

Pathos of signs/symbols in topos virtualis

June Kaminski

University of British Columbia

Like most people who use art for self expression and a sense of connection, I began my artistic journey using traditional mediums: oils, water-colours, acrylics, pastels. In 1998, the world of digital art opened up to me in two concrete ways: I began to explore the creation of art pieces using a number of available digital art programs. I also took over the ownership of a thriving globally-based on-line art community, Pegasus Art Gallery. This community of excellent artists includes painters, sculptors, textile artists, leather workers, and illustrators who together bring a deep richness of expression to the virtual landscape. These two events catalyzed a stream of ongoing reflections that have shaped my own artistic expression for the past eight years.

This expressive journey has led me to explore how people respond to and find meaning in visual art that was created using digital software, and then displayed within the virtual landscape. Over the years, I have found it intriguing to receive various responses from viewers of my on-line work, since many have a common theme – that the art they witnessed stirred them in some way: by bringing up forgotten memories, or sparking a regurgitation of symbols and images that they themselves had dreamed, envisioned during meditation, or that simply felt 'familiar'. This was not surprising really, since common symbols and images used in my work are mythical or symbolic in nature, including geometric and 'sacred' signs that have been used by many cultures since antiquity.

As I embarked on my PhD study, the world of signs entered my consciousness, particularly literary and artistic signs. Berger defined images as “collections of signs and symbols” which have a powerful effect on people (1989, p. 38). An attempt to create a language to address these signs is evident in the study of semiotics, or essentially, the study of systems of signs (Stephens, 1998; Lester, 1994). The theory purports that images are a collection of signs that viewers cognitively link together in some meaningful way. "Images are stimuli that activate us by setting off the appropriate responsive chord....they exploit what is already in our heads, the cultural lore we have stored up from our education and experiences." (Wertsch, 1991, p.66).

This spurred a train of thought and reflection.

The virtual is that which is not real but displays the qualities of the real....how then is pathos catalyzed within the topos virtualis?

Can visual signs/symbols awaken pathos, even compassion?empathy?kinship?relatedness?connection?.....delight?

Perhaps even a stirring of the soul?

Reaching past the aged boundaries of reason, to the inner state of being?

Pathos Awakens

Van Laar and Diepeveen described an emerging group of artists who are seen as leaders of social, political and spiritual healing. "Some artists believe their work can express transcendent truths that accomplish social healing. They try to operate as priests, mediating between people and the harshness of the physical, social, and spiritual environment" (1998, p. 63). This model is rooted in the ancient practice of shamanism, where leaders combined the roles of healer, priest, psychiatrist, magician and artist. These artists use their creativity to attempt to reveal mystical truths. To spark an inner chord in the heart and soul of the viewer. The abundant mass of mystical art work available online is a tribute to these artists. Countless artists create artwork that reflect their own vision of a more spiritual, mystical existence and share these with viewers in the online topos. They work to both move and inspire their viewers, to cultivate a thirst for the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of life, to touch the heart and widen the mind.

This spurred me to consider the humanistic tradition of looking at art which helps the viewer to perceive the symbolic meaning within the art form. During this process, people perceive how individual artists interact with the viewer through the visual form and present ideas that are embodied in the work. The artist is the source of these ideas. The work is the medium carrying the message. The viewer receives and experiences the symbolic imagery inherent in the work to complete the communication cycle.

The Rise of Visual Culture

The visual is a strong field that demands examination, a place where class, gender, sexual and racial identities are presented and can be debated, distilled and embellished. In this contemporary age of the visual, a new form of culture, visual culture is prevalent. The notion of visual culture was particularly interesting to me, since society has suddenly become immersed in an extremely rich, often chaotic ensemble of visual images and messages delivered through a variety of technological mediums.

"Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface of visual technology" (Mirzoeff, 1998, p. 3). Mirzoeff qualified his definition by explaining that visual technology includes any object created to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to the Internet.

Visual culture is dependent on the contemporary tendency to picture or visualize existence. The world of the 21st century is no longer understood as text, or as a book. Everyday life is rich in visual stimuli, graphic representations of real objects and even concepts. A distinction of our times is "the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual." (Mirzoeff, 1998, p. 6). Visual culture theory views art, including digital art as visual artefacts. People interact with these artefacts, often in an unconscious way, continually bombarded by icons, logos, moving images and all manner of artistic expression.

Researchers of visual culture examine the type of relationships which emerge between the producers and the consumers of visual culture (Barnard, 1998). Often works of art and graphic design have been

used to challenge the dominant societal culture, though it is also true that much actually reproduces or supports social order. "New media present new challenges for negotiating meaning through sensory input by providing new types of experiences and forms of art production and consumption" (Jackson, 1999, p. 314).

Pathos Deciphered

Carroll observed, "Metaphorically speaking, art humanizes the world for us - it presents things to us in a humanly approachable way. It enables us to explore the world of feeling, its contours and its possibilities." (1999, p. 104). He went further to describe art as a means for engendering aesthetic experiences. Lyas (1997) echoed Carroll's views and went further to bemoan the careless treatment of aesthetics in modern education and the media. He described aesthetics as marginalized, as viewed as an optional extra despite the fact that "we know that our encounters with art and nature go not merely wide but also deep, and moreover, go as deep as anything in our lives can go" (Lyas, 1997, p.2).

Fisher (1997) wrote about the visual as well as the haptic perceptual sense used to engage with and experience art forms. "I am interested in clarifying how the haptic sense works with the visual sense in aesthetic experience, as well as in understanding how both are implicated in each other. While the visual gives trajectories - sightlines - between the viewer and the surfaces of art, the haptic defines the affective charge - the felt dimensionality - of a spatial content" (p. 5). Fisher further clarified that the haptic sense is comprised of the tactile, kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses which function by contiguity, contact and resonance. Once thought of as a proximal sense, elicited only when the body's surface sensors feel something touching it, Fisher describes it as a distal sense as well. She muses that the haptic sense perceives objects more distant than the boundaries of the skin's surface. It is affective in nature, a "plane of feeling distinct from actual physical contact" (p.6). According to Fisher, both the visual and haptic senses contribute significantly to aesthetic experience. With the advent of new media technologies, aesthetic experience can incorporate stimuli that appeal and engage both of these senses as well as auditory input.

"New media technologies are redefining the role of aesthetics in the next century. Within this context, emerging forms of art, such as new media, require aesthetic articulation just as painting and architecture do. The field of contemporary aesthetics is enjoying a revival of interest in light of contemporary discourses in art theory, cultural studies and critical theory (among other areas of inquiry). Aesthetics focuses on how ideas are formed, shared and contested through the senses.

Terra(gen)forming the topos virtualis

Recently I discovered an interesting open source software called Terragen that can be used to create very realistic landscape art. This program is unique – to create the landscape, the artist renders topographic-like maps of the terrain and substrata; adjusts water levels, wave height and murkiness; atmosphere; solar intensity, colour and angle, and cloud density and appearance. The creative exercise becomes a breath-taking affair as one experiments with light and shadow, wave and sun, to create a vision of the earth before industrialization, even before civilization. Pure, untouched, pristine. Ironically, working with this digital program has shifted my artistic focus to the expression of nature

untouched by industry and technology. Coinciding with the discovery of this new digital playground, I discovered the writings of Michael Cohen which are focused on ecological psychology or in his words, “reconnecting with nature”.

As I worked with the program, and created new landscape after landscape, I began to wonder if the presentation of these pure earthly visions could help to spark a love for the Earth and for nature in viewers. As I also read Cohen, this notion seemed to take flight. Yet, somehow, I felt like a traitor, since these landscapes were not “real” - not even photographs of the actual topos, but mere imitations. Still, I noticed what they did to my own inner perception – they made me think about what the earth and nature COULD look like, USED TO look like, before industrialization. Perhaps visions of these possibilities could somehow move myself and others to consider them possible, and more importantly, consider them imperative.

“Industrial society lives by a story that guides us to separate from nature and our natural senses” (Cohen, 1997, p. 71). “Human beings learn to survive as conscious beings. We train ourselves to know the world by what appears on our personal screen” (p. 37). “The stories our thinking creates about life and each other are radically different when we are connected to the natural world” (p. 124).

“As we reconnect with nature and validate our experiences, new stories and images appear on our screen of consciousness” (Cohen, 1997, p. 125). “Our most challenging problems result from the difference between natural ways and the nature – separating thinking of our industrial society” (p. 67).

My reflections brought up many questions, such as:

Can virtual signs of the integrity and purity of the natural topos fuel a craving for connection and even a drive for restoration?

Can the representation ever come close to the what is?

Is Deleuze accurate? Is the virtual a potential state that could become actual?

Or are these signs nothing but imitations of an active inner vision?

Can we delve between the seams of the actual and the virtual topos to open new eyes for the mystery and fragility of the real?

Mimesis, the notion that art is imitation evolved from classical Greek philosophy, perpetuating the idea that art reflects the world. Aristotle also recognized that art can shape the world. Contemporary artists realize that art can be used to change the world, or our perceptions of it. In essence, art reflects belief systems. "The contours of a belief system are directly and indirectly influenced by such cultural factors as education, religion, family, gender, race, ethnicity, tradition and social class" (Van Laar & Diepeveen, 1998, p. 31). Whether consciously or unconsciously, all art and visual design makes a statement about the artist's belief system and elicits a response from the belief system of the viewer.

No matter what the context, visual messages are often composed with purpose: to tell, express,

describe, direct, explain, affect, or to inspire.

Could the signs within the virtual detour to the inner landscapes?...stir the imagination?...spark an alignment?...stimulate pathic-affective knowing?

Can signs of outer topos lead to a renewed sense of connection with it?

Pathos Catalyzed

Carter (2000) recommended that artists take time to view and absorb the techniques and compositions of other artists and designers, in all sorts of mediums and contexts: books, web sites, menus, music CDs, packaging, illustration, media advertisements and so on. Poyner (1998) wrote about the importance of paying attention to scholarly criticisms and theories related to design. He acknowledged the swift changes that have occurred in the visual design world with the advent of new media, and urged artisans to stay abreast of these changes, welcoming the new flexibility and options into their expressive repertoire. This has strong implications for educators who use art within the learning milieu.. "Some of the most challenging new design is being forged at the controversial interface of theory and practice, education and the profession. Design fuels reflection and the process of research and reflection, in turn, feeds back into design" (p. 27-28).

Paying attention to the critical positions and theories of researchers and scholars can afford critical insight and judgment in artists. Designing visual as well as multimedia materials, incorporating words, sounds and images takes great sensitivity and skill. It is necessary to learn to design materials that will serve and appeal to diverse groups, using visual language that they will both understand and relate to. Theorists emphasize that artists need to recognize and work within the context of their audience. Visual design for this era should be inclusive and multicultural yet adhere to the highest aesthetic, conceptual and technical standards. Yet, most importantly, it must genuinely touch the heart and the soul, if pathos is the goal.

References

Barnard, M. (1998). *Art, design and visual culture: An introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Berger, A. (1989). *Seeing is believing: An introduction to visual communication*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Carroll, N. (1999). *Philosophy of art: A contemporary introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Carter, D. (ed.) (2000). *The big book of design ideas*. Hong Kong: Everbest.

Cohen, M. (1997). *Reconnecting with nature: Finding wellness by restoring your bond with the earth*. Corvallis, OR: Ecopress.

Fisher, J. (1997). Relational sense: Towards a haptic aesthetics. *Parachute*, 87, July - September, p. 4

- 11.

Lester, P. N. (1994). Syntactic theory of visual communication, part 1. Retrieved September 14, 2002 from <http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/lester/writings/viscomtheory.html>

Lyas, C. (1997). *Aesthetics*. London, UK: University College London.

Mirzoeff, N. (ed). (1998). *Visual culture reader*. New York: Routledge.

Stephens, M. (1998). *The rise of the image the fall of the word*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Van Laar, T. & Diepeveen, L. (1998). *Active sights: Art as social interaction*. Toronto: Mayfield Publishing.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.