

DESIGNING OF A 'NARRATIVE COCOON' AS A COMMUNICATIVE MODEL OF A DESIGN PRODUCT

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses methodological problems of modern design and the teaching strategy to meet the present-day challenges. The author treats design as a communication practice in terms of the neo-pragmatist paradigm of social knowledge and social practices. The concept of 'narrative cocoon' as a communication model of a design product and the methods of its construction are suggested to solve the main problem of design education, namely how to reach the balance of creative freedom and intellectual discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the limits and essence of his/her freedom is an important professional task for a designer. It is only through this insight that the designer can find an effective application of his/her creativity. There are two main directions in current design education: the first stimulates creative freedom in students and promotes their ability to find original and innovative solutions; the second underscores the importance of limitations set by a customer, the needs of the users, market situation, technical and budget recourses, etc. Mere mechanical combination of creative freedom and inevitable constraints may confuse students. An attempt to overcome the mentioned dualism has been made in the user experience model and the experience design concept (Norton, 1988; Garrett, 2002).

The emphasis on user-friendly design has helped designers better realize their mission. However, this fascination with the user experience model and its universal value suppresses the designer's creative intentions, forcing

him/her to work in the wake of the current needs of the user, which ultimately hampers the development of users, designers and the design itself.

The task of the design education, in my opinion, it not merely to declare that creative freedom has some constraints but to suggest a method capable of revealing creative potential in these constraints and of showing that it is possible to work not just within the limits but *with* the limits by retaining, expanding, overcoming and then getting back to them.

CONCEPTION OF DESIGN

This method treats design as a practice of constructing of the certain communicative situation by means of a product or as a communication practice of construction of the use's impression. The precise definition of design has theoretical and practical significance because it gives a designer initial reference points. The object of design is a communicative event, or impression, that a design product incites in the user. Impression is an event and, at the same time, a form of preservation of the event. Impression 'grabs' the man out of amorphous states by structuring them. Thus, impression can be seen as a starting point for acquiring new life experience. This is the existential aspect of our definition of design.

At the same time the understanding of design as a communication practice corresponds to the neo-pragmatist definition of communication practices as cultural, historical, and situationally affected reutilized modes of forming co-dependence, reciprocity, and conformal actions of communicators (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Gergen, 2001). It has been long known that designer not only drafts an object but implements some idea or concept. Later there came an understanding that design takes place not only in the head of a designer but also in the head of a user. Therefore, designer has to think not only about idea of the product but also how a user will perceive it. So designer has to focus on the creation of communication event.

The neo-pragmatist paradigm gives a proper perspective to grasp the communicative nature of design: it is not only an interaction between

designer and user but also a co-creation of some meaningful and emotional reality, a joint production of an existential event. The neo-pragmatist approach to communication overcomes the individualistic theory of action that sees motives as the only reasons for actions and plans as the pre-defined ways of their implementation. The shift of emphasis on the process and context of actions reveals what is happening in the course of action and how situational interactions construct reality that becomes a context of further actions, thus pre-defining their direction and meaning. So the theories of practices focus not on the motives and plans of subject but how these subjects 'make happen what they are doing'.

The complicated and paradoxical nature of design is to make 'happen' what designer and user do. Here, design is understood as a communicative action of designer and user. To construct this communicative situation, designer should focus conceptually on create the communicative model of the design product.

The neo-pragmatist theory of social knowledge offers basic points for understanding communication the communicative model of design-object. Communication produces a symbolically arranged reality by means of symbolic and cognitive structures — words or, to be exact, language models and constructions as well as the contexts of their usage. The motives of an action are created by the action itself; the circumstances are being constantly constructed by the interacting individuals and thus can't be considered as prearranged. In this way, the results of joint actions construct the reality that becomes the context for further actions.

In terms of this communication paradigm we can outline a general idea of the communication model of a design product. First, this model should be a semiotic structure; second, this semiotic structure should contain both a semantic nucleus and the context of its perception; third, unfolding of this semiotic structure in a communicative space creates reality that is both manageable and probabilistic in its character.

THE 'NARRATIVE COCOON' MODEL

This communication model of design product is named a 'narrative cocoon', because the image of a cocoon as something of a distinct shape and yet in the becoming renders the static and dynamic features of the communication model of a design product. The 'narrative cocoon' includes both predetermined meanings (they form its frame) and the meanings acquired in the process of communication (this is its constantly forming and flexible cover). The meanings appear and grow around the existing semantic nucleus.

The word 'cocoon' calls for something extensional, multilayered, airy, and evacuated; it appears around something that later itself becomes a cover; at some point a cocoon may prove hollow. The same holds true for the 'narrative cocoon': the internal semantic nucleus at some point itself becomes a cover; the source of semantic construction turns into a process. Given that communication is a construction of coordinated meanings, the image of the 'narrative cocoon' as a constantly flowing semantic stream that creates its own contents seems adequate enough.

The 'narrative' attribute of the cocoon shows a particular role that narrative, or a narrative construction, plays in a design process. The notion of narrative originates in linguistics where it stands for a method of language usage. However, in the neo-pragmatist tradition the term has acquired a new dimension: the narrative forms have been reconsidered as the structures of activity and experience that are immanent to the cognitive process (Bruner, 1989; White, 1987). Narration ceased being a mere 'vocalisation' of some prior experience and turned into the production and arrangement of meanings arising in the course of narration.

The narrative nature of the 'narrative cocoon' significantly enriches the semantic resource of this term. Of course, the narrative cocoon is not to be reduced to a speech structure but, instead, should be used as referring to the 'modes of speaking' are included, or rather entwined, into its fabric. Examined closely, contemporary design can be seen as a collection of stories; what we know about design is more often the stories rather than 'pictures'. Products frequently appear in the background as mere illustrations to the

story. Thus, the question now is not whether there is a narrative in the design practice but rather what kind of narrative it is and how it is made. It can be reduced to a mere description of a product or the very product can be created and perceived as a narrative.

Narrative in design is a mode of speech allowing for structuring the experience of a designer and user. By narrating about something by means of an object the designer can model the experience of the user, stimulating various reactions and ultimately impressions. Moreover, an existing object can be created anew by changing the mode of narration. Design is not 'something that is' but the way something is told, for that matter. Designer should consider the semantic construction laid into the object and also the way it will be unfolded in the communication process. The notion of 'narrative cocoon' that eliminates the difference between core and cover, between 'what the speech is about' and 'what happens during the speech' may prove an effective theoretical tool for a designer.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE 'NARRATIVE COCOON' MODEL

In the 'narrative cocoon' model, the design product is a mobile semantic construction embodied in an image and capable of creating the situation of impression. In view of this mobility, any references to its structure are quite tentative; however, there are three basic points — concept, image, and message.

The perception of design as the 'narrative cocoon' construction predefines the teaching strategy — to direct students' analytic activity toward formulating the concept, then activate their creativity by means of relevant semiotic procedures, which results the vision of the image, and then show the opportunities of contextualisation practices for supplying the design product with the resource of interpretations.

CONCEPT

The construction of the 'narrative cocoon' starts with a concept that, like a genetic code, defines the configuration of the 'body' of the 'narrative cocoon'. Concept is the start and the end, for it preserves the essence of the

assignment and serves as a reference point for the customer's original task. Though it is the customer who defines the concept parameters, it is the designer who articulates them, as the elaboration of the concept can't be reduced to editing of the customer's requests; it is a complicated analytic procedure.

At first glance, the concept is a short description of the final object that sums up the ideas on how to satisfy the needs of the target group. However, such a concept may be a beacon for a marketing specialist but not a designer, for the latter needs the concept not for choosing the successful business strategy but rather as the channel for his/her creativity. Concept understood as an outline, configuration of the event, is one of the most complex notions in design. Elaboration of the concept is the first and indispensable step to the construction of the 'narrative cocoon'. The image gives 'flesh' to the concept, vests it with 'expressive matter'. The concept is the result of analytic work done in cooperation with the customer while the image is the product of designer's creativity. During the elaboration of the concept it is the customer who is dominating; the creation of the image lies in the designer's competence.

IMAGE

While the concept in the 'narrative cocoon' can be compared to genetic code, the image is the body. The construction of the 'narrative cocoon' is simultaneous with the construction of the image; each stage of this construction is an approach to the image and its various implementations. First, the outlines of the image should be defined by the semiotic model that prepares its vision; then the achieved result should be specified by the discursive model. The semiotic model shall have the contexts of perception in the discursive mode. Translation of the image-semiotic model into image-discursive model is done through contextualization practices that invest the image with autonomy and its own development logic.

Semiotic modeling is instrumental in preparing the situation in which an image may appear rather than in 'creating' that image. This means that a semiotic model must be found as a whole rather than composed of semiotic

resources. Semiotic modeling is a sequence of procedures aimed at the elaboration and organization of semiotic resources that allow for creating such a model.

Methodologically, semiotic modeling is based on social semiotics that discovers symbolic means used to construct communicative situations. Neo-pragmatic social semiotics is not focused on semiotic resources as such – the true point of interest is their various arrangements that allow to form meanings. The following four points on the meaning-formation mechanism are particularly pertinent for the semiotic modeling of a design product: recognition of meanings depends on the code chosen in each situation; there are specific conditions for meaning-induction (the unfolding of meanings); meaning-markers enjoy a focusing role; narrative is understood as a meaning-generating structure.

Every procedure of semiotic modeling can be considered in terms of creative condition and creative action. Creative condition works as a 'background' against which an image appears while creative action refers to the thought-through acts of processing this image (Table 1).

Procedures	Creative conditions	Creative actions
Activation of semiotic field ▶	ABSORPTION ▶	Concentration of semiotic resources
Creation of a semiotic situation ▶		Introduction of code/concept
Formation of a semiotic situation ▶		Identifying the meaning markers
		Retrieving a metaphor
Setting a semiotic model ▶	DETACHMENT ▶	Identifying a topic
		Spelling out the basic narrative

Table 1: Procedures of semiotic modeling

Semiotic modeling is well represented in the following scheme: the concept-code starts concentrating semiotic resources and creates a semiotic situation that suggests a metaphor; getting a feel for the metaphor activates an image and clarifies it; as the image gets clearer, one finds a topic that centers and orders a semiotic situation, renders further precision to the metaphor and makes the image so distinct that it can now be described in the basic narrative. All these actions are accompanied by modeling of creative conditions or, more precisely, by their modulation from absorption to detachment.

The procedures of semiotic modeling follow each other and thus require certain succession of mental acts; however, the pivotal points a designer finds in the process of semiotic modeling – namely, a metaphor, a theme, and a basic narrative – should not result from the logically accurate reasoning. There is no cause-and-effect relationship between these narrative actions: a metaphor does not result from a topic and the topic does not form a basic narrative. There are gaps and lacunae between them.

The basic narrative fixates the semiotic model and articulates an image; implicitly, it contains the instruments to be used to represent an image in an object. To bring the image into a basic narrative is to render a new quality to it. This process may be explained in terms of 'crystalline grid' and 'plasma'. The basic narrative puts the image into the 'crystalline grid' by endowing it with the stable ordered periodical structure. At this moment the image coincides with the model. Later, basic narrative is to change its state into plasmic; it ceases being a structure and turns into a clot of meaning. This means that a semiotic model must have, while preserving its distinctness, a span of freedom and a program of development. This program is unfolded by the practice of contextualization that turns a semiotic model into a discursive semiotic model.

However detailed a semiotic model might be, it will further develop and alter in communicative space. The practices of contextualization do help predict the ways of this development. By turning a semiotic model into a semiotic discursive model they create a construction of meaning open to re-signification and ready to enter a communication process. Methodologically, creation of a discursive model rests on the neo-pragmatic social semiotics that considers contextualization as a semiotic practice of endowing with meaning. Social semiotics distinguishes three types of contexts, namely the syntagmatic (it considers actions, events and phenomena in their succession), the paradigmatic (it juxtaposes, compares and pulls together actions, events and phenomena) and the indexical (it brings together events that are interconnected within a given situation rather than presents various interpretations of a single event).

To create a discursive semiotic model of a design product, the narrative cocoon methodology uses all the three practices of contextualization. However, indexical contextualization enjoys the priority since it opens up the horizons of continuous signification and resignification thus involving a user into stable and personalized communication. To actualize the indexical context is to increase an image's interpretative resource by suggesting an activity and free choice of meaning to the participants of communication. As a result, we receive a possibility of 'self-adjustment' with regard to what is being interpreted. In this sense, indexical contextualization turns a user into a participant of the design process. The contextualization of a semiotic model is accomplished by framing and reframing technologies. Framing brings a user back to a designer's code by referring to the suggested contexts. Reframing, by contrast, has to anticipate and predetermine a user's possible codes.

Thus, the semiotic model fixated in the basic narrative becomes a basis for contextualization practices. The transformation of a semiotic model into a discursive one is accompanied by the transversion of a basic narrative into a legend. Legend is a verbal construction capable of simultaneously fixating the products of contextualization and creating the projections of future contexts.

Just like core and cover can't be separated in a cocoon (one becomes the other), it is impossible to distinctly dissect the image into semiotic and discursive components. Construction of the image is a single action that has two dimensions and is done by simultaneous application of two technologies: the first one provides the vision of the image in its complete integrity while the second destroys the integrity of the image and unwraps it into a discursive practice, or the construction of meanings. The 'narrative cocoon' discloses the unity of completeness and openness of this process, its fixedness and fluidity, its definite and at the same time indefinite nature.

MESSAGE

The 'narrative cocoon' method encompasses all the dimensions of the communicative model of the design product, including its existence as a

message. Message is the mode of existence of the design product in communicative space. Transversion of image into message is done by means of the communicative technique that I would name *cultural animation*, for it can really be compared to resuscitating of the image. The message doesn't show the image but it somehow appears, unfolds, develops and clarifies itself in it. The 'narrative cocoon' in the form of a message shows itself as the state of conformal creation of meanings of the designer and user.

The image-message grows like a live organism and predetermines the outlines of the situation of impression. It is always difficult to estimate the behaviour of a living organism but the designer has to do it, that is — to construct the strategies for managing the message. Cultural animation gives the keys for such management.

DESIGN-CODE' BRIEF

The process of 'narrative cocoon' creation should be recorded in a definite structure, namely a design brief. The version of a design brief that records the process of 'narrative cocoon' construction may rightfully be called a 'design-code' because it works as a 'frame' capable of creating an organic integrity out of many uncoordinated signs. The structure of the 'design-code' brief reflects the stages of the 'narrative cocoon' construction and consists of three parts: analytic, creative and communicative ones. The analytic part reflects the process of sorting out the details, the elaboration and interpretation of the customer's requests and preferences that in the end turn into the concept. The creative part is a detailed process of semiotic discursive modeling. Finally, the communicative part includes the work done to create a scenario for the semiotic discursive model's cultural animation, the selection of respective instruments and plans as to how to disseminate the message.

The division between analytic and creative elements in the design brief is quite relative though necessary. In fact, creative work on the image in design is always analytical because it hangs on a concept by constantly checking with it. In its turn, analytical points require some creativity, too. And yet, rationality dominates design and design briefs reflect this fact.

The version of design brief, as described here, allows for grasping the complex and contradictory character of designer's practice. Design begins with a precisely defined idea that is to be changed in the process of its implementation. This results in a product that is equally predictable and unpredicted. The process seems to follow the 'nobody would have looked for me if I hadn't been already found' principle. Moreover, this difficult-to-predict quality of the result is a necessity. Though designer's activity should be based on a conception, it should be continually worked on and surmounted in the process of its implementation.

The method of teaching the 'narrative cocoon' helps students fully realize the communicative nature of design and master the work on the conception of a design product in dynamics (Table 2):

Designer	Daria Kiseleva (student of The Saint-Petersburg State University, Department of Arts, 2011)
Design product	Graphic accompaniment for International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater
Analytic part ► CONCEPT	
Objective	to create an extraordinary image of Piano Festival with latent codes
'Hero' (representative of target group)	professionals, experts, esthete
Competencies	outstanding unique musicians from various generations and different schools, each shows unique style of playing
Concept	system in system
Creative part ► IMAGE	
SEMIOTIC MODEL ► BASIC NARRATIVE	
Meaning markers	relief, aerial surveying, pendulum
Key metaphor	photolab (the process of taking photographs and developing a film)
Topic	'open artwork'
Basic narrative	<p>International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater introduces outstanding unique musicians. As each participant shows unique style of playing, an individual emblem will be created to represent it.</p> <p>The emblems styled as ideographs are based on the graphic symbols of music notation. Each musician receives his or her own emblem that contains the encoded information on his or her distinctive performing style (musical performance is characterized by tempo, dynamics, articulation, sound tone).</p> <p>General style is graphic and minimalist. The typography is clear, plain, definite.</p> <p>Key metaphor 'Photolab': the process of taking photographs and developing a film. In photographing, the film captures an elusive moment and situation that becomes evident after development. Music is by its nature ephemeral. It exists when we're listening to it and then fades away in time and space. To visualize music is to capture the impalpable, to develop it, to decode latent meanings, to sift it through structural analysis and to represent its results graphically.</p>
DISCOURSIIVE MODEL ► LEGEND	
Practice of contextualization	Indexical: reframing
Inspirations	Otto Frei's bionic constructions; ideograph symbols; stores of Jorge Luis Borges
Metaphysical reminiscences	Clear form
Legend	<p>'Open artwork' and 'openness' of its structure allowing for various interpretations and possible developments (as opposed to a solid form) have become this project's basic idea. Most music works (or, rather, most classical music works) are distinguished by an accomplished form organized and brought to the ultimate perfection by a composer. And yet even these works are 'open' since they allow for different interpretations while preserving their uniqueness.</p> <p>Otto Frei's bionic constructions are based on organic forms that he organized and brought to perfection. Tensile membrane constructions are conditioned by definite physical and landscape parameters. This principle of search for a definite form will be used in the project while the form found in this way – clear, plain, definite, carrying a latent meaning – will become the basis for this design product.</p> <p>Everything in this project is governed by the idea of interpretation, multiple perspectives, decoding and reformatting those codes, which, in turn, is based on the openness of structure understood as a possibility for infinite development and co-existence of meanings. Graphic symbols are reminiscent of runes containing latent meanings and encoded messages.</p>

Table 2: 'Design-code' brief D.Kiseleva (Analytic and Creative parts)

The student's design product reflects dynamics of the analytic and creative process (Fig. 1,2,3,4).

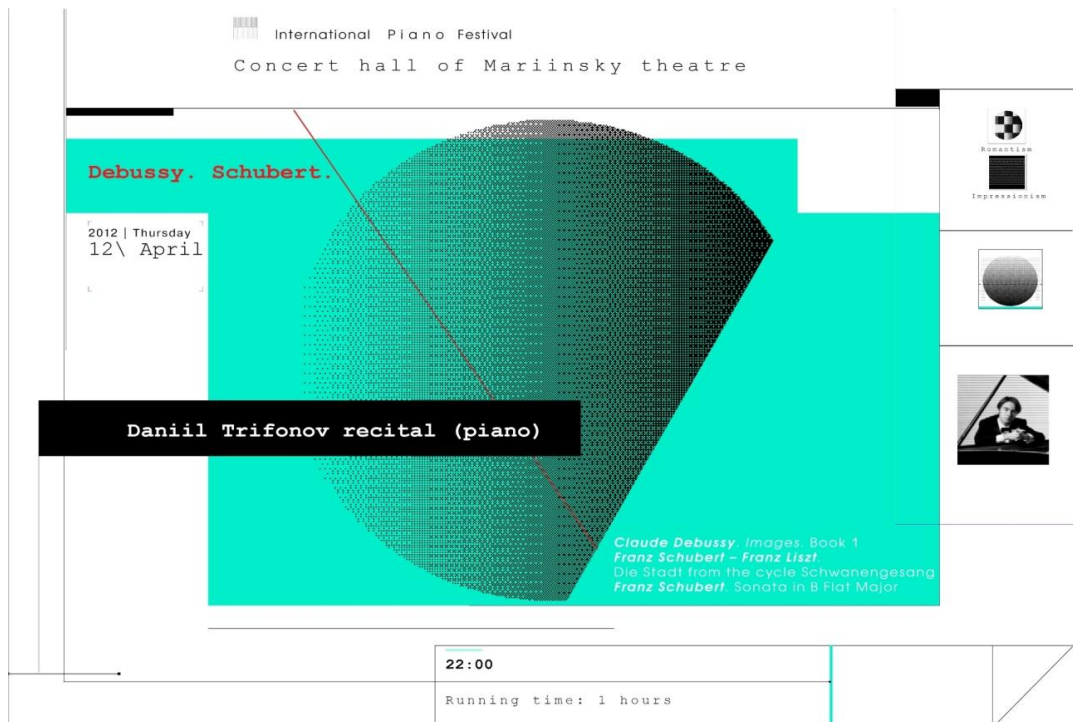


Figure 1: Daria Kiseleva. Graphic accompaniment for International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater. Poster 1.

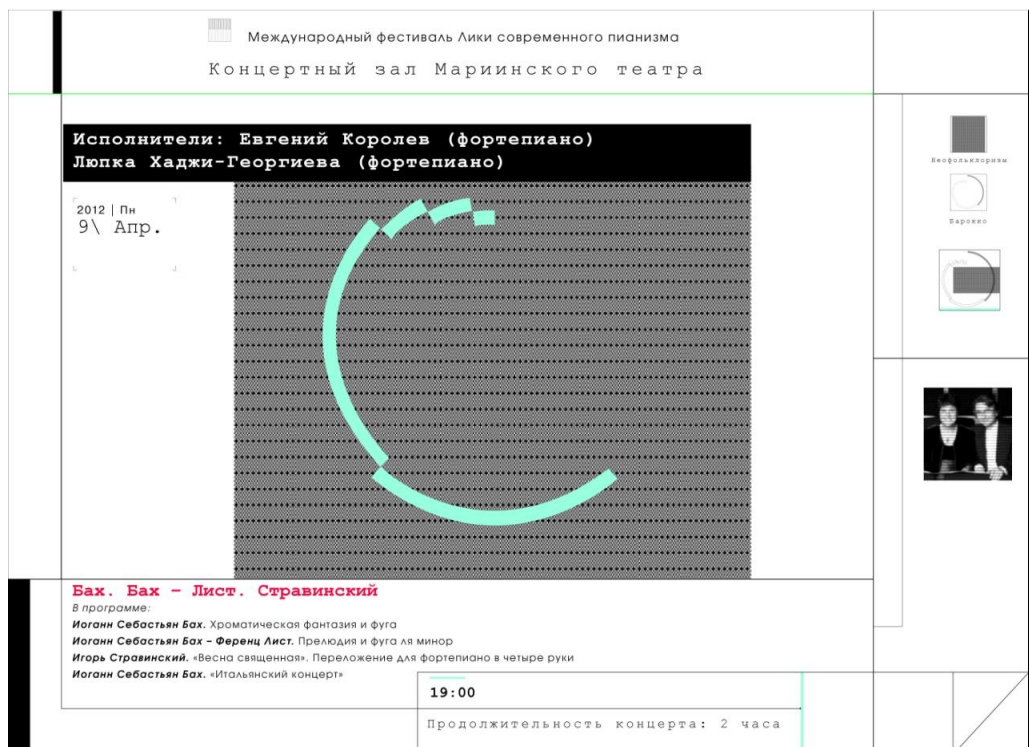


Figure 2: Daria Kiseleva. Graphic accompaniment for International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater. Poster 2.

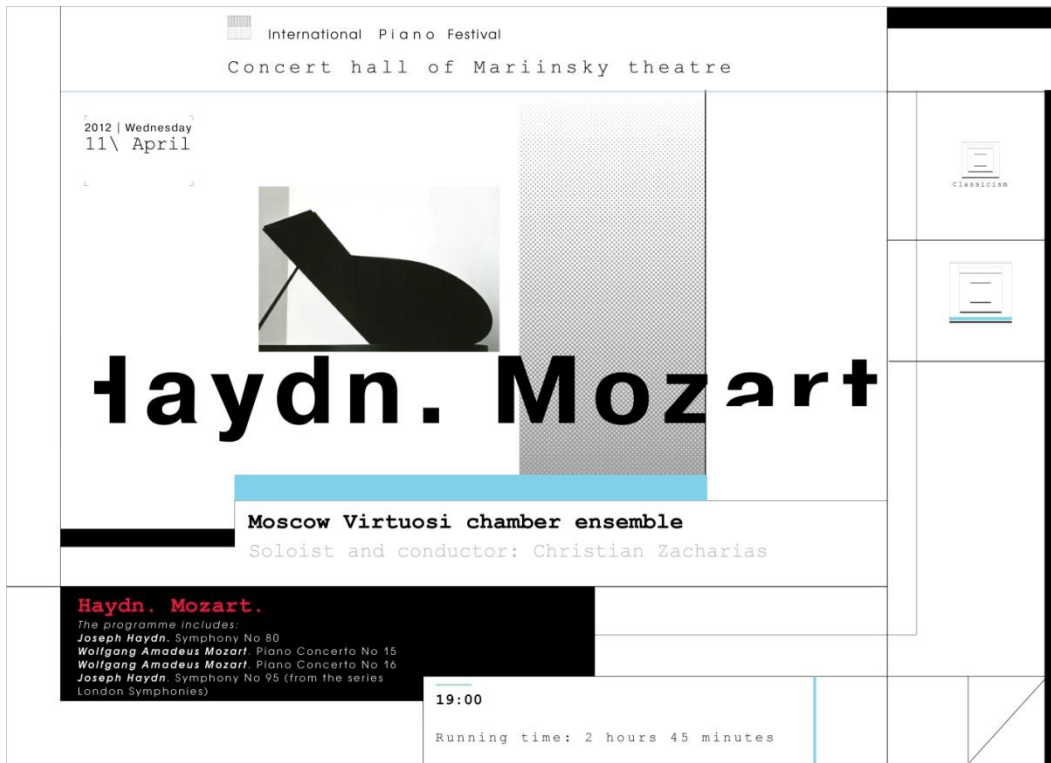


Figure 3: Daria Kiseleva. Graphic accompaniment for International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater. Poster 3.

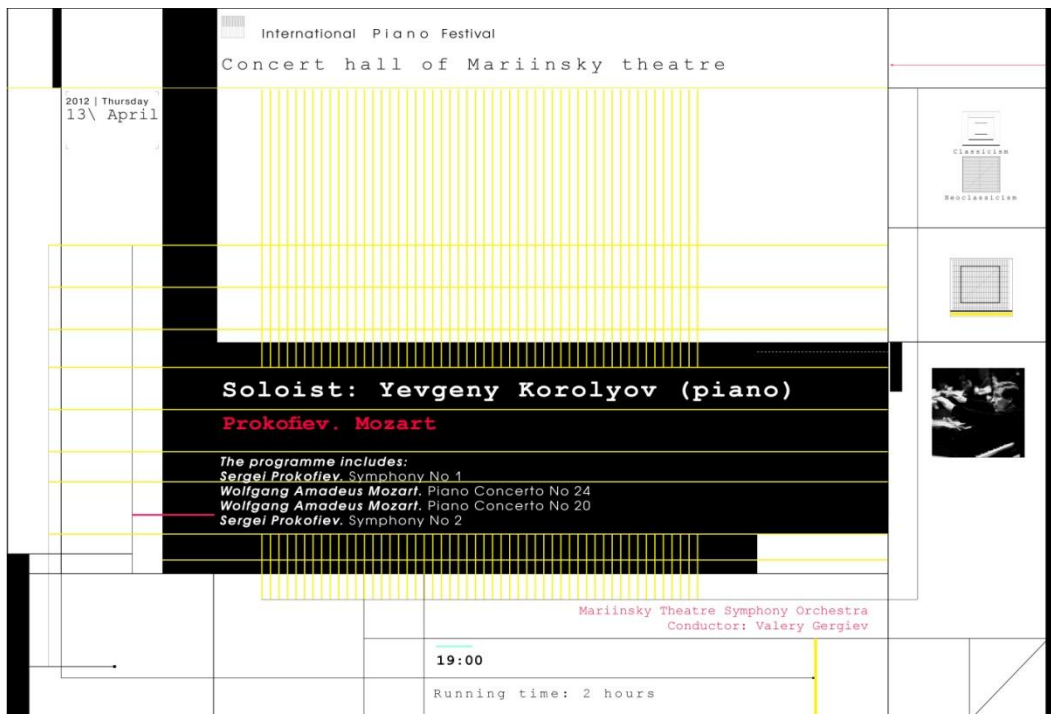


Figure 4: Daria Kiseleva. Graphic accompaniment for International Piano Festival at Mariinsky theater. Poster 4.

ADVANTAGES OF USING 'NARRATIVE COCOON' MODEL

The teaching method of the 'narrative cocoon' allows, first, to concentrate not only on the concept but also on its performance that is — to find the instrumental aspect of the designer's creativity; second, understand the construction of the communicative model of the design object in simultaneous mode, grasping all the stages of the process: semiotic modeling, contextualization practices, and cultural animation.

By teaching the students how to construct a 'narrative cocoon' I do not force them to create a product according to a strict plan but rather invite them to *participate* in the process of its creation that has its own dynamics and logic. In this case the plan is not a constant but a variable; it sets the general direction but is itself prone to modulation and requires creative approach. A design product proves its contextual character, for it is not an independent and self-sufficient substance but an integrity that is always in the becoming.

According to the method of 'narrative cocoon', the would-be designer will not only master the familiar ways of action but constantly invent new ones because he/she acts in a constantly changing situation. He/she realizes what makes his/her practice effective, namely — clear understanding of what should be done in terms of the concept and at the same time there should be eagerness to change these terms in view of new circumstances. In this case, concept works as a mobile border that allows for flexible and quick reaction to a changing situation without losing one's orientation. Therefore, the method of 'narrative cocoon' teaches students not merely to consider the circumstances but to be able to interact with them in various and somewhat spontaneous ways by means of practical imagination and improvisation. Teaching experience shows that this approach helps students find a balance between creative freedom and intellectual discipline and eliminate the opposition between the need for self-expression in a product and obeying the customer's will. This method, as well as the respective teaching strategy, helps students understand the conditions and recourses that guarantee the effectiveness of their operation, balance their analytical and creative activities, and, most importantly, fully realize their status as designers.

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