector than in did in the professional, whose products were a more direct result of applied technology. As design was integrated into the corporate structure at Philips', designers had to work as part of teams with employees from many other disciplines such as marketing, technical research and engineering. This meant the modernist model (as expressed by Kalff) of the designer as autonomous intellect was rejected in





favour of a new conception of the designers role. This new role was later described as it developed by a new head of the Philips' Industrial Design Centre, the Norwegian Knut Yran in 1966, who said that "design is a technical profession with a marketing function' and that 'a designer must realise the concern's intentions before he realises those of his own" (Heskett, 1989, p.23).

This growth in the importance of designers to the company was matched by the increased importance of design as a marketing feature and increasing freedoms in what the designers could do aesthetically as plastics and manufacturing technology became more sophisticated. The earlier method of casting thermoplastics had been replaced by the injection moulding of thermosetting plastics which provided wider colour and surface finish ranges, better accuracy and the ability to manufacture higher volumes of products. This lead Yran to question whether "designers have recognised in full, the wonderful possibilities of plastic materials, so willingly waiting to be sculpted into more humanised forms" (Heskett 1989. 28). These ideas contributed towards a further refinement of the aesthetics of many Philips' products during the 1960's and 1970's. This period also saw progressive improvement of various Philips products, as the manufacture of plastics became more manageable allowing designers to focus on the visual and formal consumption of the product. Another important development was the introduction of Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Computer Aided Manufacture (CAM), which meant that the design to production process was more efficient, flexible and faster.

## 2.5 *Moving Sound*: design and marketing

In the 1970's Philips and other European and American companies like IBM and Olivetti, had become aware of the commercial threat posed by the superior exploitation of design and technology by Japanese companies, principally Sony. This meant that they began to look at the idea of global products rather







than the aesthetic adaptation of products to national tastes. This prompted Philips' to target niches within world-wide markets. The 1980's saw companies enter the new era of global marketing in which product design was a key competitive weapon. Philips were also very much to the fore of this trend in 1980, when the American architect and industrial designer Robert Blaich, succeeded Knut Yran. Blaich's major contribution was getting the marketing, advertising, product engineers and designers to understand and complement each other's roles in the creation of profitable products. Thus a three-way multidisciplinary marriage of technology, marketing and product design developed. In this system technologies were often adapted in tandem with the identification of particular markets and the development of designs suitable for the selected group of consumers. This meant the end of the modernist linear design process with separate elements of technological conception followed by detailed design, where marketing came in after the design of the product . It also meant the end of the domination of the company by the technical department.

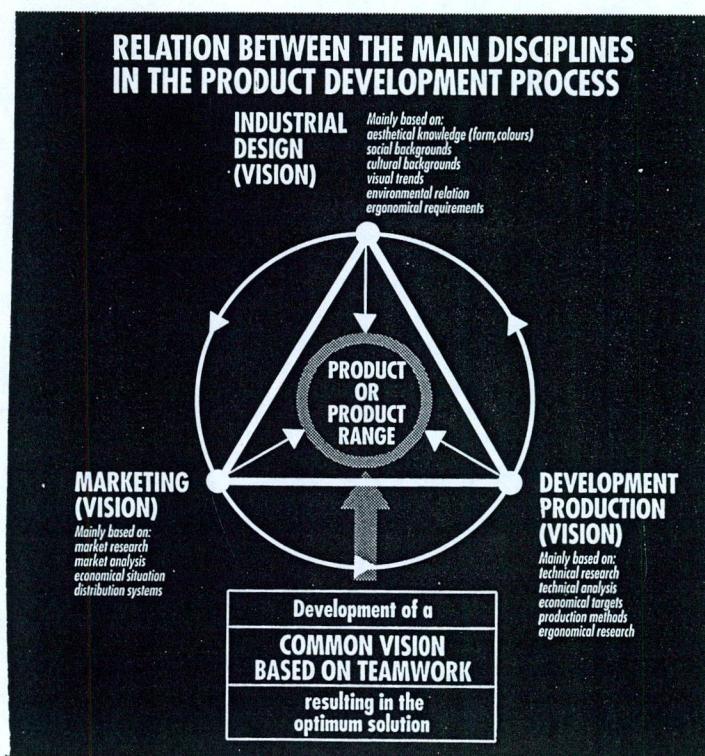


Figure 2.5  
Design is given  
the same status  
as  
marketing and  
product  
development  
at Philips, 1984





The new importance of design and the aesthetic focus on consumption, as the creation of profitable forms and as a source of sales in it's own right can be seen to culminate in the 1980's with the *Moving Sound* project in which technologically ordinary personal and portable stereos were made desirable to specific groups of people in Europe and America, through the use of design and aesthetics. Since the 1950's, the importance of industrial design as a marketing weapon has grown at Philips and from the 1920's they had conducted basic forms of market research<sup>1</sup>. This however, didn't compare to the change that occurred in the 1980's, when according to one Philips management employee "design was as much as 80% of the product, in terms of both its market appeal and the key decisions in the development process" (Lorenz, 1986, p,113). *Moving Sound* represented a fundamental change of the design function within Philips and signalled a new intensification of the power of the sign value in a commodity. This involved the aiming of an already familiar technology, at a specific market (i.e. urban youth). According to Heskett,

what is perhaps one of the most noteworthy features of this project, is that the distinctive visual qualities of the roller and of *Moving Sound* have been carefully and creatively designed for young people by young designers in CID. They were deliberately chosen by age and given the freedom to express themselves in ways relevant to their consciousness of themselves and their generation. Behind what has been a considerable success, is a close and continuous co-operation between design and marketing, and above all a management perception of design potential that was given it's opportunity (1989, p.141).

The 'family' of objects that made up *Moving Sound* can be seen as the beginnings of a truly post-modern design within a commercial setting at Philips'. These products have a 'pop', consumption defined aesthetic intended to refer to and integrate into the lifestyles of the target consumers. As global marketing grew more important and the technologies became more and more

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<sup>1</sup> The early forms of market research was the display of goods on the factory premises to employees who were asked for their opinions on aesthetics, functions and suitability for foreign markets. Technical staff were often given appliances to take home and use, after which they would fill in questionnaires.





similar, companies increasingly looked to design to differentiate their products and make them more attractive. *Moving Sound* can be seen as very much part of that trend which made the manner of aestheticisation of the commodity vital and brought it into the realm of meaning and personal identity. With electronic commodities there is no possibility of a functional approach to aesthetics. This equates with aims of Blaich, who espoused “product semantics, which attempts to make the meaning of a product an explicit part of the product’s function” (Dormer, 1993, p.22). The use of mass goods in the expression of identity was consolidated with, the further subdivision of the youth market with the release of “a baby pink model intended to appeal to girls and a more sophisticated all black model for the somewhat older consumer” (Heskett 1989. 138).

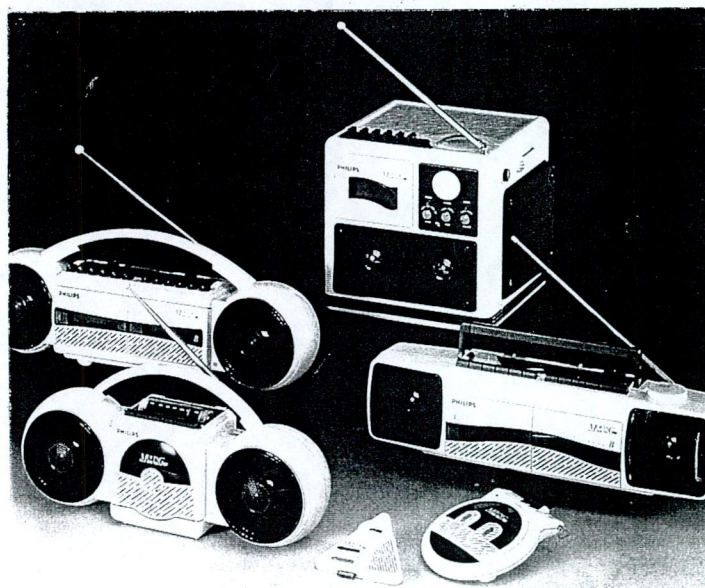


Figure 2.6.  
Philips'  
*Moving Sound*  
range, 1984.

Mass-produced goods have developed in their forms as well as in their uses and function in line with tools and production techniques. These forms, regardless of whatever cultural connotation they may carry, are the results of certain constraints and possibilities. This directly links the materials, processes and messages of a product. However, *Moving Sound* shows a further change in the relationship and blurring of the distinctions between the use, exchange and sign values of commodities. This trend was extended in the Alessi projects of the 1980's and early 90's, which took kitchen appliances like kettles and toasters







with simple electrical functional requirements and made them highly desirable designs and part of the fashion cycle.

The history of Philips can be divided into three broad categories. The first was pre-design - when Anton and Gerard Philips sold the unadorned use-value of their light-bulbs. The next stage was when it was realised that appropriate aesthetics gave their products added exchange-value. The present phase started in the 1920's when designers first tried to express particular ideas using a visual language. The aesthetic dimension of Philips' products has grown considerably more important this century, culminating first in Philips *Moving Sound* and then *Vision of the Future* projects. Throughout this century the direction of changes in the design function at Philips, has been strongly related to the personalities of the various design directors, as well as the manufacturing and commercial requirements of the company. The seven different directors of design have made huge differences to the conception of design within the company, this is no different under Blaich's successor, the present Senior Director of Philips Corporate Design, Stefano Marzano. Of the seven leaders this century, Kalff began by constructing a loosely modernist design ethic based on a German, modernist example. Verseema then replaced this with a more typically American methodological and aesthetic style. This was followed later by the global marketing led model of Robert Blaich. The present director was replaced by the Italian Stefano Marzano, who has brought a distinctly Italian post-modern approach to the company, influenced by intellectual design figures such as Ettore Sottsass and Andrea Branzi. While these views will naturally only be tolerated as long as marketing success, Marzano has declared himself to be concerned with the role of design in culture. The next chapter will examine a project under his direction at Philips Corporate Design.





# Chapter 3

## *Philips: Beyond the object*

This chapter will look at Philips' *Vision of the Future* project and Philips' own promotional literature in relation to some of the broad themes suggested by critical theory. *Vision of the Future* is a project that was released as a media event - rather than a collection of tangible, saleable objects - in the summer of 1996. It is an ambitious attempt to map the future of product design and technology within the company and beyond for the next 5 to 10 years. The design team co-operated with psychologists, futurologists, economists and sociologists, among others, to identify and take advantage of trends in society, culture and technology. This resulted in the design of 60 products (narrowed down from an original 300 concepts) using idealised performances and technologies that will be realisable within the next few years. The products are divided into four areas, serving what Philips consider to be the four 'domains' of Western daily life; personal, domestic, public/work and mobile. In terms of function they have a wide variety of uses, mainly concerned with the electronic transmission and storage of information. Most of the products have applications in the areas of entertainment and communications, while others have medical and data-processing applications.

### 3.1 *Vision of the Future* as 'media spectacle'

The first and most obvious aspect of this project is the way in which the objects are (re)presented for consumption. These products are not for sale, they are only accessible to most people through different forms of mass







media; a CD-‘interactive’ exhibition, a video compilation, a Web-site, in a book and in numerous magazine and television profiles. This then, is a large scale industrial design project in which the objects designed have no actual physical presence and so do not operate in the same way in regard to mass-manufacture, exchange-value and use-value, the areas that defined the modernist era of production for critics like Adorno, Jameson and Marx. Comparing *Vision of the Future* to previous Philips’ projects, such as *Moving Sound*, equates with Baudrillard’s account of the shift in the characteristics of modernism to those of post-modernism, a change from the mass-production of goods to the mass-consumption of reproduced images (what he calls the 3rd order of Simulacra), as the basis of our present social order. This could be seen as the natural conclusion of the development of product design under Jameson’s ‘logic of late capitalism’, as use value (which refers to the world of real objects) is negated under simulation.

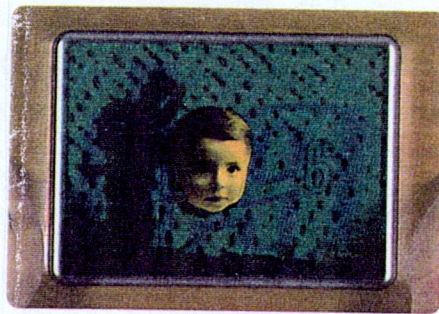
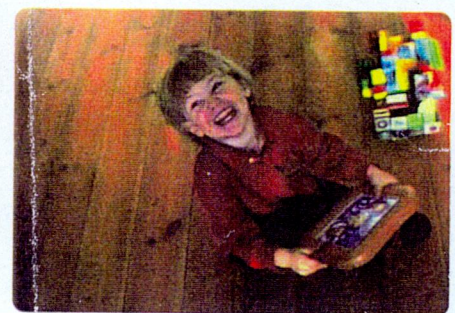


Figure 3.1 Images from the *Vision of the Future* video, showing scenario of use for *Interactive Frames*, 1996.



This collection of products is clearly post-modern in it's presentation and disconnection from the realms of use and exchange value, but before the objects are examined under other criteria it must be agreed that they can be





examined in any familiar terms at all. Baudrillard's later, more nihilistic arguments throughout *Simulations* (1983), if extended to *Vision of the Future*, would disallow any possibility for its critical analysis, as having no basis in reality, only the hyper-reality of the mass-media. Here however it is necessary and possible to treat the objects as 'real' in order to find out what they say about changes in product design. Design criticism has never relied on the actual presence of the objects discussed in order to supply analysis. In fact, it has often relied on photographs and written descriptions of the context, origin and function of an object, information which is available in abundance here. It is also inferred from the profusion of design and architecture magazines available, that designed objects can and do function in the mass-media as signs and have roles in society beyond their operational 'use-value'.

Moving away from the grand theories of cultural criticism and assuming that this project is more than a simple advertising and PR exercise for Philips' capabilities in design and technology, *Vision of the Future* could be seen as a pragmatic way for a company that manufactures electronic and lighting hardware, to tackle and be seen to be tackling, the immateriality of information technology as it apparently approaches. This project, with its combination of hardware and software applications in every day life, may simply mark Philips' diversification into information technology and an attempt to establish a viable aesthetic for this. This project is very much design led with the designers themselves deciding what is technologically and aesthetically possible and desirable. It shows a new, more important role for design within Philips as a source of product concepts as well as aesthetics.

However, it is the accompanying written documentation that makes this project most notable (apart from the colourful, almost childlike aesthetic employed), a book - also called *Vision of the Future*, and written by Philips Corporate Design in the kind of aspirational language used by Le Corbusier







and Gropius - announces the end of “the Modernist vision of relentless industrial progress” (1996, p.13) in design and society, as technology is united with a new

holistic, more global view of progress.... with the human being at the centre, one in which everyone will be able to climb the “ladder of needs”.....by satisfying first physical needs, then intellectual and finally spiritual needs, people can attain the ultimate self-fulfilment. (Philips Corporate Design, 1996, p.14)

The expressed progressive aims of this project - the use of technology and extensive scientific research into sociological trends - shows Philips appropriating principles inherited from the Enlightenment to justify and legitimise their work. Taken at face value, this apparent return to the kind of convictions held by the modern movement, could signal the reintegration of political and social ideology into industrial design. The recurring references to the Enlightenment and its ideals, by Philips<sup>1</sup> raises two interesting questions in relation to theoretical definitions of post-modernism - first the crises of legitimisation and the loss of metanarratives caused by the ‘end’ of modernism, and second, the deconstruction of history in the search for legitimisation. Throughout critical theory, the search for socio-political legitimisation is cited as a central characteristic of post-modern culture. This reflects interestingly on Philips’ use of the Enlightenment to justify a range of products, as these progressive aims have only been widely rejected in the rarefied atmosphere of critical theory, and are likely to be irrelevant to a great number of the ‘consumers’ of the products displayed. The use of the Enlightenment to provide philosophical validation for *Vision of the Future*, raises another theme of post-modernism; the deconstruction of history to provide legitimisation for wholly commercially driven projects. Further examples of this deconstruction of history are the ‘retro’ styling used on some of the products which will be addressed later in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1993 Philips launched a range of domestic lighting products called *The Enlightenment*. In 1995 they developed, but did not release a collection of televisions called *The Enlightenment Project*.





Philips describe *Vision of the Future* as a 'joint project with consumers', who can communicate their ideas and help formulate better, more relevant products. a point clearly expressed in the accompanying literature which states,

an important objective of the project is getting feedback, from as broad an audience as possible. Using this feedback we will be able to gain a clearer picture of peoples needs and desires' (Philips Corporate Design. 1996. P. 19).

This aim can be seen as a contradiction and confirmation of Frederic Jameson's view (described by Kellner) of post-modernity where the mass-consumer is controlled, "by means of passive viewing of media spectacles or attempts to buy happiness or solve problems through consumer goods." (1992, p.146). This view however shows critical theory's major flaw - the same objectification of the 'masses' that the Modern Movement displayed, in assuming the intellectual inferiority of the masses and an inability to decide what they want. The opposition of these two views of the role of design, brings us to what is perhaps the definitive point of contention between the worlds of capitalism/design and critical theory: whether these objects are necessary or not.

### **3.2 Need and function**

One of the major arguments used by Senior Director Stefano Marzano to justify and provide a philosophical basis for the objectives of The Corporate Design Centre, is an interpretation of the work of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908 -1970) and his theory of 'self-actualisation'. In Marzano's *Flying over Las Vegas*, speech (1993, p.9), Maslow's "ladder of needs" is described, where people can climb to the pinnacles of self-awareness, through the progressive satisfaction of needs, on emotional, physical and spiritual levels. Marzano feels that the role of industrial design in this is



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to create objects.....products that will enable the individual to climb the rungs of Maslow's ladder. These are products that use technology to encourage the individual's cultural growth, that promote the amplification of the senses and the individual's power. (1993, P. 9).

All of the products in the project are aimed at fulfilling some need that Philips have perceived. For example, the Shiva range of personal organisers, is necessary because "Contemporary life is characterised by our constant *need* to access information and to be in touch with each other" (Philips Corporate Design, 1993, p.54). While there is still an emphasis on progression of some kind, this signals a replacement of the modernist goal of social progress with the promise of technological personal development, to validate the extension into 'hyper-modernity'.

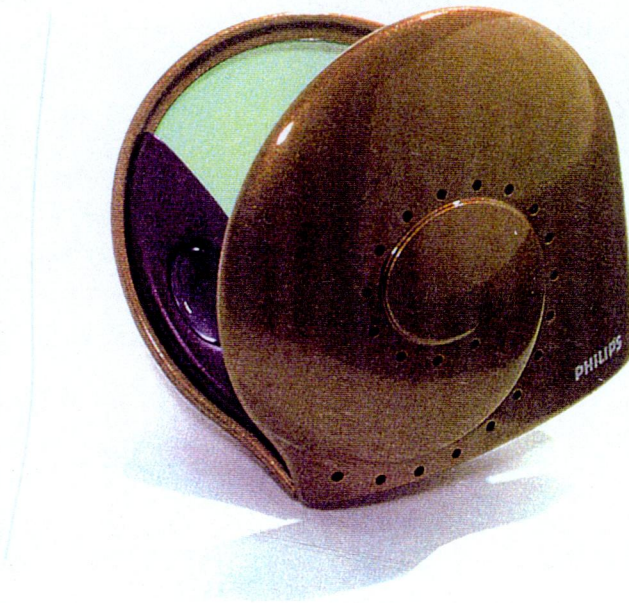


Figure 3.2,  
*Shiva Compact*,  
Personal Digital  
organiser in the  
form of a make  
up compact.

As Marzano goes to such lengths in his attempts justify the social role of Philips' products in terms of meeting human need, any investigation into the role of these designed objects must look at a complicated issue (made less clear by the mode of presentation of this project): the issue of need. The central question is whether one accepts Philips' model of need as relative to and a consequence of the social and cultural environment of (post)modernity, but no less important, because of this. The opposing





absolutist view is typified by Baudrillard, who maintains that real needs can not be said to exist in contemporary society, because of the mass manipulation of consumers, by companies who constantly seek to create and then 'satisfy' false needs through the mass-media and design (1988, p.41). This view of the falsification of need under capitalism is one of the predominant themes of critical theory throughout this century. Theorists from Marx to Jameson have generally expressed puritanical views in their denunciations of need under capitalism, rejecting any possibility that mass commodities may be "objects of enjoyment and activity, *as well as* instruments of social control and integration" (Harvey, 1989, p.43),

So where does this project lie, between the opposing views of the cultural role of mass commodities? On one hand we have the negative claims of Adorno and Baudrillard, centred on a belief that the utopian, progressive aims of the Enlightenment have produced a negative effect. The other view expressed and updated by Philips, are their utopian claims of technological progression and the beginning of a 'new Modernity' signalled by the products in the *Vision of the Future* collection.

Contrary to the claims of critical theory it is possible to differentiate between real and false needs. If in fact the products of *Vision of the Future* relate in any positively identifiable way to Maslow's 'ladder of needs' they could be said to be necessary in accordance with Kellner's description of a commodity that is necessary if 'after critical scrutiny and use, it reveals itself to be life enhancing, truly useful, well constructed and fairly priced' (Kellner. 1992, p.61).

The needs addressed in *Vision of the Future* are clearly not the biological needs necessary for survival that Marx describes, but are relative to and a result of cultural and social conditions of post modernity. However, some of the objects in *Vision of the Future* can be seen as fairly extreme attempts to create irrelevant new needs. For example *Emotion Containers* and *Hot*







*Badges* could represent an attempt to commodify areas of life previously unavailable to product manufacturers - those of memory and human relationships. As well as these there are also some products that identify and suggest solutions to real problems such as the devices for the *Hospital Network*, which tackle the problems of medical information processing and suggest technological solutions to the cutting back of staff in hospitals.

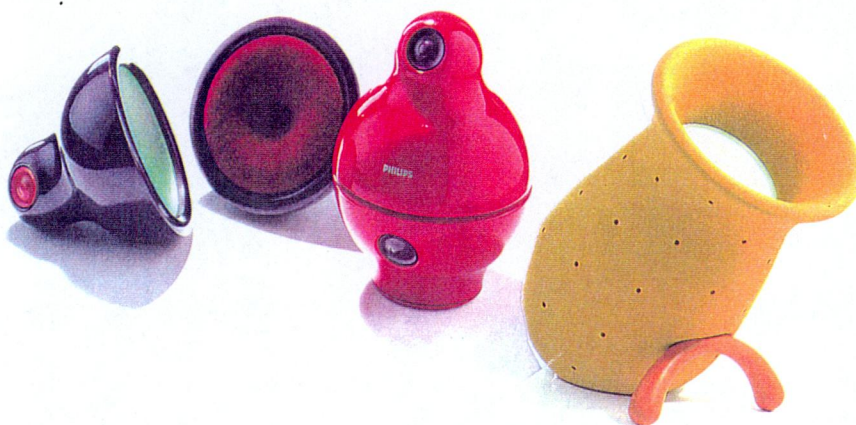
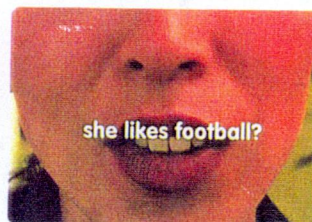


Figure 3.3  
Philips  
*Emotion  
Containers*,  
1996



Figure 3.4  
*Hot badges*,  
scenes from  
*Vision of the  
Future* video  
showing  
scenario of  
use,  
Philips 1996.







The majority of the products lie somewhere in between the two kinds of need mentioned above, where true relative needs and false, manipulated ones coexist and become more difficult to separate. While Philips use technological needs to justify a lot of these products, they are also addressing a less tangible need: one for pleasure and expression from personal objects, the need for technology to be both functionally and aesthetically friendly. This however hides the fact that Philips give a view of technology as comfortably necessary, in that no aspect of life can go without mediation through technology. The 'New Modernity' offered by Philips can be seen as a response to the social and cultural condition of post modernity. The products in *Vision of the Future* address relative needs, which are then 'satisfied' by the technological and aesthetic products of a newer 'hypermodernity'.

How does Marzano's reference to 'the ladder of needs' compare with former design director, Knut Yran's description of a 'technical profession with a marketing function' (Heskett, 1989, p.23)? *Vision of the Future* provides a conception of the designer's job, different to most earlier ideas. The call for user input into the project shows an improved model in the relationship between designer and consumer, signalling positive democratisation of the design process away from the elitist description of the designer's role provided by Pevsner. Although this change in the relationship could just be a marketing ploy that allows the customisation of products and the shrinking of the niche markets to very small groups of consumers or even individuals, it can be viewed as a positive development in that it provides a framework for direct communication between the users of designed objects and designers through information technology. One could go further and say that it approaches the deconstruction of critical theory's essential consumption/ production opposition. Philips place great emphasis in the project on the possibilities for aesthetically personalised objects such





as the *Magic Pens*, which could serve as the extension of the kind of niche marketing exploited by *Moving Sound*,

While the relationship between designers and consumers could be said to be changing in some way, is it possible that the alliance between designers and their sponsors, the manufacturers of mass goods, is different? Most debates about the function of designed objects forget that commodities usually have to fulfil two functions, one aimed at the consumer and one for the producer - the creation of wealth. This is obviously the primary reason for the development of any product, so Philips literature appears disingenuous with its omission of commercial interest from the rigorous discussion in their literature of the various contexts for objects that make up the project. Philips presentation of these products as *necessary* to reach 'self-actualisation', leaves the conclusion that *Vision of the Future* is an attempt to integrate consumers into the cycle of consumption. Contrary to the high minded, aspirational tone of the copy-writing, any of the text that actually refers to people defines them only in terms of needs that require satisfaction.

### **3.3 Aesthetics and technology**

There is, perhaps a degree of consensus that the typical post-modernist artefact is playful, self-ironizing, and even schizoid; that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities (Harvey, 1988, p.7).

The above quote goes quite a long way to describing the aesthetic style used in *Vision of the Future*. In their asymmetrical shapes, emphasis on surface, texture and use of bright colours, these products shows a clear rejection of the formal attributes of modernism, while opposing its wider values and



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### 3.3 Aesthetics and Technology

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could be said to signal the full re-acceptance of taste and sensual pleasure to the realm of mass produced goods. These objects could be described as definitively post-modern in the aesthetic approach used, which includes a rejection of modernism's simplicity of shapes, functionalism and truth to materials etc. With no ready aesthetic structure to apply to these products Philips have had to create their own. The aesthetics of these high technology products often refer to familiar artefacts like frames, jewellery, wallets and pens, psychologically placing them in a less threatening past at the same time as a progressive future. In attempting to make new technology familiar, Philips use the same tactics as the early designers at Philips' who first disguised the life-changing technology of radio in suitable visual metaphors and had a major role in making new technologies acceptable. For other products no immediately identifiable metaphors were available, so other aesthetic influences were called upon.

Aesthetically, the products in the *Vision of the Future* collection could be seen as a commercialised extension of the work of Sottsass' Memphis group. Perhaps, there are also allusions to Venturi and Johnson's post-modernism i.e. the combination of high technology, commercial design (with objects rather than buildings) with an eclectic, vernacular and slightly humorous visual style. However, the essential differences between Philips' project and the work of Memphis, is that Philips are putting their products into the realm of high technological function and consumerism, while few of the nominally socially progressive designers have been able to do this successfully. This is exemplified by Sottsass' distancing of himself from consumerism and function. Perhaps the fact that these products may never actually be made shows that the gulf between commercial and idealistic design still exists, although it may be narrowing.

The documentation accompanying *Vision of the Future* contains many references to the importance of providing consumers with aesthetically personalised objects. For example *Magic Pens* can be 'highly personal'





(Philips Corporate Design, 1996, p.74) because of their simplicity. Baudrillard also refers to this personalisation of mass commodities, in which “different brands and model’s are seen as helping people give expression to their own personality dimensions” (1988, p.16). This shift towards aesthetics aimed at individual consumers is a complete rejection of the Modern Movement’s attempts to forge universal aesthetics. Instead of the designer attempting to express definitive truths, we have the consumer expressing him or herself through the consumption of technological products. Baudrillard’s view of aesthetics as essential to capitalism is borne out by the mode of presentation of this project (1988, p.15-18). As *Vision of the Future* is presented through the mass media, so the products displayed can not operate on a functional level. Aesthetics will naturally become the most prominent attribute of the various products. This emphasis on the visual presentation of the project, refers to Jameson’s idea that the mass media is being integrated with

commodity production generally; the frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function to aesthetic innovation and experimentation (1992, p.63).



Figure 3.5. Philips’  
*Magic Pens*, 1996.





This 'aesthetic innovation and experimentation' relies heavily on developments in production technologies. There are no references in Philips' literature to how technically feasible it would be to produce these objects, but it can be assumed that they bear some relation to emerging manufacturing processes. If this is the case, it shows unprecedented freedom for designers in the creation of aesthetic form, a development due in part to the computer. The microprocessor plays a major role in the aesthetics of this project on two levels; in the production process and then in the product's function. The first impact computer technology has had on this project is in the design process itself. Computer-Aided-Design (CAD) and Computer-Aided-Manufacturing (CAM) techniques make possible the aesthetic range of this project. CAD makes it much easier and quicker to accurately draw the complex forms used in the project. CAM takes a lot of the repetitive human tasks out of mass-production, and also greatly speeds up and makes more flexible the prototyping and production process. This has created a framework within which aesthetically personalised commodities become feasible. This is in contrast to the early modernists and designers at Philips who had their aesthetic possibilities limited by what was possible within the draughting and production process at a particular time. Any ideas of truth to materials also become redundant with high volume production processes and the huge range of possibilities offered by material forming processes in plastic moulding and colouring technology.

All of the products in *Vision of the Future* would contain miniaturised microprocessors of some kind. The operations of these devices are so complex that few people understand their totality. This makes any gesture towards 'form following function' futile. This project takes strong account of the two most important trends in regard to the design of technological goods: portability and miniaturisation, these trends allow information technology to be included in personal objects rather than, only those used in domestic or work situations. This means that the various technologies come





physically closer to the consumer, for instance with *Enhanced Jewellery*, and *Multimedia Clothing*, where

the technology required is woven into the fabric, making it invisible. The trend towards miniaturised components is allowing many functions to be “built in” to our bodies, creating a “second skin” (Philips Corporate Design, 1996, p.62).

The relationship between people and technology is an area of great relevance to both critical theorists and industrial designers. For example, Donna Haraway has a very bleak view of the effects of the various technologies on the human,

Late 20<sup>th</sup> century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between, the mind and body mind and body, .....Our machines are disturbingly lively and we ourselves disturbingly inert (1985, p.76)

As well as illustrating further, the collapse of the binary oppositions that characterised modernism, this quote reveals some of the essential fears of critical theory, in regard to the results of technology encroaching further into the human physical and mental functions and relates to some of the proposals by Philips, who

In reviewing technologies which now exist or look extremely promising, concentrated on ..... refining and merging existing technologies and extending them into more areas of our lives (Philips Corporate Design, 1996, p.36).

### 3.4 Critical reaction; Philips and post modernity

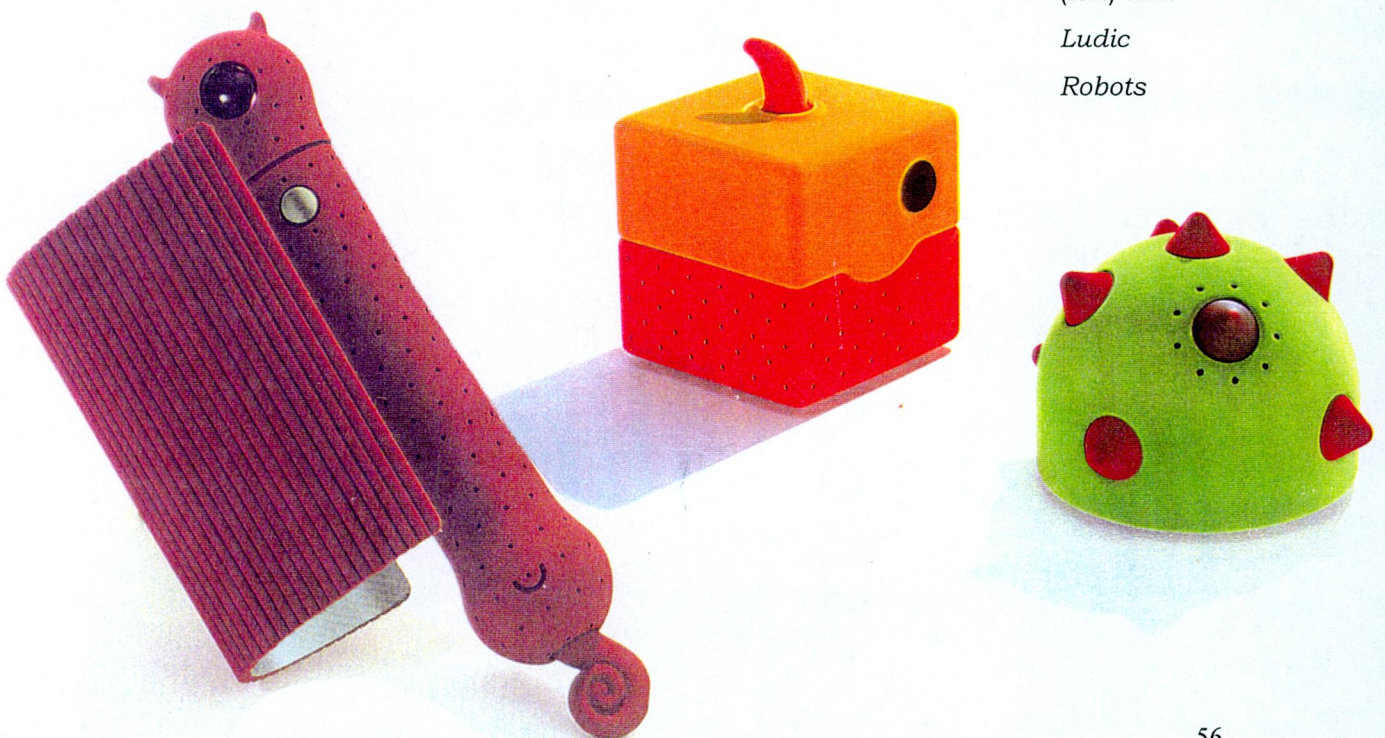
*Vision of the Future* is a post modern project in many ways. It is eclectic in its drawing on weighty social theory to justify ‘pop’ aesthetics. Philips use the perception of exhaustion with modernity to sell the products of intensified modernity. *Vision of the Future*, could in many ways be seen as a step towards the kind of future dystopia that critical theory is so concerned with, but perhaps in the end it is best to be slightly sceptical about the value





of criticising the project seriously at all, for two reasons. The first is Baudrillard's previously mentioned view, that because of its presentation as a media spectacle, the objects depicted bear little relationship with reality. The second, more convincing reason is irony. Irony is one of the cultural characteristics of post-modernism. Apart from the aesthetics, there are many clues that there may have been a degree of ironic intent behind the project. One such clue is the use of the Hindu goddess Shiva as a metaphor for a range of personal organisers. The accompanying text refers to her as a multi-armed goddess, to help in the performing of several tasks at once. However, Shiva was the goddess of destruction whose 'technological juggernaut' destroyed all in its path, a connection that is unlikely to have passed unnoticed within Philips Design Centre. The oddness of some of the connections made by Philips in the *Vision of the Future* book is extended in the *Ludic Robots*, which are 'small unpredictable electronic friends' which 'respond to emotional needs' and *Shiva Devil*, which is a device with a roll-out screen for accessing a site on the web called *Mystic East* where users can meet 'virtual mystics to predict their fortunes' (PCD 1996. 56). In spite of this, the rest of the project seems sufficiently serious and realistic to appear genuine.

Figure 3.6  
*Shiva Devil*  
(left) and  
*Ludic*  
*Robots*







# Conclusion

This thesis attempted to explore contemporary product design, as it is embodied in *Visions of the Future*, a project that claimed to be a break with modernity. To conclude I will briefly summarise the main points of each chapter.

The purpose of the first chapter was to work through the theoretical framework of modernity that critical theory has constructed to explain its present trajectory. According to Adorno, Habermas and Baudrillard, the Enlightenment made possible the Industrial revolution which in turn gave rise to the means to create the mass goods and services that defined and created modernity. This was then related to the rise of modernism and then post-modernism, which were reactions to the cultural condition of modernity. This chapter provided the theoretical framework necessary for the discussion of Philips and *Vision in the Future* in relation to post-modernism.

In chapter two, design in the Philips company was examined, in terms of the personalities and economic and technical processes that were most influential in driving it through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This traced a discernible movement towards post-modernism, from the early days of design at Philips' as a function of marketing and technological possibilities rather than any ideological movement. The only constant here was design as a source of profitable form.

The third chapter looked at Philips' *Vision of the Future* project as definitive of post-modern design and explored it in relation to some of the more relevant critical theories. This investigation naturally reflected both





on the wider role of design and the relevance of critical theory to modern culture, not wholly positively in either case. From its beginnings with Marx, critical theory has developed in parallel with and opposition to capitalism. Critical theory and the modernist model of design have much in common, in that both have identified themselves in an 'ivory tower' like position of instructors to the masses. It is this division and objectification that has resulted in an ideology free design and a critical theory that is perceived as largely irrelevant. In terms of methodology the two critical theorists mentioned most in this thesis, Adorno and Baudrillard can be described as encompassing the differences between modern and post-modern culture. Adorno uses Marxist methodology and metanarratives and despised mass culture. Baudrillard is less elitist and ideologically driven, more eclectic in his writing and references, seeking to deconstruct or decode the meanings of industrial capitalism. Nevertheless, critical theory and design can be seen as products of capitalism as it has developed from the Enlightenment - one theoretical and critical of the project, the other practical and an integral part of it. In fact they can be seen to represent the oppositions that have defined Western culture since the 1850's and the beginnings of modernity.

*Vision of the Future* is indicative of the increasing role has within the company and within culture, as a source for new products disseminating strong cultural messages. However, despite these changes, the basic function of design has in its essence stayed the same i.e. - making technology acceptable and desirable to the public. The most promising aspect of the kind of post-modernism offered by *Vision of the Future* is the possibility of including people in the design process. It remains to be seen whether this is simply a clever marketing strategy or a real development in the democratisation of design.





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