

The Metamorphosis of the Designer: A Prerequisite to Social Transformation by Design

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The title of this presentation is drawn from an essay by German Studies professor and Goethe expert Frederick Amrine titled *The Metamorphosis of the Scientist* (Amrine 1998). His central argument is that if one carries out a scientific inquiry with a Goethean phenomenological approach, a metamorphosis takes place in the inner world of the researcher. For his Theory U Claus Otto Scharmer transferred what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe achieved for natural phenomena, namely physics and biology, to the observation of human individual and collective phenomena and situations (Scharmer 2008). Scharmer went a step further proposing a new scientific approach to understand the economic, political, ecological, and spiritual aspects of our world: he introduces a design method to transform existing situations into preferred ones. This essay shows how the Theory U model can be considered as a radically different design theory and methodology from common approaches used and taught in design. Claus Otto Scharmer and Katrin Käufer further state in their 2013 published book *Leading from*

the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies:

»The crisis of our time isn't just a crisis of a single leader, organization, country, or conflict. The crisis manifests across all countries in the form of three divides: the ecological divide – that is, the disconnect between self and nature – the social divide – that is, the disconnect between self and other – and the spiritual divide – that is, the disconnect between self and self. The crisis reveals that the old underlying social structure and way of thinking, the old way of institutionalizing and enacting collective social forms, are dying.«

From crisis to preferred situations

Strolling through any bookstore today, the visitor might come up with the idea of setting up a specific section about crises. Indeed, today we witness crises all over the world. The Braunschweig master's program Transformation Design (since 2015) suggests the hypothesis that design might be a promising approach in the face of a present time shattered by (a) crisis. Like the curriculum in Braunschweig, the master's program in Nîmes, called Social Design or Social Innovation by Design (since 2011) also deals with crisis issues of contemporary society from a design perspective. The question is: What can Design do about all these crises? Although we all expect answers, I will not give any. Instead I will only make a few proposals based upon the five-year experience with our program. Going back to Herbert Simon's famous definition that »design is about devising courses of action for changing existing situations into preferred ones« (Simon 1996 quoted by Jonas 2016), it is necessary to ask who defines what a preferred situation is and how this definition is to be arrived at. Could designers be the sought-after experts? Under which circumstances could they turn the world into a more habitable place, if one accepts that habitability sets the designers' task? They contribute to making the world more livable concerning all different human experiences, not only physical and biological, but also psychological, social, and spiritual. But we are not sure if designers are the solution. So, who is going to decide what a preferred situation or a more livable world is?

↳ Jacqueline Hen: Schlendern/Langeweile:
An unserem Verhältnis zur Langeweile lässt sich die von Scharmer beschriebene Krise unserer Zeit, besonders die der *Spirituellen Teilung* in Zusammenhang mit den sozialen und ökologischen Verwerfungen, ablesen. Langeweile – nicht als Methode sondern Verhältnis zur Zeit – besitzt eine transformative Kraft abseits effizienz-motivierter Verwertungslogiken. In diesem Sinne laden die folgenden Kommentare zum Abschweifen ein.

Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist inspired by Jean Piaget's work on the stages of cognitive development, is best known for his moral theory that defines six steps of moral development in dependence to age, knowledge, individual reasoning and societal experiences (Kohlberg 1981). He came to the conclusion that statistically only few individuals manage to reach stages 5 and 6, which corresponds to an extremely high capacity in empathy, altruism and devotion to their fellow citizens. His research seems to be an appropriate approach to morality. Still, considering his model, I cannot see why designers would score better than others on that scale. It seems clear that they are no more competent in making moral and value decisions about preferred situations than anyone else. However, since designers cannot ignore moral issues, a problem appears, which Scharmer's model tries to dissolve. His model, called Theory U (Scharmer 2008), is worth considering as a theory and methodology about how to make decisions towards preferred situations. The following examples reflect my personal experience of using this model in design education to train social designers. My aim is to elaborate on how Theory U differs from methodologies usually taught and adopted in design schools.

From the Bremen Model to Theory U

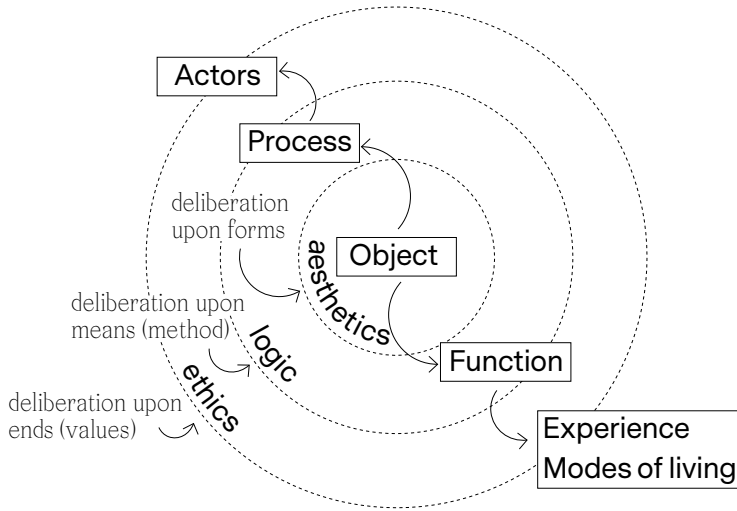
The Bremen Model (Findeli/Bousbaci 2005), first presented in 2004 in Bremen in a keynote lecture at the International Conference of the European Academy of Design, describes the historical development of design theories and their change in focus over time. The research derived three main periods respectively focusing on the actors of the design project, the process of production, and the resulting object or product, corresponding to indicating an ethical, a logical, and an aesthetic philosophical concern stage (see [1](#)). In the conclusion, we asked what the next stage of design theory could be. We came up with two hypotheses: Either we are heading towards a »meta aesthetic«, or there will be what we then called »ontology« on the upstream dimension (the generative or conception side) and »anthropology« (in its philosophical sense) on the downstream dimension (the expe-

rential or reception side). When some years later Otto Scharmer published his Theory U, we found out that his model was, if somewhat superficially, a more developed version of what our model described and our hypothesis hinted at. What we named the next stage of the model is the key issue of Scharmer's model, what he calls »the blind spot«, which had finally given sense to my own »Gulasch.« In what follows, I will focus on understanding the specificity of his theory and on the way it will radically change the way social designers think and act.

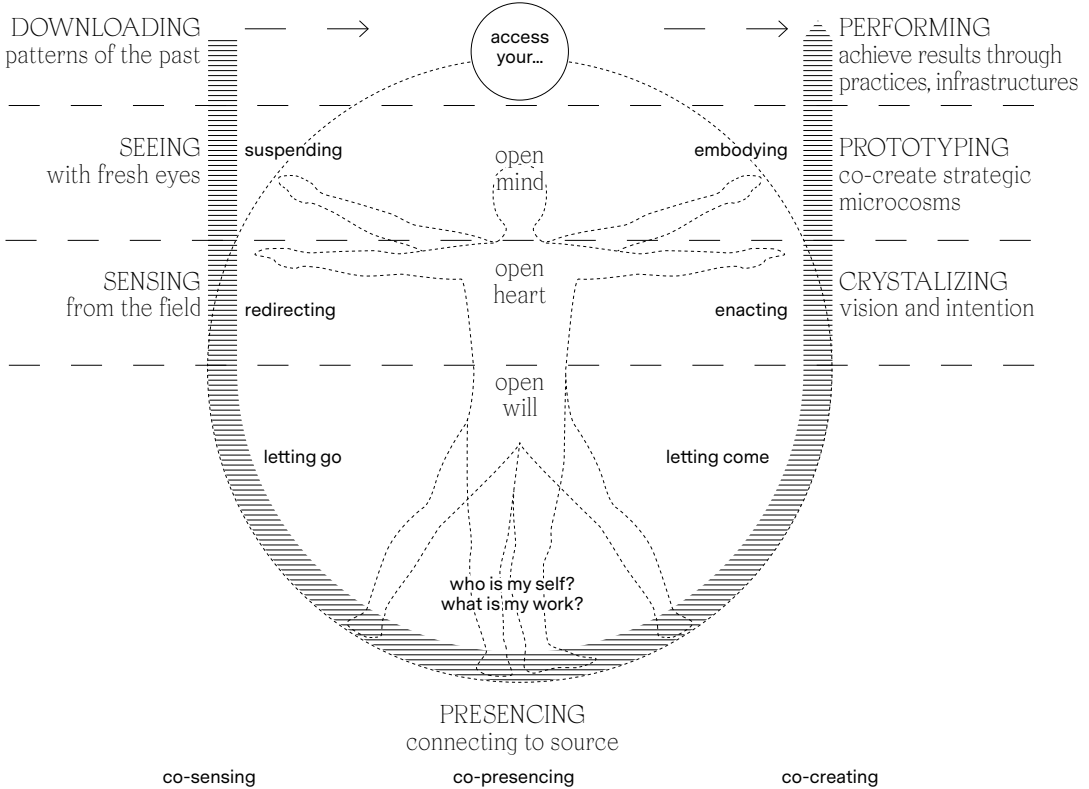
Theory U is structured around three key concepts, namely: the structure of attention and intention (central to any design project), the social field, and the blind spot. Briefly glancing at these concepts, Scharmer points out that any project consists of the outcome of a project (the deliverable), the methodology used to carry out the project and the social field including the people involved in the project (its stakeholders). Incidentally, one observes that this corresponds precisely to the three stages exemplified by the upstream half of the Bremen Model (1: object→process→actors). What remains hidden, however, is the inner place from which the project holders operate. The blind spot in the social field is the fundamental concept of Theory U. Scharmer argues that the success of an intervention depends on the inner condition of the people who carry out the project. In other words: The capacity to appreciate the beauty of a natural landscape depends on the richness of a person's inner landscape.⁴ If the inner landscape is poor, one will be missing the aesthetic capacity to appreciate the beauty outside of oneself. Furthermore, Scharmer points out that presently in the curriculum of future managers, leaders, and indeed of designers might we add – there is no place where the inner landscape of the students is consciously and pedagogically developed. As a consequence, they are not prepared to discover their blind spot and work on it in order to improve their epistemological, methodological, and moral capacities to make aesthetic judgments when they take decisions about preferred situations in their professional domain and expertise. I am firmly convinced that this issue, namely the relationship between the outer world and the inner world, is of highest relevance for the future of design education and design practice.

☞ »Langeweile ist ein warmes graues Tuch, das innen mit dem glühendsten, farbigsten Seidenfutter ausgeschlagen ist. In dieses Tuch wickeln wir uns wenn wir träumen. Dann sind wir in den Arabesken seines Futters zuhause. (...)« (Benjamin 1982: 161)

- 1 The eclipse of the object in design theories
(Bremen Modell, after Findeli & Bousbaci, 2005).



- 2 Theory U (Scharmer 2008).



Designers, especially those trained in dealing with complex models, are more familiar with what Scharmer calls the social field, that is the network of connections through which the stakeholders of a given system relate, converse, think, and act together. It is just another way of talking about complex systems, specifically social systems. The social complexity results from the difference and divergence in the interests, cultures, mental models, and the Weltanschauungen that the various stakeholders of a situation bring into play. Scharmer calls social grammar the set of hidden rules, structures, and inflection points that enable certain types of evolution and emergence to happen in the system. Looking at the graphical representation of Theory U the central column (2, open mind, open heart, open will) shows the three different types of structure of attention and intention involved during a project. To sum up: Currently there are more than eighty design methodology models available to describe what they are or should be about. What first appeared to be just another design thinking or design methodology model schematized in an original U shape, turned out to bear and suggest some new qualities and characteristics which I will outline in the following paragraphs.

Comparing Theory U with the Double Diamond

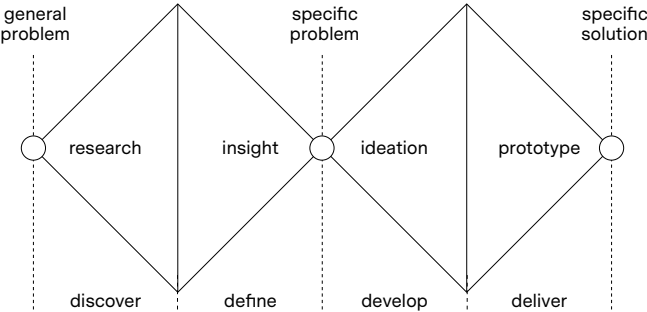
The Double Diamond or 4D design process model (3: discover, define, develop, deliver) is currently the most widely used in design education (Design Council, 2005). Despite its deficiencies, it has a hands-on character and a pedagogical virtue that makes it very suitable for bachelor students to begin with design (thinking). If we superimpose the Double Diamond and Scharmer's unfolded U model¹, we observe approximately the same stages and concepts in both models 4. However, there is a great difference: first, it happens to be somewhat ›flat‹ if we consider what is experienced by progressing through the different stages (the discover, define, develop, and deliver steps are conceived as predominantly strictly cognitive abilities), whereas the latter discloses a certain human depth by differentiating three anthropological/experiential dimensions corresponding to the three main faculties of the human psyche, respectively thinking (the cognitive), feeling (the

1 A first original feature of Theory U is that it contains both a positive and a negative counter-model, the latter presenting why the world does not function as it should. It describes more accurately why we are in a state of crisis. Reading Scharmer's articles in the Huffington Post (2018), where he comments on some recent and burning political decisions, one realizes that his aim is to propose an alternative to current capitalism.

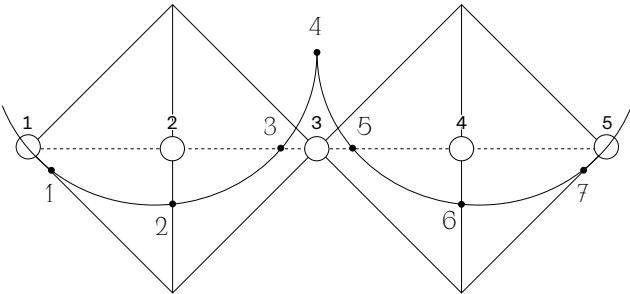
Als Pendant zur *Vita contemplativa* (dem beschaulichen, in Gedanken versunkenen Leben) steht die *Vita activa*, (das tätige Leben) (Arendt 2007; Han 2009:87ff). Beide Begriffe sind aus dem christlichen Mönchstum stammende Ideale, die in einem ausgewogenen Gegenspiel zu einem ›Guten Leben‹ führen sollen. Byung-Chul Han überführt diese Phänomene ins Profane und versucht mit ihnen eine Lösung für unsere heutige Zeitkrise zu formulieren. Mit der Absolutsetzung der ...

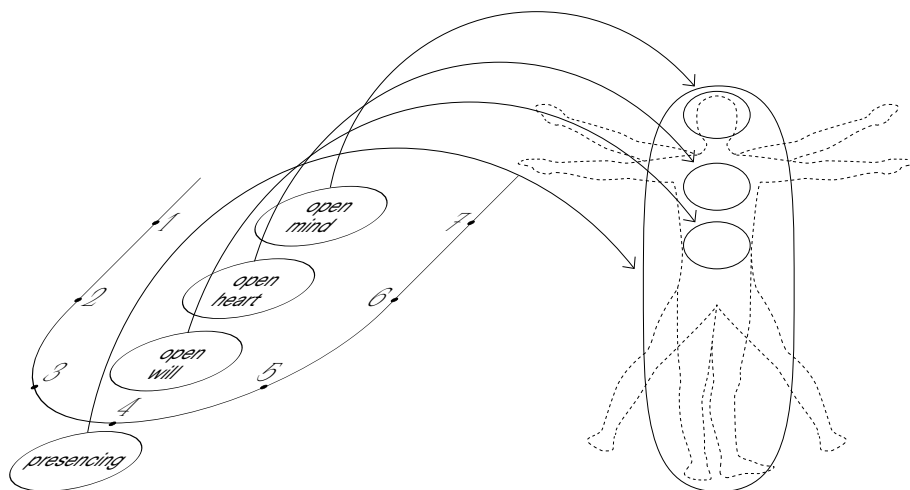
affective), willing (the conative) [4]. On the left-hand side of the U ([2]: down-loading, seeing, sensing, presencing), designers are confronted with attitudes and perspectives requiring specific anthropological and experiential competences, the same applies to the right-hand side of the U (also [2]: pre-sencing, crystallizing, prototyping, performing). This is precisely what constitutes the main difference between the two models since it requires that not only the designers, but all stakeholders are invited, through a carefully controlled process, to immerse their selves into parts of their inner world, which otherwise stay neglected or even unknown (thinking, feeling, willing). Taking this seriously has indeed a direct impact on future design education, consequently on the required competences of design educators.

[3]a Double Diamond Model
(after Design Council 2005).



[3]b superimposition of the Double Diamond model and the unfolded U model.





Goethe's phenomenology

The second aspect of Scharmer's epistemological stand was borrowed from Goethe's phenomenology (Goethe 1989, Steiner 1987). Scharmer used Goethe's methodology and epistemology, developed to describe and understand the mineral, vegetal, and biological worlds, to transfer them into the social world and its complexity. The key concepts of Goethean phenomenology are: (1) delicate empiricism (*zarte Empirie*); (2) intuitive power of judgment (*anschauende Urteilskraft*); and (3) archetypal phenomenon (*Ur-Phänomen*). There is a great difference between Goethean epistemology and what is considered ›standard‹ scientific methodology. The shape or configuration (*Gestalt*) of any phenomenon, for instance a social phenomenon, is considered the consequence of two counter forces: (1) the forces of contextual nature, namely the social, economic and political forces; (2) the social phenomena, which have inner forces, meaning they have an intentionality, or in other words a project of their own. Since the task of designers is to deal

Vita activa ging auch die ausschließlich negative Konnotation des Begriffes der Langeweile und begleitender Phänomene der Prokrastination, welche heute als Zeitverschwendung gelten, einher. Wo früher das Verweilen und eine lange *Weile haben* positiv behaftete Handlungen und ein fester Bestandteil des alltäglichen Lebens waren, die ohne ein schlechtes Gewissen ausgeübt wurden, ist heute das Gegenteil der Fall. Handlungen wie das Trödeln, der Müßiggang et cetera, welche aus

dem Takt des Produktivitätsparadigmas fallen und ihrer Eigenrhythmik folgen, affrontieren den Ökonomismus. Gerade diese kontemplativen Elemente aber sind essentiell für die menschliche Existenz, denn sie geben uns die Möglichkeit zur Eigen- und Weltreflexion. Die gänzliche Verbannung »besinnlicher« (Ebd.: 107) Handlungen aus unserem Leben und der Degradierung der Dinge zu herstellbaren Objekten, führt nicht nur zu einem Verlust der Zeitlichkeit, sondern lässt uns selbst zu geistlosen Dingen werden.

with these two sets of forces, it is necessary to recognize and understand them phenomenologically. A detached attitude is fruitless for this specific kind of purpose. Instead, a personal engagement towards the phenomenon is necessary, e.g. through ethnographic and empathic inquiries. According to Goethe, »Every new object, well considered, opens up a new organ in us« (Jeder neue Gegenstand, wohl beschaut, schließt ein neues Organ in uns auf) (Goethe 1989). Instead the standard, supposedly ›objective‹, approach of scientific research requires the observer to be situated outside of the phenomenon, using his or her cognitive abilities exclusively, if possible, with the help of algebraic manipulation. In phenomenology the relationship between the observer and the phenomenon is a crucial factor. The idea is to merge with the phenomenon to understand its core, meaning, its very own systematic logic, completely excluding the observer's personal logic. The problem is that phenomena cannot communicate whether in spoken or written form, so that the observer must so to speak ›lend‹ his or her consciousness to the phenomenon, enabling it to speak and report through them: »This is what I actually am, this is where I want to go, these are my concerns, this is my project.« Because the observer needs to mobilize, not only his or her cognitive but also affective/emotional and conative/willing capacities for the inquiry to be successful. Such phenomenological practices actually transform the observer, »opening up a new organ« to perceive phenomena as mentioned above. If such a transformation did not take place through experience, it would not be phenomenological at all. The metamorphosis of the scientist-phenomenologist, in our case the designer, is therefore an essential criterion. Assessing an observation is necessary to determine, whether it is faithful to the phenomenon or only a projection of the observer onto the phenomenon. This is precisely the point where Scharmer's and Goethe's approaches merge.

From Double Diamond to Theory U: the future of design practice

As mentioned above, although the two models differ graphically [3], the terminology describing the development of the design process along the U curve

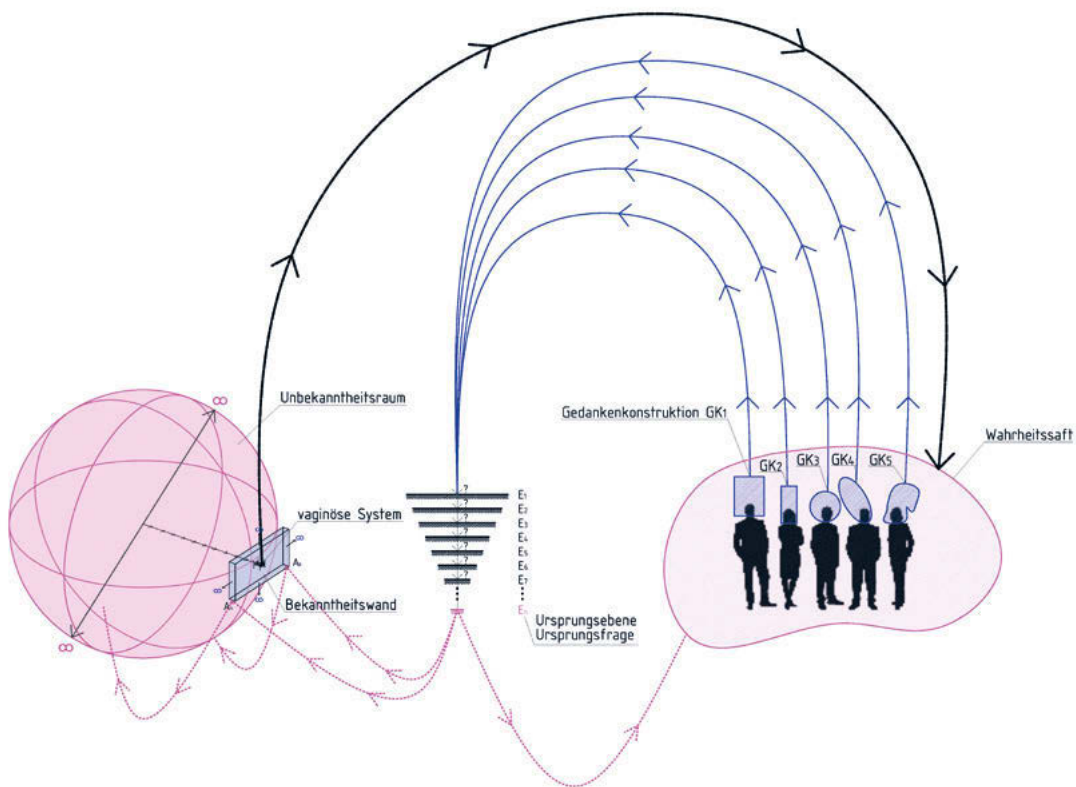
of Scharmer's seven steps model and along the Double Diamond's four steps are quite similar and familiar to designers; so similar indeed that if we unfold the U curve, it almost superimposes with the Double Diamond (see [3]). One could then justifiably think, that there is no difference, hence, there is no point adopting a new model; a statement often expressed by students. But there is a difference, and it rests on the metamorphosis mentioned above. The initially apparent graphical similitude disappears if a three-dimensional reading of the models is proposed, especially of its left half [4]. Concretely: Successively progressing down the left-hand side of the U (see [2]: downloading, seeing, sensing, presencing) requires the designer to confront, not only the two sets of antagonist forces mentioned previously, but also the images and ideas, he or she is constructing of him- or herself. It requires the risk of taking a journey to one's inner space, where maybe one has never ventured before. And this is true, not only for the designer, but also, if the challenge of the phenomenological approach has been well understood, for all the stakeholders of the project. This is why the crucial task, for designers in such social design projects, is to learn how to co-design a space, both physical and social, where such risks may be safely taken and empathically welcomed by all stakeholders, and why designers need to acquire new competencies if they pretend to improve the habitability of the world for their fellow citizens.

Conclusion

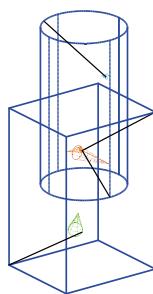
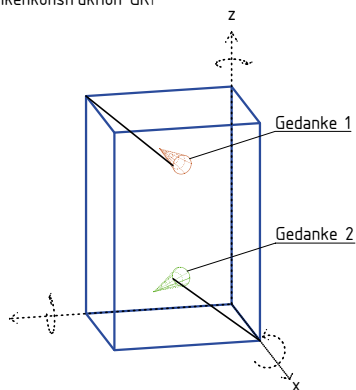
As we have seen, the different stages of Scharmer's method refer to distinct dimensions of the human being and their experiences. His model can therefore only be understood by actual practicing, and not by mere intellectual reasoning. My own approach is indeed in contradiction with such principles. Ideally, I should have proposed a co-design workshop. »Don't preach: practice!« Scharmer says in the MOOC (2015), he and his MIT team designed to teach the model, inviting designers to use the model to change their world-view and, by undergoing the metamorphosis, to open up »the new organ« in order to understand the complexity of the social world before proposing to transform it.

☞ Kreatives Arbeiten erfordert reflexive Momente und Eigenrhythmik. Wer maschinenhaft dem Takt des Produktionsparadigmas folgt, hat weder die Chance die Komplexität der eigenen Innenwelt noch das Außen zu ergründen und verwirkt so die Möglichkeit, die eigene Rolle zu reflektieren. Ausgehend von diesen Überlegungen ergibt sich folgende Frage: Wie können wir als Designer*innen Erfahrungen gestalten, die sich für Rezi-

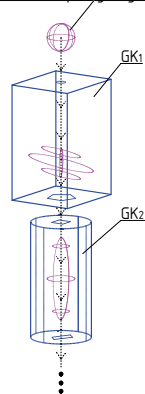
pient*innen nicht im Sinne eines ökonomischen Imperativs verwerten lassen und eine bewusste Distanz zu sonstigen produktiven Daseinsweisen schaffen?



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