

Notes on Style and Design

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In this detailed analysis, the author suggests that most of the qualities we wish to attribute to ‘style’ are best considered as elements of ‘design’. The essay goes on to explore the relationship between ‘design’ and the ‘natural’. ‘Style’ is something much more ‘human’ and, according to the author, more philosophic. This essay is one of three published in this edition on the concept of style. It was inspired by the Synoptique Style Gallery (founded in November of 2004), which was the beginning of an ongoing project investigating ways to discuss the concept of film style. These essays will provide some of the groundwork for a Forum on Film Style to be published in in Synoptique 7 (February of 2005).

Consider your idea of a ‘house’, a house without specific form, a ‘thing’ that houses. Imagine what you imagine to be the bare minimum required for a house to be a house: the image doesn’t have to be vivid, but you need to know what I’m talking about. There are certain elements a house must have before it can be called a house: four walls and a roof, perhaps. You may wish to debate this point, but we can relegate that to semantics. Regardless, our ‘image’ more or less approaches the constituents that are necessary for a thing to function as a house—and this is the key for what I will say later: our image of ‘house’ responds directly to its functional role. And while the description is unclear, our sense of its basic function is not. The translation of this idea of house into physical reality can never be ideal, and in fact, there is little reason it should be: there are innumerable ways to embellish this house as we build it.

Those embellishments may be more than functional—they may be gorgeous. But this is still not ‘style’. And there can be different ‘types’ of house: but a cave is not a style, a shack is not a style, a log cabin is not a style, a palace is not a style. A house can have many real world variations—and these variations can be more or less conventional, to the point that they seem *natural*—but, there is a certain threshold of design a house must cross, a certain distance from its functional role, before the house communicates (along with its ‘house-ness’) an actual style. The house must be ‘designed’—its design must exhibit some sort of coherence, even if its coherence is a dissonance. What is clear is that as we approach conceptualizing a style of ‘house’ it becomes necessary to include an active human creativity. Human intelligence, and human will, is what defines style: which is why we can never accuse a tree with ornately curved forms in its bark, for example, of being in the “rococo” style. It’s just a tree; it’s just a variation on a tree. Understanding this ‘threshold of design’, this singularity and coherence, is easier to ‘sense’ than it is to actually prove. And while some styles are very much related to individuals—Frank Gehry’s work, for example—others are much more subtle expressions of cultural fads: Gothicism, for example. But both can be analyzed. More importantly, we can study these styles to the point where we not only understand them, but we can use them as categories to help us understand styles and phenomena we have yet to encounter. This is ‘style’ as ‘concept’. And concepts can always be put to use.

There are significant differences between ‘style’, ‘taste’, and ‘design’. Consider your idea of a computer: a thing

that ‘computes’: a machine that rapidly carries out the same mathematical task repetitively. Computers, to be useful, require a human interface. The ‘mouse’ is a design solution, an engineering solution, to one part of the problem of a human interface. But another design would do: a light-pen, for instance. You could buy a light-pen, and learn how to use it, but most people do not. It’s a question of convention and of ‘taste’ (which always has something to do with practicality, no matter how random or idiosyncratic we think it is). ‘Design’ encompasses everything from a bird building a nest, to the elaborate criteria we invoke when faced with any decision. ‘Style’ is something else, though intimately related. The computer company Apple has worked very hard to create an ‘Apple style’—everything from its logo, its fonts, to the pinstripes on its menu bars, to the look of its commercials. Apple exercises a great deal of control over its style—releasing new product lines regularly that carefully shift the overall look of their products in new directions. All of Apple’s efforts work in tandem to create a public ‘sense’ of the ‘Apple style’—and, indeed, in this formulation, style is very public. There are many other companies that chart the ‘Apple style’, and make products that will complement the ‘Apple style’ and appeal to consumers who want a unified ‘look’ for their computing equipment. In this case, it is clear how established style influences design. Some of these products exemplify the ‘Apple style’ better than others, and no doubt a detailed analysis would be able, at any moment in the development of the ‘Apple style’, to identify the necessary design elements a product must have before it can partake in the ‘Apple style’. This, I’d suggest, is what ‘style’ means the most often. Style, in this formulation, is separable from what exhibits it. The thing would still be a thing—in this case, a computer—without any style at all. This is a crude way to separate form and content, but in sum this what we’re doing. In this formulation, style is something added on. When we say something is ‘stylized’ we mean it has some sort of style applied to it, either to a part, or to the whole.

ON DESIGN

The above discussion is useful in thinking about style, I’d maintain, because it provides a sort of narrative of how style came to be. First, there was nothing, then an idea, then the real world and contingent design and manufacturing of that thing, and then there was the added significance of style. In thinking through these examples, I realize that I put primary importance in the construction of a thing on the process of ‘design’. Design is problem solving. Ideal design responds

perfectly to the practicalities of the thing existing in the world. Design, in its purest form, reacts to the world. Hypothetically, the design of something manufactured is already latent in what it responds to. Again, continuing to think hypothetically, the shape of a made thing can be calculated knowing the exigencies of nature, and human intervention is not needed. The sort of design we see, for example, in a bird’s nest: the selection of materials, and the order, all responding to chance and imperative.

This is starting to sound close to an evolutionary model. Once we are in the realm of human production, though, the exigencies to which the thing must ‘conform’ is expanded to include human history. Very often one of the most significant influences on design is a pre-existing style. An architect designing a building for the downtown core is forced to design their building so that it will work with its surroundings. Multiple criteria are taken into consideration, but the style of the surrounding designs is one of the most crucial. When, in this case, we study style, the style is the ‘concept’ that motivates the design, it is that which we embellish. The architect has a sense of prevailing style, and consciously will want to ‘push’ that style. It is, however, unnecessary for the architect to do a scientific study of the buildings in the area to get a concept of the prevailing style. The judgment passed on instances of design—those accepted as appropriate, and those rejected as inappropriate—is based on, though not limited to, something we might call intuition. And this is surely a phenomenon not well understood in modern discourse. Style is the name we give to the categories we’ve learned to recognize, that we feel close to. In this formulation, style is close to etiquette, and propriety. To unwritten rules.

I am suggesting that it’s through ‘styles’ that we think about the world. When attempting to understand the world, we are always faced with limited information—the intuitive process of inference, as it relates to reason, makes up for this deficit. Understanding concepts is the act of inferring based upon limited information, and the more information that is available the clearer the concept becomes. The same is true, to an extent, for styles. Concepts share with style the qualities of unity, coherency, and above all, *sustainability*—styles, though, are far more complex, and are linked far more closely to repeated sets of discriminate actions. To personal history. Our sense of personal style is not far removed from our sense of personal political style. Or our moral style. There is some sort of logical consistency to our actions, but no one would claim to know completely the

logic of all their actions. It is the coherency of a style that makes those actions make sense. Our ‘style’ and the ‘concepts we understand’ are closely related.

Like everyone else, artists get most of their personal style from their culture. But this inheritance is only the beginning. The artist, because of taste and skill sets, is intent on refining their personal style, exploring this faculty of intuitive understanding. While most of us use personal styles of thought to formulate opinions, artists formulate expressions of personal style. When this personal style enters into forms of artistic communication, it becomes a sign of personal vision; it becomes the content of the work. That is to say, an artist has a particular sensibility, based on culture, experience, intelligence, and taste, that they are exploring and refining through interaction with art: other works, and their own. The closer the artist gets to representing their ideas perfectly (and in this case, ‘perfection’ is determined by the artist’s sensibility), the more perfectly they express (and *develop*) their personal style. And the better they express this, the more they present to us a vivid, unique, and captivating personal vision. These ideas may be as vague to the artist as their own conception of their own personal style: indeed, truly successful style, and great art, is dependent on the chance intersection of ‘taste’ and ‘design’.

ON ART

It is no simple task to imagine ‘art’ in the abstract—as an idea in terms of its function—the way we can with most things made by human beings. If we consider art to be communication, and can consider a pure unadorned concept as we may imagine/sense it, then we can imagine ways that the concept could be represented, and that representation may approach the coherence of a style. But art is very rarely trying to communicate a straightforward concept—indeed, when we sense that it is, we accuse it of being bad art. The artwork is trying too hard to ‘function’—which is why artists prefer the term ‘working’, as in “the piece is really working.” Something can ‘work’ without it being actually ‘useful’. Very often, these issues amount to a question of an art’s content: “What is it supposed to do?” becomes “what is it supposed to mean?”

There is a simple way to say something, and a complex way. There is the simplest way. And there is also the most conventional way. Constructing a conventional way to say something is a process of design. Anything that complicates the process of communication is either bad design, or it is style. In this formulation,

style distracts from communication—it complicates, obfuscates. But this is not how communication works, and most definitely not how art works. The style of a communication can amplify the message in surprising ways; sometimes the style of a message can communicate something separable from the message that it stylizes. Style is something added on, but in this case style can radically change the function of the thing—so much so that it may be impossible to know the *nature* of the thing: what it was before it was stylized.

Because the ‘function’ of a work of art is hard to gauge, because it seems made to *exist* rather than *to be used*, art feels very close to nature, even despite its heightened artificiality. This is art’s persuasive power. This is why art is philosophically important.

ON NATURE ^[1]

Style is useful, and as something useful it is unnatural. And it is ‘function’ that distinguishes manufactured things from natural things: nature has no function. Nature has no purpose. Nature is neither harmonious, nor chaotic—both of those terms are terms that express degrees of functionality. Not to say that nature doesn’t ‘work’, nor that we can’t understand how nature works—but that sort of scientific intervention is inherently de-naturing. Nature, not to put to fine a point on it, doesn’t ‘work’, it just *is*. Nature does not produce objects for the purpose of utility, the way we imagine utility, nor is nature’s purpose to find balance. Nature is self-sustainable only through flux. Nature is infinitely surprising. In more concrete terms, nature provides objects and things that humans can use, but that is not why those things were designed. A tree can fall against a bank and provide shelter: can ‘house’. But its quality of ‘houseness’ is entirely accidental. We can use a stick to beat something—but the stick is not a bat until we re-design it. ‘Beating things’ is no more in the nature of a stick than a computer is made natural if it is used by a monkey. Human beings are part of nature insofar as we have no purpose; we are separate from nature insofar as we believe that we do. And as much as human beings depend on nature, nature does not serve us. Style is unnatural insofar as style is purposeful, insofar as it is an expression of will. Discovering a ‘true’ conception of nature—this thing outside paradigms of usefulness—is the traditional subject of philosophy.

Let’s assume that the purpose of art is to “hold the mirror up to nature” and that an artwork—at its absolute most basic—is thus a thing that represents nature but is not part of nature itself. An artwork reproduces nature,

most often for the purposes of decoration. However, as any decorator knows, the goal of art is not exact duplication of objects, it is not pure mimesis. That fact has been made unavoidably clear since the invention of technologies like the photograph, which can produce images of Nature with accuracy far in excess of what artists are capable. But long before these inventions, artists (as those distinguishable from craft's people) were those who represented Nature in non-naturalistic ways—who embellished, who reinterpreted—and who, paradoxically, got closer to ‘capturing’ Nature than slavish mimesis ever could. Of course, not all of the differences between the subject and the work can be attributed to artistic intervention: much of a work's shape is determined by the practicalities of design: the medium, the day, the artist's taste, experience, and the history of design this work will take part in. As in the examples at the beginning of this essay, once these design choices are organized so as to demonstrate a coherency of design, the work of mimetic representation can suddenly achieve a consistent style. Style determines artistry. It was the photograph—the image in the mirror captured—and its claims on art that made this equation both evident and necessary. Style, in this formulation, is thus an evaluative characteristic: style makes art.

I feel this long line of reasoning more or less ‘works’. This term ‘work’, as I've used it before, is essential in understanding art. It's an inherently vague term, but I would suggest that it has something to do with our conception of the way nature ‘works’. When something is ‘working’ it exhibits balance, grace, rhythm, form, symmetry—qualities of aesthetics. And while the properties of aesthetics are properties we've derived from nature (I would hesitate to say from a *concept*, or style, of nature), and are demonstrated by nature, they are not ‘natural’ themselves. That is to say, that though a perfect circle can exist in nature, its ‘perfectness’ is not an inherent quality of the natural thing. It is only ascribed. Which is why we tend to call things that are ‘too perfect’ unnatural. These qualities are communicated to us through a long history of style and design, and all design in some form or another answers to that tradition.

ON A THEORY OF STYLE

Walter Benjamin's conception and approach to style, while unorthodox and difficult to tease out precisely, offers a very compelling technical description of what style does and where it is most sensible. I've found helpful a seemingly minor line from the “Exposé of 1939” about an architectural style called Jugendstil,

which “strives to disengage [tectonic forms] from their functional relations, to present them as natural constants; it strives, in short, to stylize them” (20). Benjamin here seems to be providing a definition of what happens when things are “stylized”. “Tectonic forms” is a vague term in architecture, referring to the basic elements of architecture: post/beam/arch, etcetera. Tectonic architecture is characterized by a privileging of use value, though not to the point of fetishization. I tend to consider “Tectonic forms” as something related to the pure image of a ‘house’ that I was grappling with in the first paragraph. As described by Benjamin, Jugendstil, or “Dream City”, takes this functional architecture and pushes it until its use-value seems natural. Jugendstil, called in *The Arcades Project* “the stylizing style par excellence” (S8,2, p. 556), was characterized by its excessive and powerfully beautiful use of images from nature: art-nouveau vines, leaves, swooping arches. Thus, Jugendstil is a style that uses a natural style. And while nature itself does not exhibit style, a comprehensive human vision of nature, one of many, could be called a ‘natural style’. For Benjamin, Jugendstil applies a ‘natural style’ to tectonic architecture creating the effect of ‘naturalizing’ it, which means—in Benjaminian vocabulary—to remove from that which it expresses the way it is functioning in human construction. Jugendstil stylizes tectonic architecture by making it appear natural, and, according to Benjamin, if anything is to appear natural it must be divorced from its use value (which explains the way human junk can begin to appear natural).

I want to stretch Benjamin's definition a bit. In the above, Benjamin presented us with a concept/style called “tectonic architecture”, which is based on ‘natural’ elements in the world—‘natural’, in this case, refers to the same sort of ‘naturalness’ demonstrated by mathematics. Arches are stronger than post and beams, $2+2=4$. These are qualities that are discovered by us, as *a priori*, in nature, and that are used for human ends—in this case, the building of buildings that are ‘architecturally sound’. Jugendstil, as a style, divorces “tectonic architecture” from its use value, presenting the entire structure as exhibiting, simultaneously, two conditions: what it does, and what it is. Its status as something manufactured, and its status as something natural. Between those two conditions lies the possibility of its real ‘purpose’: what it is really communicating, its ‘truth’. An artwork, like a film, is a more complicated structure, in terms of what it represents, if not in actual intricacy of physical construction. I tend to think we can push the above definition of style ‘into’ the artwork, where a thing's ‘function’ is not immediately

pertinent to how it ‘functions’ *in the real world*, but to how it ‘functions’ within the *world of the artwork*. How it functions as a piece of the whole.

In this case, I can offer a hypothesis of what it is style ‘does’, and I can offer it in italics: *style disengages any one working element from its use-value in the work, and presents that element as a natural constant*. In other words, we look at a moment in a film and determine if it is ‘working’. Some moments in a film work in such a way as to de-emphasize that they are working—but not to the point where they don’t ‘work’, but to the point where they become natural (i.e. they have no ‘function’). This accounts for the uncanny experience of style in a work of art. Paradoxically, the most profound style moments will be precisely those moments that announce themselves the loudest, the moments that most convince us that what we are experiencing is *not* natural. That is to say that style can—and it can also be very very subtle—break the illusion of transparency that an artwork like cinema can create. But style is not merely a giant finger pointing out the ‘artifice’ of art—it is, more appropriately, an emblemization of nature. It is a representation of true nature through artifice. This is a highly significant human experience, and, I would argue, the only experience that can provide—outside of divine revelation (perhaps the most stylized of all experiences)—an actual sense of the natural.

ON STYLE AS IDENTITY

It is highly significant that the more sophisticated an artwork’s design, the more we want to say things like “it takes on a life of its own,” or, “it is what it is, it couldn’t be any other way.” It is commonplace for an artist, at a certain point in the creation of an artwork, to disavow control over what becomes visible, sensible, and fully formed in their work—they can no longer claim responsibility for how the piece is working, nor account for the possibilities of alternative interpretations. While design brings an artwork closer and closer to a state where it seems natural—and thus emphasizes the work of art’s use-value as a re-visioning of nature—there is a point where we no longer associate the work’s power with its closeness to nature but with its closeness to something else: to something human. This is why, not to be absurd, that it is necessary to give styles names. To identify them; to give them figure. The clockwork of design, which functions using the physics of the natural world and thus achieves an almost naturalness of function, gives way to the ambiguity of what we associate with an identity. That is to say, that the constituent elements no longer seem ordered

around exigencies of nature, but instead around a personality, around a consciousness. At this point, when we now try to understand it, we understand it *sympathetically*, not analytically. We respond to it as one human consciousness to another, not in terms of our history of aesthetic experience in the human world and the natural, but in terms of the experience of our own consciousness. When we become sensible of an artwork’s identity—and ‘identity’ is both unnatural and constructed as well as a profound expression of an individual’s ‘nature’—then we have entered the realm of an artwork’s style. This is the ‘threshold of design’—our design as spectators—that needs to be crossed.

But does all this simply relegate the vast majority of aesthetic appreciation to the study of design, leaving style to occupy some vague and indeterminate role as a metaphor for human self-consciousness? I would say yes, insofar as that a study of artwork would benefit from a sober study of a design that includes all manner of variables: artist’s intention, taste, cultural influences, cultural styles, cultural design, historical design, historical styles, collaboration, the practicalities of the medium, the production history, etcetera. The separation of design and style would save the sophisticated scholarship of the former from the burden of universal significance—rather, it becomes engaged with universal verifiability. A study of style—of recognizing the presence in an artwork of an identity—is only possible through a detailed analysis of design. But still the question remains: what are we looking for when we are looking for identity, for markers of a style that might be worth interiorizing? The method, I think, will only reveal itself in practice.

The study of style is philosophical. It is the discovery of nature. A style moment is an expression of the power of the simple and the singular to express, in a flash, the whole. Teasing out those particular and relevant moments based on an inchoate conception of the whole, collecting into kinds and dividing along natural joints, is—at its best—the most basic philosophic act. It is in our apprehension of style that we put to the test the fine handiwork of sensibility, the ways intuition and imagination guide reason when faced with answers that seem unverifiable in one lifetime. The more styles we perceive in the world—through art and conversation—the more we refine our own personal style: the way we dress, the way we decorate, the way we live, the way we tend to think, the way we tend to act—this develops, what we can call, our own personal philosophy. This is where the analysis of style becomes an analysis of our habits of thought.

Film, as the most radically mimetic of human arts, and the most hypnotic, charges the relationship between art and nature. Film Studies needs to reconsider its use of style as a concept both too broad, and yet not ambitious enough to put into relief one of the most astonishing qualities of art: to *create*, not just *represent*, an experience of nature. Style is generative, not representational. The analysis of style is less like taxonomy, and more like biography.

David Cronenberg, Walter Benjamin, Arthur Lipsett, Robert Altman, New German Cinema, and The Western.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1999.

1 There is ‘Nature’ (birds and bees, oaks and stones) and there is ‘nature’ (as in the sentence, “It’s in his nature to be cruel.”) Nature, capital ‘N’, is the name we give to the Natural world—things, I argue, without ‘function’. The word ‘nature’ is most often applied to what things ‘do’: if a wheel always turns we can say that not only does it have the capacity to turn, but it is its ‘nature’ to turn. If it stops turning we can still make that claim, however, convinced that the wheel was meant to turn. Here, a thing’s nature becomes closely linked to its purpose. That leap, however, from saying that “it is man’s nature to be cruel”, to saying that “cruelty is man’s purpose” is not an easy one. Nor can we easily say, “overcoming natural cruelty is man’s purpose”. Nature—capital N and lowercase—are intimately related to truth. In Film Studies, we use concepts of nature when we speak about genre and film form, though we tend to elide the word. “The nature of documentary film is...”, “It’s in the nature of cinema...”, “The Western creates a binary between the natural and the civilized...”, “Film Noir offers a sober look at the ugliness of human nature...”, “As audience members it’s not in our nature to...”

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