

RE/FRAMING DESIGN TRENDS: A BURKEAN META-RHETORICAL APPROACH

DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM

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ABSTRACT

In this PhD research project I aim to investigate the rhetorical framing of communication design trends, by employing the theory of American rhetorician, Kenneth Burke. Although Burke is relatively unknown in design research circles, this study argues that he may provide valuable new perspectives on the rhetorical nature of design products, processes and discourses. Visual rhetoric is considered an important yet underdeveloped area of design inquiry, and an application of Burke's rhetorical theories may prove valuable in addressing this need. Furthermore, I intend to show how Burke's dialectical approach, as seen in his interrogations of historical transitions, may prove particularly useful for investigating fluctuating design movements and trends. In other words, Burke's holistic rhetorical-dialectical framework can serve as a means to gain insight about design motives, their underlying philosophical values and how these shift over time. I describe the methodological approach of this study as meta-rhetorical insofar as the visual rhetorical strategies embodied in design products will be analysed alongside the surrounding discourse (the justification and promotion of those strategies).

INTRODUCTION

The visual treatment of design products is in constant flux. Throughout design history, new styles and movements have supplanted older ones in an attempt to improve on or change functional, aesthetic or ethical factors. Furthermore, modernist aspirations have been replaced by postmodern pluralism since at least the 1960s, and along with it, stylistic trends fluctuate faster than ever before. The pace at which products become aesthetically obsolete is of course a major cause for concern. In order to find more sustainable ways forward, we need to understand trend dynamics. In other words, we need to ascertain on what grounds new trends are justified and promoted.

New movements often gain traction by asserting radical positions in opposition to that which came before, arguing for the legitimacy and benefit of a new approach. Although shifting trends are undoubtedly instrumental in stimulating consumer demand, the rhetoric employed in the promotion and justification of new trends point beyond purely commercial motives, towards more philosophical values. It is thus possible to argue that design trends are rhetorically framed, insofar as they persuade a variety of stakeholders, both visually and discursively.

By considering past and present design trends, a recurring theme or philosophical thread can be identified. Trends could potentially be analysed in terms of their technological orientations. 'Technology' is used here in the broadest sense, referring to all aspects of the human development of tools and processes. Competing technological orientations signalled by terms such as progress vs. tradition; objectivity vs. subjectivity; functionality vs. aesthetics are often expressed as motives behind shifting design trends. It is in navigating such dialectical orientations that I see great potential in Burke's methodologies; as a means to gain greater insight on trend dynamics and broader design values in general.

AIM, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This project aims to investigate the rhetorical framing of design trends by applying Burke's theory in visual and discourse analysis. Owing to the conceptual and theoretical focus, a large part of the study will consist of a literature review. An important objective of the study is to make Burke's theories accessible to a design audience and to indicate how his theories may be valuable in the domain of design studies.

In order to illustrate Burke's theories three contemporary, and fairly different, case studies will be analysed:

- 1) the shift from 'skeuomorphic' interface aesthetics to what is currently known as 'flat design'.¹
- 2) 'neo-craft' aesthetics, or the widespread adoption of faux-craft effects in wide-ranging marketing contexts.²
- 3) current information visualisation practices, including big data visualisation and infographics.³

These design trends, being very different in kind and scope, highlight different facets of design practice and point towards different issues with regards to dialectical orientation and rhetorical argument. These trends have also been deliberately selected since they indicate dramatic aesthetic shifts, while being accompanied by a considerable amount of discourse / debate. Throughout the interpretive analyses, the historical design movements referenced as influencing the respective stylistic philosophies are also considered. One must pay attention to intertextual references, since trends do not develop in isolation. Preceding conceptions of 'good design' are regularly cited in the justification and promotion of new trends.

In addition to analysing the particular case study trends individually, Burke's dialectical approach will be adopted in the interrogation of broader design trend dynamics. As mentioned previously, the particular hermeneutic framework adopted in the study can be described as 'meta-rhetorical'. A second-level analysis, which looks at the rhetoric (discourse) behind the rhetoric (visuals), is employed; ultimately towards gaining greater perspective on the ideological motives behind practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kenneth Burke (1987-1993), an American literary and social critic in the mid-twentieth century, is relatively unknown outside the USA, but his work on *New Rhetoric* – rhetoric as applied to a broader range of

cultural production – is finding a wider audience in Europe and other parts of the world. Burke's theories are primarily concerned with communication, the use and effect of symbols, and language as related to ideological orientations. Burke thus offers a holistic methodology for thinking about how humans communicate and his theories extend beyond traditional rhetoric, into the realm of non-verbal symbols. Although Burke is commonly acknowledged for paving the way for the study of 'visual rhetoric' (Foss 2005), remarkably little has been written about his rhetorical theory from within design studies, possibly owing to his rather difficult and idiosyncratic style.

In addition to Burke's numerous publications on rhetoric (communication and symbol use) and dialectic (material and linguistic transformations and oppositions), I aim to consult theorists who investigate the rhetorical nature of design products and processes, as well as design trend dynamics.

Anne Tomes and Peter Armstrong (2010) provide valuable insights on how trends operate by analysing the key values associated with major historical design movements. They contend that "[a]ny particular conception of 'good design' ... tends to privilege certain virtues whilst neglecting or suppressing others. Because design can never satisfy all of its stakeholders, there is always the potential for a 'revolution' in which the virtues prioritized by an existing order are rejected in favour of those currently suppressed" (Tomes & Armstrong 2010).

However, the cyclical nature of fluctuating values identified by Tomes and Armstrong does not imply the simple replication of previous styles, nor the automatic shift from one trend to another. Designers still need to motivate their decisions (mostly to clients, but also to themselves) when developing or adopting new styles. Richard Buchanan (2007) points out how this is of course a natural rhetorical situation, since the "radical indeterminacy at the heart of all design problems" requires designers to persuade all stakeholders of a particular course of action. This persuasion, as Buchanan points out, occurs through the non-verbal design product itself, as well as on a verbal level throughout the design process. It is argued here that both these levels could be explored simultaneously through meta-rhetorical inquiry.

Buchanan also strengthens the argument made here for thinking more critically about the trends that designers regularly concern themselves with. Buchanan (2001) argues that in a relatively young discipline such as design, "philosophic assumptions operate powerfully but are seldom articulated clearly or in productive relationship with alternative assumptions – in effect, ignoring the ecology of culture of which they are only a part". Buchanan thus warns against employing any philosophical position as "merely another weapon in a battle for the dominance of a partisan view rather than a productive tool for collective inquiry" (Buchanan 2001).

¹ As examples the Microsoft Windows 8 interface will be analysed alongside transitions in Apple's Mac OS X.

² Various visual examples will be selected depending on the availability of both motivational and critical discourse.

³ Again, particular examples will be chosen based on the amount of surrounding discourse available for analysis.

Such partisan arguments are clearly visible when designers move “from one fad to another, with too little cumulative memory and knowledge to show for it” (Buchanan 2001).

Buchanan, with his background in rhetoric, is one of the most prominent advocates of rhetorical perspectives for design and one of the few design theorists to acknowledge the analytical potential of Burke’s theories. Buchanan (2001) only briefly mentions Burke, but appears to find inspiration in his approach to reveal multiple meanings and underlying philosophical assumptions.⁴ I am proposing that a systematic and in-depth interpretation and application of Burke’s theory can provide valuable new perspectives on the rhetorical nature of design products, processes and discourses, within the context of shifting design trends.

A BRIEF EXPOSITION OF BURKE’S THEORY

Burke’s concept of *identification* in particular opens up greater possibilities for examining rhetorical strategies in visual design contexts. Burke (1951) explains that “the key term for the old rhetoric was ‘persuasion’ and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the ‘new’ rhetoric would be ‘identification’, which can include a partially ‘unconscious’ factor in appeal”. From a design perspective this is useful, since designers often utilise visual rhetorical strategies subconsciously, while audiences identify with certain messages or products without being overtly persuaded, as by an argument.

Burke’s dialectical method involves exploring issues by distinguishing between and testing various competing dualities. The fluctuation between opposite forces or attitudes throughout history is a recurring theme in many of his writings. Burke for instance considers how ideology changes throughout Western history, through the terminological coordinates of *acceptance* and *rejection*. He sees ideology as a system of ideas in continual flux, changing and adapting to the environment; not as a “monolithic system” but rather as divergent and dynamic, inclusive of competing subdivisions. It is possible to argue that design trends operate along these coordinates of acceptance and rejection. As Tomes and Armstrong (2010) point out, a trend typically develops as an alternative to a dominant aesthetic style. The trend becomes increasingly popular to the point where it can no longer be described as counter, after which a new trend emerges by rejecting mainstream values.

Although postmodern design practice no longer strives towards the ultimate aesthetic, the rhetoric surrounding contemporary trends as antidotes or solutions nonetheless perpetuates a kind of hierarchical thinking. In other words, new design approaches are sold as ‘better’, not merely ‘different’. Burke’s observations on *hierarchy* and the human drive towards *perfection* (what he refers to as *entelechy*) may be useful here. According

to Burke, this human drive coupled with an increasingly specialised industry leads to the conditions of *occupational psychosis* and *trained incapacity*, where particular ways of thinking or doing are perpetuated in the name of progress, thus going unchallenged. Designers also fall into this trap when they perpetuate practices without considering broader social and environmental implications.

Although designers have made important changes in the last few decades, these changes are now considered incremental and utterly inadequate. The situation calls for a far more radical reconsideration of what design is, and what it can and should do. According to John Wood (2013), such a radical rethinking of design can be achieved through *meta-design*; the redesigning of design in order to bring about a necessary paradigm change. This ties in well with Burke’s primary goal, to always question paradigms, so they may be challenged if necessary. Metadesigners, like Burke, see much value in language, to assist in exposing paradigms, but also to shift paradigms through re-languaging.

One instance of re-languaging is seen in Frascara’s (2008) preference for the term design ‘response’ in opposition to design ‘solution’. The humble new term acknowledges how design products alleviate one problem only to create a myriad of unforeseen problems. This approach would resonate with Burke, who does not support any new ideological orientation as an antidote to a previous ideology; instead, he proposes to demystify all ideologies as both functional and dysfunctional (Beach 2012). Thinking about function and dysfunction simultaneously is in line with Burke’s dialectical method, where opposite views are considered simultaneously, as a means to generate “maximum self-consciousness of the human condition” (Cratis Williams 1993). One way of achieving such greater self-consciousness is by looking for the *terministic screen* in a situation; the way in which any “*reflection of reality*... must be a *selection of reality*; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection of reality*” (Burke 1966). Any designer’s selection is simultaneously a deflection, and in consciously considering deflections, greater insight about motive can be gained.

Burke’s proposed method for dialectical analysis is what he refers to as the *Dramatistic Pentad*, where five terms are used to rhetorically analyse motives: *Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose*. The method involves identifying the dominant term in the discourse and to subsequently investigate how the terms are interrelated through various ‘ratios’. A *Scene-Act* ratio, for instance, could illustrate the manner in which Behaviourists attribute action (*Act*) to environmental influences (*Scene*). An inverted *Act-Scene* ratio, on the other hand, would emphasise the impact that an act may have on the environment. In Pentadic terms, the well-known design maxim ‘form follows function’ can be interpreted as emphasising *Purpose*, with *Purpose-Act* or *Purpose-Agency* ratios revealed. As another example, one might find that the *Agent* (maker) is emphasised in movements

⁴ Buchanan (2001) develops a model for *Generative Principles in Design Thinking*, which loosely resembles Burke’s pentadic method.

such as Arts and Crafts, while being deemphasised in modern movements that call for greater aesthetic 'objectivity'. Through pentadic analysis the differences as well as the similarities in shifting design trends can be identified. This in turn provides clues about perceived design roles and values, whether universal or more transient.

CONCLUSION

Although only very briefly outlined here, many of Burke's influential concepts show potential for analysing rhetorical orientations of particular movements and trends, as well as shed light on broader design trend dynamics. I am proposing that a Burkean meta-rhetorical approach (a combined visual-discursive analysis that looks at multiple rhetorical perspectives simultaneously) can assist in revealing hidden motivational patterns / underlying philosophical values.

Such a critical approach is significant insofar as it can help us discover and question the motives behind fluctuating design trends. Since greater sustainability is of utmost importance, we need to ascertain whether new styles are merely perpetuating the 'cult of the new' (our *occupational psychosis*), or whether new approaches are indeed justified. By considering the rhetorical dimensions of both past and emerging movements, greater self-consciousness about trend dynamics may be gained, and perhaps help us to distinguish between valid motives, and 'mere rhetoric'.

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