Roberto Verganti
**Design Driven Innovation.
Changing the Rules of
Competition by Radically Innovat-
ing What Things Mean**
2009, Harvard Business Press, 272 pp.
*(Design Driven Innovation. Cambiare le
regole della competizione innovando
radicalmente il significato dei prodotti e dei
servizi. 2009, ETAS, 282 pp.)*

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This is not a book for you. Unless you are a manager or, better, a top executive. Otherwise, if you are, as I suppose, a scholar in STS or interested in STS, this is not a book addressed to you. As Roberto Verganti, professor of Innovation Management at the Politecnico di Milano and author of the book, explicitly says, "this is a book on management" (p. vii), a book "about the management of innovation and design" (p. 219) where "the process through which executives leverage external and internal resources and creativity to develop breakthrough innovations" (p. 219) is examined.

And yet, this is a book you should read if you are interested in artefacts, design, technology. Anyhow, if you decide to read it you should try not to give too much relevance to the managerial rhetoric that peppers many parts of the book – all the references to "profit margins", "competitive advantage", "inspiring leaders", "your company", "your customers", "your competitors", etc. – which hampers a real engagement with the contents, at least for me, not being a manager either.

You should read it because *Design Driven Innovation* is not just a book about innovation management. By introducing the issue of meaning – and of the management of meaning in relation to artefacts – Verganti deals with issues that are very close to those tackled by STS, – as he himself notices by citing Callon, Bijker, Latour and Law. Indeed, by focusing on meaning, Verganti investigates the sociocultural dimension of artefacts and its relevance for innovation.

You should read it because, by disentangling the sociocultural dimension of innovations, Verganti takes into consideration the mediating role of artefacts and all those other actors – "interpreters" for Verganti – that constitute the network through which innovations take place.

You should read it because by focusing on how innovations rearticulate the relations in which they take part – one of STS concerns – Verganti gives the possibility to talk, within innovation studies, about artefacts as "matter of concern" and not as "matter of fact" (Latour 2008), and about design as an articulation of issues and not as problem-solving.

Besides, you should read it because, should Verganti's version of "design driven innovation" (DDI) become popular among managers, entrepreneurs and policy makers – as it seems possible considering that the book has been praised by people such as Luca Cordero di Montezemolo – it could allow STS scholars to make STS's issues understandable for an audience who, at least in Italy, has never been too sensitive to them.

Thus, you should read it, yes, but without swallowing it – and not just

because it is peppered with a managerial rhetoric not always easy to digest.

The book summarizes ten years of studies on innovation (see bibliography) giving them a managerial allure. These studies have been carried out by Verganti himself and other scholars from management and design studies, and are mainly about northern Italy furnishings and housewares companies, even if the book presents many examples and cases from various companies from different parts of the world.

These studies have been inspired by Verganti's specific perspective on DDI. The concept of DDI was introduced by Giorgio De Michelis (2001) in 1997 in order to account for a third kind of innovation that does not fall under the traditional two considered within innovation literature – "technology push" and "market pull". For De Michelis such a third kind of innovation, which is typical of Italian industrial districts, is characterized by the creation of a new user profile and, at the same time, of the product or service able to meet the expectations, desires, needs, of this new user. De Michelis also notices that such kind of innovation makes it possible to create not only a product or service, but also a corporate vision related to the brand.

Drawing on Klaus Krippendorff's dictum – "design is making sense of things" – on which the "product semantics" approach (Krippendorff 2006) of design studies is based, Verganti reformulates the concept of DDI. By doing so, he broadens, clarifies and specifies it, showing that DDI is not just a blend of the two traditional kinds of innovation in connection with a brand vision, as others, following De

Michelis, assume (see Celaschi and Deserti 2007), but a different kind of innovation that interacts with the other two. In this way Verganti is also able to actually integrate DDI with the other two kinds of innovation, connecting his model to Giovanni Dosi's one (1982) (Dell'Era, Marchesi and Verganti 2008; Verganti 2008).

Verganti's version of DDI is outlined in the first part of the book – "The strategy of Design Driven Innovation". In order to illustrate it, I can mention one of Verganti's preferred examples (see also Verganti 2003): the *Metamorfosi* light system by Artemide, an Italian lamp manufacturer. *Metamorfosi* is not a lamp like *Tizio* or *Tolomeo*, also produced by Artemide. It is a three-spotlight system producing colored ambient light that can be changed through a remote according to the situation and the user's moods. For Verganti this is a radical innovation "in what people mean by a lamp" (p.27): "it shifts people's attention from the object of the light (…)" and "from white to colored light (…) to psychological well-being", bypassing the need to illuminate through a focused light as well as to have a nice artefact in the living room or in the studio. Indeed, *Metamorfosi*, with all its technical elements visible through the transparent bowl that constitute its shell, has to be placed on the floor, not necessarily in view.

Thus, for Verganti, innovation is related to people's need in two ways (see also Dell'Era, Marchesi and Verganti 2010):

- through function, i.e. technological innovation – the three-spotlight system of the Artemide lamp – which allows the performance, and

- through messages, i.e. language, which convey a meaning – well-being instead of illumination.

Performance-technology and meaning-language are schematized as the two axes of a matrix where it is possible to distinguish incremental technological improvement from radical technological improvement as well as "adaptation to the evolution of sociocultural models" from "generation of new meanings" (p. 45). Radical improvement accounts for "technology push" innovation, "generation of new meanings" for DDI, incremental improvement and adaptation for "market pull innovation". For Verganti the latter is equivalent to user-centred innovation. Indeed *Design Driven Innovation* can also be read as a critique of user-centered design and all the related methods – usability tests as well as focus groups. For Verganti, user-centered design tends to conform to present user needs, whereas radical innovation creates new users, which cannot be tested before the innovation has spread. As Verganti notices: "people seemed to have been waiting for the Swatch, although they did not think to look for it" (p. 73), "[p]eople did not ask for that meaning, but they loved it once they saw [Nintendo Wii's features]" (p. 5), which allowed a shift from a "passive immersion in a virtual world" to an "active physical entertainment, in the real world, through socialization".

The second part of the book – "The Process of Design-Driven Innovation" – "shows how companies can realize successful radical innovations of meaning: how they can make unsolicited proposals that turn out to be what people love" (p. 15). It basically focus-

es on how a company can take part in the "design discourse", i.e. the discourse produced by interpreters of the cultural production and of technology such as, among others, artists, media, cultural organizations, technology suppliers, retail and delivery firms, but also sociologists, anthropologists, semioticians as well as designers who have a specific role as "brokers of language". In order to develop a radical innovation, a company should listen to, and interpret, the design discourse, which means to develop its own vision by selecting the right information and, finally, influencing it in order to influence in turn the more general public.

The last part of the book – "Building Design Driven Capabilities" – tells how Design-Driven labs can be built and used and what "the vital role of the top executives" (p. 202) is. Thus the latter emerge as the actual protagonists of DDI since their job is to spin the design discourse in their favor.

Verganti's interest in meaning leads him to take into consideration mediation: the mediation deployed by innovative artefacts, the various mediations deployed by all actors – "interpreters" in Verganti's words – constituting the networks of innovation and, most importantly for Verganti, the supermediation carried out by managers. Even if Verganti does not explicitly mention mediation as a foundational concept of his approach, it emerges from the cases and examples he introduces. And it emerges in its radical, Latourian, version: mediation as an instance that does not connect two pre-existing terms, but two instances emerging through the mediating third (Hennion 1993).

Meaning is, indeed, seen as a result of a mediation that rearticulates the network in which the innovation takes part, as the *Metamorfosi*'s case shows. This is exactly the way in which Madeleine Akrich (1990) conceived the signification of an artefact.

And yet, Verganti formalizes meaning in another way: as opposed to function, performance, technology. But as Akrich (1990) stated, "What we call function of technical objects is not opposed to signification. Such opposition belongs to a perspective related to technical or, on the contrary, to cultural determinism. From our point of view 'function' is just part of the *program of action* outlined by the *script* of a technical device", as the *Metamorfosi* case shows: the "technical" devices have a central role in the re-articulation of the illumination and hence in its meaning.

Through his formalization, Verganti recovers the quite known – at least since Barthes (1964) – opposition between function and signification, selling it as a new way to look at design. Unfortunately that dichotomy – which recalls other, more general dualisms of the western thought – continues to pester the reflection carried out by the semiotics of objects, notwithstanding the parallel efforts of the Greimassian semiotics of objects (Floch 1995; Mangano 2009) and of Actor-Network Theory in overcoming it – a thing Verganti does not really acknowledge since he considers STS only as a contribution to the technological side of his theory.

Even if Verganti knows that such a dichotomy does not hold (p. 33), probably for the sake of an elegant and alluring formalization that complies with other theories of innovation, probably for the catchiness of a schematization so entrenched in the always popular western dualisms, he uses it and, through it, introduces other theories of signification that cast a shadow of incoherence on his discourse.

Following Akrich (1990), who recognizes that signification emerges from the passage between "the world inscribed in the object and the world described by its displacement", Verganti could have kept his schematization using a general and relational dichotomy such as "inside/outside", acknowledging, as he implicitly does, that meaning permeates the whole process of innovation, as this journal has showed (see Parolin 2010).

Probably other STS -minded readers, not so interested in signification as I am, would have focused on other discrepancies with the STS approach, such as the fact that Verganti mainly presents success stories or the fact that he considers users very marginally.

STS tend to be symmetrical and consider innovation failures as much interesting as successes, if not more. It is understandable that in a book that tries to sell a certain approach to innovation to managers, success stories have more relevance than failures. But certainly it would have been interesting to examine not just successful DDIs, such as the Swatch's one, but also the failure of Smart, which, at the beginning, was managed by the same manager of Swatch under the same brand; or not just the process of Barilla's project *Beyond primo piatto*, but also the process that brought to the Alixir line, soon disappeared from our supermarkets.

As for the second point, Verganti pays overwhelming attention to managers and their super-mediations, compared with the almost non-existent attention given to the users. However, the latter do not just constitute the market through the expression of their present needs and desires. Users sometimes innovate too, through more distributed processes than the manager-centered ones privileged by Verganti.

Thus, Verganti's version of DDI can interestingly bridge innovation studies and STS, but, in order for the bridge to be solid, we still have much work to do.

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Теория практик - Teorija praktik
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Teorija praktik is a book addressed to the Russian public, which gives an overview of the pragmatic turn taking place in contemporary social sciences. Pragmatic Turn is also the name of a series of books published by the newly founded European University at Saint