

Imitation, Experience and Learning: On The Unity Of Expression In Design

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ABSTRACT

Design is the act of bringing the intelligible to the senses. Not simply a work of pure reason finding science or methodology through knowledge, or a work of practical reason sensing genius or taste by empirical evidence, or even faith, design is a cause often mistaken for an outcome. It is a totality of which only a part is sensuous, as an esthetic object, or as a structure of soundness, while other parts elude the senses into apprehension through form fitting idea. Attributes of relevance in the artifact emanate from within the constituents of design: form and content, relative to one another rather than to the need for art, often external thereto, being social, political, economic, etc. In this regard, the significance of a work of design is an internal affair found in the accordance of form to content. I say accordance to allow for the possibility of a range in suitability, where one idea is more suited to being recited in a poem than embodied in a sculpture. This is while harmony is a state of absolute accordance, similar in content to elegance in form where nothing could be added or omitted without some loss of significance. Ultimately, judgment of the work of art—as a design—is a question of *making* responding to conception and not the servitude of the artifact to the external need that had called for the act of making in the first place. Design is collected—as would be rainwater—at the core of existence, nourishing, invigorating the spirit with turgidity, and springing out into full visibility and splendor when the natural thrust of expression overwhelms the forces of containment.

Keywords: Design Theory, Design Education, Viollet-le-Duc, Aristotle, Plato, Performance Arts

Necessity is a term often appearing with reference to the external need for design. In one of his well published and influential *Lectures On Architecture*, Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc attributes design to

necessity prescribing the cause or premise to which design would be an effect or conclusion, Viollet-le-Duc even named particulars: “Necessity imposes the programme: it says I want a dwelling; I want air and light.”¹ The notion of necessity has several incarnations in literature, most noteworthy of which is in Plato’s *Timaeus* where necessity is in the need to subordinate the properties of material to the will of the craftsman by temperance through mixture and combination with the aim of controlling those properties to enhance some, reduce others enhancing all to best perform in representing ideal content through sensuous form. Plato thus establishes necessity as the need to negotiate materials, tempering their natural states of being to serve the creative purposes of the artist and craftsman. Purpose in this sense includes the range of design intent, not limited to utility or aesthetic considerations. “Reason overrules Necessity by persuading her to guide the greatest part of the things that become towards what is best.”² Plato established Reason as the agency driving the creative act of design, clothing concepts in material form, as successfully as the form suits the idea.

What appears to be a convulsion of nature is, therefore, argued to be a manifestation of a force of the unknown operating on Nature, or by means of the visibility of natural phenomena. “Our social life is the best Tragedy,” Plato writes in the *Laws*. There would always be a reason, however, to create works of art in imitation of reality. The significance of imitation is in it being direct manifestation of reason, evidence thereof and a true show of human nature. The primacy of design is a notion nearly as old as there was awareness of the tendency to design beyond utility; yet, a question about design education recurrently surfaces, often unexamined in its very

1 Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel. *Lectures On Architecture*. Bucknall, Benjamin (Translator), Vol. 1, 1877, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1987, Lecture VI, p. 173.

2 Plato, *The Timaeus*(48A) as published in Cornford, Francis M., *Platos’ Cosmology*, Routledge, 1935. Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1997, p. 35.

structure and the validity of the term “design education” once design is understood in the Aristotelean sense as an early, natural and primary means to education. In other words, we learn by means of design and have done so long before cumulative awareness of this natural phenomenon led to examining this tool, reason it and, en route to finding answers thereabout, possibly damaged much of the instinctive tendencies associated therewith without proposing nearly as effective means to enhancing learning by design.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle established poetry as the ultimate art form—at least in two senses of the term: Firstly, freedom of expression from the fetters of making through material and all related concerns, from cost and all things money, to the limitations, rules and necessities that the properties of matter dictated. Secondly, freedom of speculation from accountability to fact and memory that fast bound history down to faithful recording. It is that sense of freedom that made poetry an art, a flight of fancy roaming far and wide on hope, dream, whim and the countless possibilities of imagination. The Aristotelean perspective on poetry granted that art—rooted in little more than linguistic expression and ideal content—the advantage of a lofty status that lives to this day through analytical thought of possibilities and alternative philosophy, through political analysis, drama and cinema; and the longevity was the grounds upon which I base the continued relevance of design as a seminal means for learning about all things from the core of the human psyche to the unseen extremities of the universe and its overarching order. With design and poetry associated with the unbreakable bond of reason—when both widely believed to be driven with emotion—I proceed with using the terms “poetry” to indicate a broader range of speculative thought that is integral to creative expression in its numerous incarnations; and I find much sense in Aristotle’s view of poetry pointing to the broader, further reaching sense of the term “poetry” than often allowed.

Aristotle linked the origin of poetry to two natural causes at the core of the human faculties of perception—the core being childhood and thus inextricable with primal instincts: Imitation and experience. In doing so, we are presented with one of the earliest arguments for the necessity of esthetic expression in the natural constitution of human kind.³ Not only is it so as a tendency, but also as an essential means to verifying oneself and others against a backdrop of perception as an impulse and a challenge at once. Cognition via imitation and indulgence of self and other anticipated Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

3 “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation.” Aristotle, *Poetics*; Introduction To Aristotle. McKeon, Richard (Editor). The Modern Library, New York, 1947. P. 627.

while firmly grounding the arts and design within the realm of the necessary. I am less concerned—for the purpose of the current argument—about imitation as a childhood impulse of creativity than I am about it being a primary way to learning. Design is a natural path to knowledge and enlightenment through the senses and reason in unison as no other may offer in such harmony and balance.

Inconsequential and, ultimately, impersonal, imitations evoke select emotions, and thus are formally suitable for certain occasions and not for others. This notion Aristotle uses to counter-argue Plato’s conclusion that since Art is a representation of the representation of the senses to reality, then Art is “three removes from truth.” As representative of universal truths, Art—Aristotle argues in the *Poetics*—is closer to the truth than history. Factual accounts of events and people in poetry constitute only one part of a whole of actions, passions and ideas. The essence of poetry transcends narrative to the poet’s unique apprehension of underlying structures and patterns of events. A poet would use fact to inaugurate narrative from a grounding of fact and imagination combined at individual proportions as a collective of speculative thought to constitute future possibilities and past probabilities. In essence, this is the making of design in any sensuous form, including built form. “What is imagination?” asked Viollet-le-Duc, “It is the power given to man to unite a combine in his mind things that have struck his senses.” The ability to combine is the creative fiber that is the imagination; yet, the creative tendency—no matter how much training and refinement it meets in the course of education—would still require sensuous expression if it were to communicate ideas beyond the confines of self to the other, to share the constituents through the senses. “Even abstractions must clothe themselves with a form before the imagination of man can conceive them... A man born without hands, deaf, and blind, could have no imagination.”⁴

The other Aristotelean point of origin of poetry is experience, as pleasurable and innate as imitation but may result in more adventurous works of art where “though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies.”⁵ Experience in art enjoyed the greatest range of evolution over time if we consider performance arts to be where this aspect of art and design to have evolved, including theatre, cinema, television, all the way to the internet and its unprecedented redefinition of access between the artist, technician, and the audiences everywhere, including time and place for enjoying a performance. The most recent of revolutions, the revolution in communication, may well be the best contender to expanding the mode and scope of communicating the

4 Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel; Ibid.

5 Aristotle, *Poetics*; Ibid.

makings of the human mind to the extremities of place and time. Art as experience is the ultimate distillation of pleasure, made possible through severing actions and passions from consequence to become purified and heightened sensations that may seem as realistic as possible. Knowing that no threat may ensue would clear the heart of fear, allowing only pleasure in the art to permeate the senses in ways not possible in real-life calamities that might present similar components but imbued with tragedy and loss. As such, art and design grow out of a ground of near-absolute freedom—since poetry is the least fettered of the arts, needing minimal resources and collaboration—and venture through challenges to the seminal freedom, trading some for new possibilities and grounds of creativity that continue to expand to virtually no bounds. Most significant is Aristotle's attributing pleasure to learning, for often they are discretely regarded, even as mutually exclusive; but this attribution claims an internal, nearly subconscious action since beauty in imitation, in quality of representation, color combinations, rhythm and improvisation, are but resonance of innate tendencies that are bound to infuse the spirit with a sense of comfort and familiarity. The newness, originality, and the makings of surprise and awe are collectively the vehicle to learning and to at once enrich the mind and heart with pleasure through knowledge: The true significance of the arts amongst the vast array of cognitive vehicles.

For knowledge to be grounded in the order of the universe—the order that warrants meaningful creativity in the face of the more often destructive chaos—a foundation of historical record is paramount. Historical accounts would serve as ingredients for a poetic speculative construct. Thus, the work of art is not a third-generation result of mere factual narrative, but a mixture of facts and probabilities not confined to one temporal or spatial frame of events. The Poet is a craftsman appropriating the makings of his artwork in order to suit a desired construct. History is a narrative of events collectively arranged from premise to conclusion at once informing and arguing by evidence of occurrence. "History is experimental politics, and just as, in physical sciences, a hundred books of speculative theories disappear before a single experiment, in the same way in political science no theory can be allowed if it is not the more or less probable corollary of well-attested facts."⁶ A poet would be no more an author of the Trojan War than the blacksmith is an author of the ductility of raw steel.

Experiencing the sensations typically aroused by the arts is primarily an affair of the mind en route to the senses, hence Kant's attributing the realization of the empirical world to faith, as a state of mind suited for

making perceptible the unreal, phenomenal world both theoretically and practically. The three basic faculties of Reason, namely perception, conquest, and reason or the faculty of ideas establish Reason as our means of knowing an external and objective world. The existence of an empirical reality is no less an object of faith than is the existence of God. However the nature of such empirical world may not be accessible to Reason by means of faith alone. Senses detect and relay to the mind the properties of matter as reality external to human authority, but Reason alone is the agency to prescribe the laws that govern negotiating those properties. Nature becomes possible by Reason via critical thinking, free of the inconsistency at the heart of individuality; for Reason—pure and practical⁷-- precedes experience. While perceiving objective existence—or the thing-in-itself—or knowing it, is the object of Kant's Pure Reason, acting upon that knowledge is a work of Practical Reason—both constituting our action and passion about Nature, prescribing the laws for Nature by design, never admittedly deriving them out of her.

Design is in nearly every action and passion of the spirit, informed by research, science, art and the necessity intrinsic to the complexity of life. Representation as a primal instinct and affinity of the human spirit to make, craft and bring to the senses what is otherwise intelligible remains central to generating shared experiences of the world and thus for establishing grounds for verification of standard. Design may be the one venture of the human spirit that recognizes the relative nature of being in its being firmly rooted in space and time as models of infinity and eternity respectively and manifested through a material component vital for arousing the senses. Through apprehending art as form and content, and comparative thought there-between, design is common ground for debate on a broad range of cognition clear of the temptation into conflict. I qualify Design as an occasion—rather than a destination—for the revelations brought about by Design are more often probabilities, where a successful design would occasion as broad a scope of actions and passions in context as may be within the parameters governing that design. The breadth of the scope would be a measure of success and survival or a structure—physical, ideological, social, political, etc.-- within proposed parameters is the manifestation of that success. In cybernetics, design remains the primary mode of operation of the human mind that may naturally weave pure sciences, applied venture, philosophy and sensuous representation—the arts—into a continuum of curiosity where a path assume by way of a journey is no less significant than any one of the often numerous anticipated, if seldom foreseen, destinations.

⁶ De Maistre, Study On Sovereignty (1884); as published in "The Works Of Joseph De Maistre"; Schocken, New York 1971; p. 114.

⁷ Refer to Kant's Critique of Judgment.

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