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On Being A Designer

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Abstract

Can design writing contribute to our understanding of the practice of designing? Are there examples of writing that grant us access to insights, perspectives, or interpretations that inform design activity? Are there modes of writing that might be suited to the designer as writer? In this paper I draw on the Heideggerian insight that words cannot capture our experience of the world. Words can direct our attention towards particular types of experience, but the reader is always necessary to any completion of an understanding of that experience. I explore parallels between the aspirations that Heidegger had for the involvement of the reader in the completion of phenomenological description and the mode of writing adopted by the designer Martin Venezky in the monograph 'It is Beautiful...Then Gone.' I argue that Venezky uses writing to evoke a sense of his own way of being in the world, to direct our attention towards particular ways of 'comporting' himself in the world. I consider the value of this mode of writing as a way into an understanding of Venezky's design activity.

Keywords

Interpretive phenomenology, formal indication, hermeneutic circle, Heidegger, Martin Venezky, design

Introduction

The 2005 monograph 'It Is Beautiful...Then Gone' (Venezky, 2005) is a rich account of the practice of publication designer Martin Venezky. Much of the text is written by Venezky himself, with additional contributions from a curator/writer, and two editors/collaborators.

The structure of the monograph is interesting. It opens with an essay by the designer

– ‘Design and Melancholy.’ The essay tells us much about how the designer finds himself in the world. He is in transition. He is packing up a house that he has lived in for a number of years. The configuration of objects and collages within his house are important to him. He is in a constant struggle to rectify the conventional, evenly spaced order that his house cleaner likes to impose on the objects that he brings into his house. As Venezky fleshes out his account of how it is that he finds himself dealing with the world at this particular point in his life, we are given access to detailed descriptions of ways in which the designer is relating to the world, and we develop a sense of the larger significance of these relationships for this designer.

The opening essay is only tangentially related to design and yet it is through this essay that Venezky manages to illuminate so many of the projects presented later in the text. In this paper I explore Venezky’s approach to description by drawing on the Heideggerian strategy of ‘formal indication’ (Heidegger, 2009; Streeter, 1997). ‘Formal indication’ is an approach to writing that Heidegger adopted in an attempt to engage the reader in the ‘completion’ of phenomenological descriptions. I explore the relevance of this form of writing to the cultivation of an understanding of design activity. I close the paper with comments on the potential relevance of this form of writing within an academic context.

Formal indication and comportment

Central to the phenomenology of Heidegger is the claim that all understanding is grounded in the background holistic awareness that arises from our ongoing dealings with the world (Dreyfus, 1991). Whereas most traditional philosophical accounts, including Husserlian phenomenology, commence with the assumption that thought is the basis of our understanding of the world. Heidegger shows, through careful phenomenological description, that understanding always exceeds thought, and that any act of bringing to the fore of aspects of our background understanding is necessarily a diminishing of our concrete experience of the world.

Heidegger’s interpretative phenomenology is an approach to research that aims to bring us back to concrete experience, to reawaken our engagement with the fullness of that experience. Streeter (1997) draws attention to the strategy of ‘formal indication,’ a ‘method’ (Streeter, 1997, p.414) that lies at the heart of Heidegger’s phenomenology, but which has, until recently, been obscured by inconsistent translation of the term into English.

Formal indication proceeds from an acknowledgement of the limitations of words. Words cannot capture experience. The most we can hope for is that words might be employed so as to indicate a direction, a way into engaging in a refreshing connection with concrete lived experience.

The formal – words, descriptions – must be understood as empty, as incomplete. The formal cannot replace concrete experience, it can only direct our attention towards those concrete experiences in their full materiality. Formal indication has an ‘approach character,’ (Streeter, 1997, p.419) it sets up a direction that can only be completed by the reader as they activate their own experiences of the concrete phenomena indicated via the assertions of the formal indication.

What is the nature of this completion? What is it to engage with concrete experience? The aim of formal indication is comportment (Streeter, 1997, p.420). Comportment refers to ways in which we find ourselves situated in relation to the world. Heidegger draws on two senses of comportment: ‘to behave,’ and ‘to stand in relation to...to have a relation’ (Heidegger, 2009, p.40).

As we focus attention on different aspects of the way in which we find ourselves coupled with the world we might be more or less aware of the physicality of our relationship with the world, the way in which we are physically pressing into possibilities in the world and the way in which the world presses back on us. We might be more or less aware of the ways in which the world is showing up for us, and the way in which that which shows up for us relates to our concerns. Finally, there is the inherent temporality of comportment evident in the experience of being more or less aware of temporal aspects of our involvements in the world. We might be more or less aware of the way in which past experience comes into play in our actions or our reading of the present, we might be more or less aware of the way in which our projections of some future possibility are playing into our present activities.

It is important to note that we are, for the most part, not explicitly aware of most aspects of our comportments. We are always already comported, always already involved in the world in some way. Comportments operate at the level of background awareness. What explicit moments of awareness of our comportments reveal is the richness and complexity of our sense of our physical and temporal relations in the world.

In his exposition of one of the most basic senses that we have of our relations in

the world Heidegger draws on the metaphors of 'holding onto' and 'being held by' something (Heidegger, 2009, p.40). The physical and reciprocal nature of this sense of our relations with the world is developed in the work of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Todes (2001). Consider, for example, the taken for granted nature of our coupling with the world evidenced by the background awareness that allows us to register both the sense of the path pressing back on us as we walk, and the bodily adjustments that we must make to remain upright, move forward, get to the bus on time and so forth. The reciprocal nature of our coupling with the world, where we both press into possibilities and the world presses back on us in particular ways, is a direct challenge to the radical separation of subject and object that is a fundamental assumption of metaphysics and of much 'common sense' thinking. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes the way in which our conceptual understanding of the world emerges from the physicality of this aspect of comportment. Between 'fore-having' (holding onto/being held by) and 'fore-grasping' (fore-conception) Heidegger introduces a third aspect of comportment – 'fore-sight' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 151). This third aspect draws on the metaphor of sight, it relates to gestalt concept of figure and ground. Given specific interests and concerns, specific past experiences of the world, specific perceptual conditions and specific perceptual capabilities, particular objects and aspects of objects are drawn out from the ground, they show up for us. Fore-sight 'cuts' into fore-having such that it interprets in a particular way. Fore-sight leaves behind something of the breadth and complexity of our physical coupling with the world as it allows the world to show up for us in this derivative, and yet still pre-conceptual, mode. A fourth aspect of comportment draws out the temporal nature of our relationship to the world, we are always already thrown into the world, we have the potential to draw on the full complement of our past experience of the world in our understanding of the present. Further, we are always projecting into the world, pressing forward with possibilities. It is only in the light of this projection into future possibilities that anything in the world shows up for us.

As we come to appreciate the physicality and temporality of any 'comportment to...' the world, the necessity of the embodied situated reader in the completion of any process initiated through formal indication becomes apparent. The strategy of formal indication is a response to the insight that words can be employed to direct the reader such that he or she is in the 'right frame of mind' (Streeter, 1997, p.421) to retrieve a sense of the fundamental experiences that are our comportments to the world – fundamental experiences that must be the ground of any genuine understanding of the world; fundamental experiences for which words, in themselves, are no substitute.

Martin venezky: a designer's comportment

'The planned spectacle is fine, but I prefer the unofficial stuff that slops into the frame. That's where the veneer rubs off and happenings can happen. I like the shadowy world of before, the impending excitement of things on the verge, and the discarded world of after, where the cue cards are stored, the carpets vacuumed, the power cords bunched into knots. The suggestion of human ceremony is worth more to me than the ritual itself. It is as if the event is simple a pause between the greater worlds of unpacking and repacking. Here people sweat, practice, concentrate, arrange, plan, argue. Here, outside of the spectacle, the edges melt together.' (Venezky, 2005, p.9)

The excerpt above is from Martin Venezky's essay *Design and Melancholy*, an essay that opens his 2005 monograph *It Is Beautiful... Then Gone*. The excerpt draws attention to the way in which Venezky finds himself in the world – it is a description of what he notices, what happens, what he experiences, what he values. In this short excerpt we are given access to a specific way of being in the world.

What is venezky doing that affords us this access?

First, he evokes a sense of how this particular comportment differs from more conventional ways of experiencing the world. Venezky describes the way in which he directs his attention away from the 'planned spectacle,' away from the 'ritual itself.' He describes an alternative orientation, a focus on the 'before' and 'after,' the 'unofficial stuff' outside the main frame, the 'happenings' under the surface 'veneer.' By introducing his own distinctive comportment as a specific kind of turning away, he give us a visceral sense of the moves involved in working ourselves into this particular mode of attending to the world.

Second, he provides examples of the objects and activities that show up when we reorient ourselves in this way: 'cue cards,' 'vacuumed carpets,' 'power cords bunched into knots,' 'unpacking and repacking,' people sweating, practicing, concentrating, arranging, planning, and arguing. These are familiar objects, familiar activities, typically consigned to the background. As we look at the world through Venezky's eyes these objects and activities take on significance in relation to the 'main event'. They come to suggest an activity that has past or is yet to come. The constellations of objects and activities that surround the spectacle can be seen as potent symbols of the spectacle itself.

The entire essay might be seen as a series of observations designed to give us some access to various ways in which the designer finds himself comported to the world. Venezky finds himself 'dislodging' his possessions from their 'habitat.' These objects have become an extension of self, the inner logic of the conversations that the objects have with each other and with the space that they inhabit are part of a 'rhythmic peace...built, bit by bit, over the years' – the push and pull between self and world is played out as the real world, the disruption of the physical space is reflected in an attendant dismantling of that 'rhythmic peace.' By pulling up roots and taking control, Venezky acts on his desire to resist 'decay.'

The sense of the situatedness of the designer in relation to past, present and future, is palpable. Venezky discusses his relationship to one particular painting – Rembrandt's *The Mill*. It is a painting that he is drawn to because his uncle was drawn to it, it is a painting that was a focal point of the eight-year old Venezky's visit to *Gallery 58 of the National Gallery* in Washington. Venezky's contemporary relationship with the painting is quite literally coloured by past encounters. The painting has been restored in the period between that initial childhood visit and the present. Layers of yellow varnish have been stripped back to reveal 'a beautiful blue-tinged sky.' The painting is 'younger' now. The painting of the present is modified by the painting of the past. The freshness, the youthfulness of the painting rubs up against Venezky's sense of his own trajectory in time, his movement towards an end. The contemporary experience of the painting speaks to Venezky of an anticipated future, already in motion, his own experience of decay and decline.

What we have in this opening essay is a beautifully constructed description of various aspects of the way in which the designer finds himself relating to the world. Why does the monograph open with this essay? If, as I am claiming here, these descriptions afford us access to aspects of the designer's comportments to the world, what, if anything, is the relevance of these descriptions to the practice of design?

On comportments and designing

Venezky's studio Appetite Engineers was engaged to design a wide range of print collateral for the 2001 Sundance Film Festival project. The approach adopted by the studio reflects Venezky's interest in the peripheral, in the objects and activities that revolve around the main event. In the early stages of the festival promotion Venezky's team focused on the players behind the scenes, the 'hands' involved in putting the festival together, the infrastructure and equipment required to screen the film. As the

festival progressed the relevant print material featured representations of the props and activities that coalesced around the screening of the films – stages, curtains, members of the audience, seated, clapping or engaged in conversation (Venezky, 2005, p.87).

In the context of the monograph, the description of the *Sundance Film Festival* project is sparse. In fact the written descriptions of all the projects in the publication are fairly minimal. And yet the reader is able to make connections between the comportments described in the opening essay and the individual projects. We can see where Venezky's design approach has come from. The design activity shows up as a natural extension of those comportments.

Consider again the *Sundance Film Festival* work. It is not an obvious move to focus on the peripheral equipment, actors and events of the festival. Venezky is clearly bringing his own preoccupations to bear in determining the visual content of the communication materials. The reader who delves straight into the images and annotations relating to the project would no doubt be struck by the distinctiveness of the *Appetite Engineers* group's response to the demands of that project. On the other hand, I would argue that the reader who works their way through the monograph, who approaches the project description after a prior engagement with the Venezky essay, would be somewhat at home with the moves that the designers have made. The access to the project that Venezky affords the reader through the introductory essay, an essay which makes very little direct reference to specific acts of designing, is in many ways more generous than a rigorous, step by step account of the specifics of a given project. Venezky offers the reader an account of his practice that does not simply launch into an account of an act of designing, but which instead provides an intermediate point of connection – the essay. Through the evocation of physical and temporal experiences, experiences that the reader might be able to recognise and respond to, Venezky guides the reader through a process of projecting themselves into comportments that resonate with the ways in which Venezky finds himself in the everyday world of noticing, living, remembering, comparing, of experiencing loss and anticipation. The attentive reader should be able to draw on their own rich experiences of the everyday so as to project themselves into the everyday situations that Venezky describes – to 'complete' an understanding of comportments that Venezky is directing our attention towards. By the time that the reader comes to the images and to the discussion of this specific design project they are in a position to themselves recognise the way in which particular aspects of the project resonate with particular ways of orienting oneself to the everyday. Distinctive moves in the

practice of design might be seen to arise from distinctive ways of positioning oneself in relation to the everyday.

Design writing and research

Venezky is not alone in recognising the need to connect with a more or less shared background awareness of the world in order to cultivate an understanding of the distinctive perspectives that shape design practice. In the area of visual communication design, for example, this is a common feature of most public presentations by expert designers. Presentation by Paula Scher and David Carson, made available on the internet based forum TED (Carson, n.d.; Scher, n.d.) are prime examples of this practice. Presentations given by expert designers, where they describe what it is that they experience and notice in the world, the ways in which this experiencing and noticing relates to their ongoing concerns in the world, and the ways in which this experiencing, noticing and caring plays out in relation to individual design projects, have a long history in the dissemination of design expertise.

In his later work, Heidegger developed compelling arguments for the recognition of works of art as a potential site for the experience of 'truth' (Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1993). Many institutions and research bodies now recognise creative works as either research or research equivalent activity. It is generally the case that there is an expectation that these works be accompanied by some form of writing. There is considerable debate as to the role of this writing, and the form of that this writing should take. Perhaps the Heideggerian strategy of formal indication could furnish the designer-writer-researcher with an approach to writing that is an appropriate complement to the creative work, the artefact. Here the creative work could be conceived as a site for the experience of truth; the exegesis, as a document designed to cultivate a receptivity to, and a shared understanding of, an experience of that truth.

Alternatively, we might turn our attention away from the experience of 'truth' and focus instead on the ethical dimensions of particular orientations. In this case, the activation of connections with a more or less shared background awareness of the world could inform an exploration of the structure of care (concern) embedded in the compartments that inform design activity.

The various trajectories that lead out of Heidegger's early work should prove fertile ground for further exploration of the potential of the strategy of formal indication within academic design discourse.

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