

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

## EXPLORING THE RHETORICAL ORIENTATIONS OF DESIGN TRENDS: A KENNETH BURKEAN APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to offer a new perspective on the rhetorical analysis of aesthetic design trends, by employing the theories of literary theorist and critic, Kenneth Burke. Although Burke is occasionally mentioned in design scholarship, up to date there is no in-depth application of his theory in this domain. An overview of some of Burke's key concepts is provided, after which the potential of his theoretical approach is illustrated by analysing a case study. The approach outlined here is referred to as meta-rhetorical insofar as it aims to analyse both the visual and discursive rhetorical strategies employed by designers. It is argued here that this meta-rhetorical approach is ideally suited to the interrogation of new design trends, since they are usually surrounded by explanations or justifications of motive. As a case study, the revitalised interest in craft values along with the appropriation of craft aesthetics, referred to here as neo-craft, is analysed. Although only this one example is analysed, the aim is to show how Burke's rhetorical theory could be applied in the analysis of a wider range of design products, processes and discourses. Furthermore, Burke's theory may shed light on the nature of trend dynamics and provide a foundation for questioning the motives that drive change.

*Keywords: Aesthetics, design, dialectic, rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, trends*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Burke (1987-1993), a prominent American literary and social critic in the mid-twentieth century, is relatively unknown outside the United States of America, but his ideas on New Rhetoric – rhetoric as applied to a broader range of cultural production – are finding a wider audience in Europe and other parts of the world.

Through his contribution to New Rhetoric, Burke is commonly acknowledged for paving the way for the study of 'visual rhetoric' (Foss 2005; Helmers 2004). However, despite the steady increase in rhetorical scholarship by design theorists such as Gui Bonsiepe and Richard Buchanan, amongst others, remarkably little has been written about Burke's rhetorical theory in the design domain. Since rhetoric is considered an important yet underdeveloped area of design scholarship, this paper departs from the position that an application of Burke's theories may prove valuable. Furthermore, it is argued here that Burke's particular theoretical approach is ideally suited to the meta-rhetorical analysis of design trends or stylistic movements, where the visual strategy is analysed alongside the surrounding discourse, in order to gain a greater perspective on both expressed and underlying design values.

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The visual treatment of design products is in constant flux. New styles and movements regularly supplant previous ones in an attempt to improve on or change functional, aesthetic or ethical factors. Although rapidly changing trends are undoubtedly useful for stimulating consumer demand, the rhetoric employed in the promotion and justification of these trends extends well beyond purely commercial motives. New trends often express radical positions in opposition to that which came before, advocating the need for new approaches. It thus becomes clear that design trends are often rhetorically framed, not only in terms of persuading consumers to buy into a new aesthetic, but also in terms of justifying particular design decisions.

By considering past and present design trends through a Burkean lens, a recurring theme or philosophical thread may be identified. Trends could potentially be analysed in terms of their shifting technological orientations and how these orientations are manifested aesthetically and rhetorically. The term 'technology' is used here in its broad original sense, referring to all aspects of the human development of tools and processes. Competing technological orientations such as progress vs. tradition; machine vs. hand; objectivity vs. subjectivity; functionality vs. aesthetics are often articulated as motives behind shifting visual design approaches. In such a way, trends fluctuate between dialectically opposed philosophical values. As Anne Tomes and Peter Armstrong (2010:29) explain:

"A recurring theme in the history of design is that new conceptions of good design arise from a rejection of those immediately preceding, a pattern which implies that the parameters which define good design also change. What appear to be design fundamentals at a given point in design history, we contend, are actually temporary points of stasis in a long-term oscillation between relatively stable but opposed conceptions of virtue-in-design."

In order not to oversimplify, it is important to recognise the complexities and ambiguities in contemporary trend orientations, specifically in terms of postmodern production, where products often exhibit seemingly contradictory signs of embracing or resisting technology simultaneously. It is in investigating such tensions that Burke's particular dialectical approach, which opens up multiple perspectives, perhaps proves most useful.

This approach to open up multiple readings in design studies is advocated by Buchanan (2001), who happens to be one of the few design scholars to acknowledge the value of Burke's theories. Buchanan (2001:70) suggests 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". He further argues that "when philosophy is consciously discovered in a young discipline it is often merely another weapon in a battle for the dominance of a partisan view rather than a productive tool for collective inquiry" (Buchanan 2001:70).

In relation to design movements and trends, Buchanan (2001:68) argues that "design often appears to lurch from one fad to another, with too little cumulative memory and knowledge to show for it". Buchanan thus makes a good argument for thinking more critically about the trends and fads that designers often concern themselves with. Moreover, in light of current concerns regarding ecological sustainability, we need to think more critically about the longevity of our design solutions. Along with this we need to question whether a new trend is

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truly justified in terms of those motives it expresses, or whether it merely perpetuates the type of unproductive partisan dynamic Buchanan warns against.

Burke's combined dialectical-rhetorical approach to understanding communication is useful here. Not only does Burke's dialectic provide a basis for understanding trend dynamics, but the dialectical method at the heart of Burke's rhetoric, aims to transcend partisan rhetoric, in order to generate "maximum self-consciousness of the human condition" (Cratis Williams 1993:20). It is thus proposed that greater self-consciousness about design trends may be gained when examined from this Burkean perspective.

## 2 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF KEY BURKEAN CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Burke's theories are primarily concerned with communication, the use and effect of symbols, and language as an instrument that both creates and solves human problems. Burke offers a methodology for thinking about how humans communicate and act and his theories are seen as increasingly valuable in interrogating visual language and symbols as well.

Burke's concept of *identification* in particular opens up greater possibilities for examining rhetorical strategies in visual design contexts. Burke (1951:203) 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. 'Identification' at its simplest is also a deliberate device, as when the politician seeks to identify himself with his audience...But identification can also be an end, as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other". It isn't difficult to see how Burke's notion of identification relates to rhetoric in the design context. As Buchanan (2007:65) points out, "products are persuasive when users can identify with the product and are willing to take it into their lives as an extension of their identity and self-image". The concept of identification is particularly useful in design settings, since aesthetic strategies are to a large extent utilised by designers in a rather unconscious way. Similarly, audiences may feel attracted to identify with certain messages, products or brands without necessarily being overtly persuaded by an argument. Although design products are often perceived as mere tools, it is important to understand how they invite identification through various cues.

Another of Burke's major contributions to understanding the rhetorical use of (visual) language is his concept of the *terministic screen*. Burke (1966:45) explains that "any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, and by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality". Every communicative utterance requires a terministic screen, since it directs attention towards something. However, attention is necessarily deflected away from something else, insofar as it is impossible to speak about everything at once. The concept of the terministic screen highlights the subjective motives in language, since all communication is created by individuals for specific purposes. It obviously also highlights the potentially manipulative ends towards which language can be used.

As a theorist working in the uncertain climate of post-war political and economic instability, Burke was highly influenced by Marxism. Much of his work can be seen as ideological critique, as approached from a rhetorical perspective. Burke was highly critical of societal hierarchies as well as the ambitious human drive

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towards climbing these hierarchies. In light of the cold war nuclear threat, he was also sceptical of what he saw as a relentless human drive towards technological progress. All of these influences led to Burke's conviction that simplicities should be converted into complexities; by ruining "possibilities of ready hierarchies" and by working "corrosively upon those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms" (Burke in Hill 2009). Burke believes the prevailing scientific and technological ethos of optimal functionality and efficiency needs to be subverted through a type of deliberate anti-functionality (Hill 2009). In his concept of *anti-instrumental instrumentality* he proposes that the aesthetic can serve as "anti-mechanization, the corrective of the practical" (Burke 1931:111).

Burke frequently explores issues by distinguishing between and testing various competing dualities. This interest in the fluctuation between opposite forces or attitudes throughout history is a recurring theme in many of Burke's writings. According to Burke (1931:vii), "[h]eresies and orthodoxies will always be changing places, but whatever the minority view happens to be at any given time, one must consider it 'counter'". Burke thus considers how ideology changes throughout Western history, through terminological coordinates of 'acceptance' or 'rejection'. He sees ideology as a system of ideas in continual flux, changing and adapting to the current environment. Ideology is in other words not a monolithic system but rather divergent and dynamic, inclusive of competing subdivisions.

It is easy to see why Burke's project is considered prescient of postmodern theoretical positions. Burke's dialectic, in contrast to those of Plato, Hegel and Marx, does not aspire towards a specific 'truth', but rather maintains an open-ended view of reality. In other words, Burke 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 and in so doing to develop broad perspectives (Beach 2012:30).

Burke's proposed method for dialectical analysis is through what he refers to as the *Dramatistic Pentad*, where five terms are used to conduct a rhetorical analysis of discourse: *Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose*. The pentad thus offers "a way to question assertions about motive" by systematically considering "the not said in every act of saying... from a multitude of hermeneutical perspectives, [or] 'terministic screens'" (Crusius 1986:23;27). A pentadic analysis involves identifying the dominant term and to subsequently investigate how the terms are interrelated through various 'ratios'. The ratios indicate "a relationship of propriety, suitability, or requirement among the elements" (Foss *et al* 2002:202). Burke (1945:127) explains how this relationship could be expressed "in temporal terms by saying that the term selected as ancestor 'came first'; and in timeless or logical terms we could say that the term selected is the 'essential', 'basic', 'logically prior' or 'ultimate' term, or the 'term of terms'".

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. As another example, the *Act-Agent* ratio illustrates a powerful rhetorical resource by means of selection and deflection: "[o]ne may deflect attention from scenic matters by situating the motives of an act in the agent (as were one to account for wars purely on the basis of a

'warlike instinct' in people); or conversely, one may deflect attention from the criticism of personal motives by deriving an act or attitude not from traits of the agent but from the nature of the situation" (1945:17).

Buchanan identifies the potential of Burke's pentad for exploring the various underlying assumptions that inform conceptions of design, which he calls 'generative principles'. Although understanding Buchanan's full framework is not immediately relevant here, it is useful to point out how he refers to Burke's 'ratios' within the context of different modes of design thinking: "[t]he generative principles that we have identified are seldom found in pure expression in the work of scholars or designers. Most often they are combined in what Kenneth Burke would call 'ratios' and 'stratagems' of inquiry. For example, one may explore the relationship (ratio) of *agent and cultural ideals* in order to investigate how personal values are expressions of collective cultural values. Or, one may explore the ratio of *agent to underlying forces* and processes in order to investigate cognitive processes of decision-making in design practice" (Buchanan 2001:83). Although Buchanan modifies the Pentad quite substantially, he shows how Burke's dialectical method of discovering the underlying philosophic presuppositions can provide bigger picture insights on design values.

It is thus proposed here that the Dramatistic Pentad may prove useful in analysing the discourse surrounding design movements and trends in order to gain greater insight into underlying motives and values. This method, in combination with Burke's other theoretical concepts, is now briefly applied in the analysis of a case study.

### 3 NEO-CRAFT AESTHETICS

The term 'neo-craft' is used here to describe the widespread contemporary appeal of low-tech, artisanal processes, along with the visual aesthetic or stylistic simulation of such craft processes. The proliferation of alternative hand-crafted consumer goods produced in a variety of industries can be seen as part of a broader contemporary trend to 'return to craft'. Locally produced and authentic artisanal products are increasingly visible in local craft markets as well as high-end design studios. The influential work of Dutch design firm *Droog*, as well as the recent craft/design showcase in *Domus* (2012), all point towards this so-called "Craft Renaissance" (Antonelli 2012). According to Paula Antonelli (2012), craft is timely again, "with its antagonism towards mass production, tinged with ethical implications, coupled with new conditions in the world and in the market". This post-fordist craft aesthetic – which includes the use of older production techniques, the hand-crafting of unique, often more decorative, pieces with 'personality' and the rejection of homogenised, mass-produced goods – is potentially rooted in a widespread disillusionment with mass-industry and consumer society in general. Related alternative consumer preferences are also clearly visible in the widespread 'hipster' movement, with its "practical technological withdrawals" (Greif 2010).

Contemporary craft goods are ascribed new meaning and, in contrast to earlier prejudices against craft, are considered increasingly luxurious and trendy. Discerning consumers are willing to pay a premium for the perceived added value of hand-crafted goods; which Teleri Lloyd-Jones (2011) describes as more than mere sensual and aesthetic pleasures, but also political and social values, "be they anti-consumerist, 'localist', green, or even just plain-old fashionable".

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The consumption of craft goods may thus in some instances be seen as a form of social, economic and political protest, linked to other alternative modes of consumption (such as anti-consumption, brand-avoidance and underdog-consumption) but with a particular 'craft edge'.

The accompanying visual promotions of craft goods usually exhibit a 'craftsy' aesthetic, often with a distinct nostalgic flavour. Furthermore, low-tech and retro aesthetics are prominently featured in brand communications, not only for the marketing of actual craft goods, but also for other brands that wish to jump onto the profitable neo-craft bandwagon. The adoption of this fashionable craft motif could be seen in the recent controversy at the Yankee stadium, where fake 'craft beer' was sold to unsuspecting consumers (Rykoff 2013). In this instance the faux-craft beer was promoted in a rather clichéd manner by employing a chalk handwriting font on a black sign. This example clearly illustrates how the appropriation of a visual craft aesthetic can easily be feigned by using references to certain media, processes or styles.

This example also illustrates the fairly common misappropriation or distortion of a subculture's values when taken up in the mainstream. Today, goods displaying neo-craft aesthetics are happily consumed regardless of whether craft processes were employed in their production. Kelefa Sanneh (2009) explains how "in this decade, the revival of traditional craftsmanship and home-grown food has generally been seen as a progressive cause, loosely aligned with environmentalism, blue-state snobbery, and all-purpose anti-corporate activism". Various current concerns and motives are thus fused into a loosely knit movement, with values that are often questioned, and potentially lost.

In order to understand the popularity of the craft aesthetic, it may be useful to look at this movement, not as an entirely new phenomenon, but by placing it alongside similar historical design responses. Early examples of reactions against industrialisation and mass-production in the nineteenth century can be seen in Luddism and the Arts and Crafts movement for instance. More recently, postmodern designers have sought to subvert the modernist 'form follows function' philosophy. Robert Venturi's maxim "less is a bore" can be considered a direct attack on the modernist values of efficiency and functionalism. From a communication or graphic design perspective there are also numerous examples where hand-crafted processes have provided an alternative to mainstream, digital production. The punk fanzines of the 1970s were iconic of a rebellious anti-modernist do-it-yourself attitude and Stefan Sagmeister, for instance, experimented with hand-drawn typography in a time where using digital fonts became the norm.

A contemporary exploration of this neo-craft phenomenon in a study by Greg Dickinson & Casey Malone Maugh (2004) provide insights on the rhetoric of nostalgia and comfort as expressed in the grocery chain *Wild Oats Market*. They depart from the position that "the grocery store – as banal as it may be – is a crucial place for understanding everyday visual rhetoric in a postmodern world" (Dickinson & Maugh 2004:259). They suggest postmodern visual rhetoric aims to overcome the dislocation resulting from our inability "to settle or locate our identities in either time or space" (Dickinson & Maugh 2004:261). Dickinson and Maugh identify two common strategies in managing the insecurities that arise from this postmodern dislocation. The first strategy is to "revel in and rely on semiotic excess" by relentlessly referencing a large range of visual cultural texts (Dickinson & Maugh 2004:262). This is visible in the highly eclectic and hybrid

approach commonly associated with early postmodern design. The second approach aims to “nostalgically recall simpler times or offer stories of images that seem more coherent” (Dickinson & Maugh 2004:262). These two strategies could be interpreted as dialectically opposed attitudes towards technology: the first embraces technological transformation while the second, as can be seen in neo-craft aesthetics, attempts to offer a resistance of sorts.

As pointed out previously, the nostalgic neo-craft effect can be constructed to great effect through simulated low-tech production techniques and other visual rhetorical strategies. Although such appropriation of retro craft pastiche is naturally criticised for its lack of authenticity, its widespread appeal is nonetheless worth investigating.

#### **4 A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF NEO-CRAFT AESTHETICS**

Following the above description, it is possible to argue that the neo-craft trend operates along Burke’s dialectical coordinates of ‘acceptance’ and ‘rejection’. In neo-craft aesthetics the orientation is clearly nostalgic in its attempt to offer an alternative. Dickinson & Maugh (2004:261) explain how “[w]ithin the context of dislocation, postmodern visual rhetoric can be particularly useful as individuals seek to create coherent and comfortable identities”. The values projected by neo-craft aesthetics thus provide a strong message with which certain consumers can identify. Reactive rhetorical strategies based on nostalgia and the notions of sincerity or authenticity work together with their audiences to create “new strategies through which individuals are able to more or less successfully negotiate the postmodern terrain” (Dickinson & Maugh 2004:262).

By taking a more critical look at the neo-craft trend in terms of Burke’s concept of the terministic screen, one can determine what is being selected and reflected, but also what is being rejected or deflected. Dickinson and Maugh (2004:271) observe how although the visual rhetorical strategies of nostalgic neo-craft brands seem to suggest that they are opposed to globalised and industrialised systems, they are in fact merely repackaging the possibilities of globalised industrial society. Such strategies provide a sense of familiarity and connection, but with all the added benefits and luxuries. Globalised mass-industry is therefore not rejected, but its processes are hidden and mystified, or in Burke’s terms, deflected. It is thus clear that while trends shift between dialectical opposites, their orientations are often more ambiguous.

Through Pentadic analysis, the motivational ambiguities can be explored further. A focus on craft, which implies valuing the process of making, as well as the role of the maker/craftsman, could perhaps be interpreted in terms of a Pentadic emphasis on the *Agent*. Here the *Agent* is the driving force, dictating the *Act* through creativity, skill and a will for self-expression. In contrast, industrial mass-production could be interpreted as emphasising *Purpose*, when pointing towards the primacy of functionality as values in the design and production process; or *Agency*, when emphasising production efficiency. An approach that values *Purpose* (end use) or *Agency* (tools / production processes) places the designer’s interests (*Agent*) after the goals of design for use or profit.

It is possible to argue that design values, in general, have shifted from an *Agency-Act* (object-driven) ratio to a *Purpose-Act* (user-driven) dynamic. Keeping this in mind, a different perspective on the current case study can be offered. This can be illustrated by JW Drukker and Marjolein Van Velzen’s (2009)

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critique of designers who promote postmodern hand-crafted goods; essentially designing for an elite few while ignoring pressing issues in the design for mass consumption. The Arts and Crafts movement faced similar criticism more than a century ago, and the debate is clearly ongoing. The question that arises here is that of propriety: should the *Agent* (maker) be emphasised in a design context, or does such a value belong in other domains, like art or craft?

Another Burkean Pentadic interpretation can be offered when considering the treatment of *Scene*. Once again, neo-craft can be linked to the Arts and Crafts movement's "rhetoric of social reform", aimed at persuading the public of the machine's spiritual impoverishment (Tomes and Armstrong 2010:32). By emphasising a *Scene-Act* argument, neo-craft rhetoric argues that the problematic consumer environment necessitates an alternative approach. In Burkean terms, craft practice, as embracing the 'imperfect' and less efficient, could be seen as an aesthetic corrective of the potentially harmful drive towards progress or perfection. The widespread craft trend could, from this perspective, be considered a visual manifestation of a contemporary anti-instrumentalist attitude towards technology. It questions the domination of mass-production and provides alternatives as a positive and proactive form of protest. However, the earlier counter-argument by Drukker *et al* (2009) can also be framed in scenic terms insofar as the global consumer *Scene* calls for more accessible, mass-produced design.

Indeed, a comprehensive analysis could be conducted by investigating the ratios amongst all the Pentadic terms. As Buchanan points out, "there is no limit to the strategies of design thinking that come from the changing ratios of the generative principles, and it would be a project in itself to demonstrate the diversity of ideas and methods that emerge in design thinking from such strategies of combination and synthesis" (Buchanan 2001:83).

## 5 CONCLUSION

Burke's rhetorical concepts were only briefly illustrated here, but it is clear that he offers a valuable methodology for interrogating rhetorical strategies in design products and processes. Furthermore, a Burkean dialectical method could prove useful in exploring the technological attitudes or orientations of larger design movements and trends.

Visual design trends are dialectical in nature insofar as a new approach or movement typically develops as an alternative to a dominant aesthetic style. Usually the trend is popularised to the point where it can no longer be described as counter, after which a new trend emerges to reject the mainstream. The motives surrounding the development or adoption of a new trend can thus be interpreted in terms of the 'acceptance' or 'rejection' of some aspect of technology, albeit sometimes ambiguously combined. It has been shown that trends are also rhetorically framed, with designers often justifying their motives on ideological grounds. In other words, although postmodern design no longer strives to achieve the 'ultimate' aesthetic, the rhetoric surrounding new trends as antidotes or solutions tend to perpetuate the kind of hierarchical thinking that Burke aims to expose.

Design, as situated between the sciences and the humanities, between engineering and art often grapples with tensions between technology / functionality and human factors / aesthetics (Findeli 1994). Tomes and



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Armstrong (2010:30) also explain how “[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 prioritised by an existing order are rejected in favour of those currently suppressed”. Under such circumstances it is natural to encounter opposing philosophical views on what appropriate design practice should look like.

Some of these opposing views have been discussed in relation to the ambiguities inherent in neo-craft aesthetics. On the one hand, the trend signals a genuine desire to return to more traditional modes of production and consumption. On the other, the widespread craft aesthetic often appropriates the above values without having to adopt its processes or deliver on any of its promises. Nonetheless, as Andrew Feenberg (2002:189) points out: “Although a new civilization cannot be extracted out of nostalgia for the old, nostalgia is a significant symbolic articulation of interests that are ignored today”. Neo-craft aesthetics, or any other trend for that matter, could thus be analysed in terms of how it seems to tap successfully into deep-seated desires.

Some have speculated that it is Burke’s dialectical method (which presents multiple perspectives without any convincing argument), along with his idiosyncratic style, that has prevented his theories from gaining a greater following. It is however argued here that Burke’s dialectical approach to rhetoric makes his theories particularly useful in analysing trends and movements in all their complexity. Not only can his theories shed light on particular visual and discursive rhetorical strategies in the contemporary design environment, but it can simultaneously present a method for interrogating design values.

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