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Supporting the Aesthetic Through Metaphorical Thinking

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During my time at the C. W. Post campus of Long Island University, I have been fortunate to be the mentor to a number of art majors who have also been honors students. During this time I have found that defining the fine line between input and output needs to be finessed. These students normally deal with the visual image and how it relates directly to their own personal work. In many cases, especially with freshman and sophomore students, their understanding of creativity is that an artist's inspiration comes out of thin air. As they progress through their academic years and through the honors process, they start to understand that this is not the case. Their scope of comprehension broadens, and their ability to use this newfound capability helps them in other areas of their discipline and throughout their core courses as well; however, keeping the balance between influence and derivation is a difficult task. The possibilities of derivation and influence were defrayed by requiring these students to focus their honors tutorial and thesis projects on topics not directly related to their specific discipline in the visual arts. In this paper I will discuss how I have used the honors method to impose a strong research framework, based on metaphorical thinking, which has subsequently improved the artistic process of four art students.

Metaphorical thinking as defined by Pugh et al. (1992) and used by Dr. J. W. Hamilton in her dissertation, "Doubly Informed" (2002) draws parallels between apparently unrelated phenomena to gain insight and make discoveries. In her dissertation, Dr. Hamilton speaks of how "metaphorical thinking under girds the creation and understanding of both literature and art." Hamilton also discusses how she has used art to broaden the skill sets of her writing students to see different relationships and harmonies brought out in the art. In my experience as an honors advisor, I have flipped this process by mentoring digital art and design students to see the relationship between the construction and process of the written word and the visual arts.

This restructuring has, at times, been a difficult process for these young artists and designers to embrace. Art and design students do not necessarily 'see' things the same way as other students. Michael Baxandall in his *Words for Pictures, Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism* best expresses the problem by stating, "Our language and other languages around the world are crude. We are able to share feelings and communicate with others, but it is our descriptive and informative speech that is a problem. It is nearly impossible to share with someone a purely visual sense of a scene or picture through words or writing. It is easier for our own eyes and mind to perceive them visually." The balancing of these two issues, the necessity to 'show'

something as opposed to writing about it and the need to build a strong basis of critical thinking relies on the use of metaphorical thinking. The balance is not an easy problem to solve but the honors process has helped to reinforce, the structure that Hamilton describes.

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY AND PROGRESSION

As with any method of teaching, maintaining the integrity and progression of the student is paramount. As a teacher of the visual arts, I feel that keeping the student from being predisposed to inspired free-spirited creation as opposed to creating from focused research may be more of an issue in art than in other disciplines. In the arts nothing could be more detrimental to a young artist's career than being seen as a bad copy of another artist. Being from a certain school or derivative is one thing, but structuring one's approach on the research or styling of another artist can be the death card to an ingénue. In mathematics or in any of the sciences, imitation—even rote learning—may have some positive value. Students must understand theorems and the “order of operations” before they can move to more difficult processes and to their own concepts. In the arts, however, imitation has a strong negative connotation despite the need to build on history and models. As a result, keeping the artistic spirit and uniqueness of these young emerging talents alive and well can be tricky. Similar to a director in a movie, the art professor must pass the overall vision along to the actors without requiring the young artist to mimic commands or direction. In the visual arts too much direction is a legitimate concern. For example, in teaching two-dimensional design, the instructor must convey certain elements and principles of design. A composition must have a dominant shape, sub-dominant shapes, focal point, motion, and counter motion. Students must understand them, embracing and using them daily from the first day of the first semester to the end of their professional design career.

Another issue that I discuss with young designers focuses on the reality that design needs to be functional. I have them read the work of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus School. Gropius was the founder of the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany, in 1925 and responsible for using the concept of “form follows function.” This became the credo of the entire school and the movement. I also request that they read Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In this work Kant emphasizes an opposite view, that beauty need not be functional. I believe this perspective is contrary to good design and the Bauhaus theory and is actually one of the main reasons why design has not been embraced the way it should be in the society at large.

Because these design principles and elements themselves are abstract and difficult to conceptualize, bringing them to light is best done by concrete example. This approach typically is discarded when students progress towards higher levels of education. Obviously I would not teach a sophomore the same way that I would teach a freshman and so on. As the projects become more difficult, so do the requirements. I do, however, count on the previous methods to be fixed within their routine and psyche. The problem comes about when I use direct examples of these themes and the student is not allowed to expand his or her thought. In other words, if I declare

a composition to be a perfect example of a “balanced” design, students have a tendency to create their design in accordance with the look and feel of the example. This limits their creativity and projects a perception of singularity to the world of art and design. This is the point at which the rote method appropriately becomes both necessary and dangerous.

In writing, appropriating passages of another’s work without proper attribution is called plagiarism. In the visual arts, artists or designers are discouraged from using another person’s symbols or even rendering style in their own work; instead they are encouraged to branch out and develop their own. Artists or designers cannot attribute another artist’s work directly, past stating in the title “with homage to” whomever, but this is usually done with a rendered copy of a known work. Although artists or designers whose work is too derivative of another person’s would run the risk of losing their original approach, they must learn how to take that master’s work and use it as a logical catalyst for their own.

In the arts the method of critiquing student work is more democratic than most other learning situations. Usually a student presents work as if in a private showing to a group for discussion. The students will then offer suggestions and other commentary, as part of the critique. In a typical design critique, for example, the professor will usually open the floor to suggestions. Students will then make alternate design suggestions, offering a reason or end result they think will be brought about from the suggestion. More likely than not, the originator of the work will take this criticism and move forward with it for the next critique or defend his or her approach. Designers, similar to artists, are sensitive to how well their work communicates with the world. This process is how they judge their own work. But rarely do you hear a designer say, “this is my vision.” Usually they are looking for how well they have explained their message to the viewer. Artists, on the other hand, validate their work via personal vision or logic. This is developed through a substantial body of work or through reflecting on another artist’s composition. The overall creative process is not a black and white issue as it may be in other disciplines.

In the arts establishing a personal style is the goal. Influences are considered and become requisite to establishing validity to the work, but my experience in fifteen years of doing these critiques is that art students cannot directly note those influences when critiquing. They are hesitant to do this; they see it as “copying” another’s style. For this reason, learning how to properly research a topic or how to validate using that research correctly is where an honors thesis helps them. They often ask me when seeing my personal work or other abstract artists’ work, “how did they come up with that?” The students think that they are looking for a recognizable figure or object. What they are actually looking for, without realizing it, is an attribution. They are looking for something to hold on to, some kind of previous knowledge or reference point in their life to help them relate to what they are viewing. In essence, they are looking to relate metaphorically to the artwork. This development of metaphorical thinking comes to light directly during the research and evaluation process in an honors tutorial or thesis.

During their early years of college, all students learn proper citation and research techniques in freshman and honors English as well as in other core courses. Inspiring

them to use these techniques later in their respective disciplines often requires great subtlety. Most visual arts students find writing to be quite a unique and foreign form of communicating. Some write well while others struggle with putting together sentences rather than images. Once they engage in the process of creating their honors tutorial and thesis, they must produce both a written product and a visual series that supports these findings. This path is difficult, but one that does help them to construct a positive approach to an array of issues.

In constructing an honors tutorial and thesis, students are required first to select a topic. Then through meeting with their advisor, they formulate an outline. From this outline students explore diverse materials to use as validation for their tutorial. From this outline they construct an annotated bibliography and then start to work on the thesis. Through research, via annotation and documentation, the thesis writer (in my experience typically an artist or designer) must construct a clear and concise logic and path through borrowed and assimilated sources to their finished thesis project. This process is almost contrary to what they think is done in the act of creating a piece of artwork. In the following sections, I will describe four honors student theses. Each of these students researched an area that is, at best, tangential to their personal work. All of them are unique in their respective topics, but they do share a common process and final goal.

STAYING THE COURSE AND KEEPING THE CREATIVITY

By way of preface, I should like to say a few words about my own background in design. I personally have been using a computer as a designer for almost twenty years. In their infancy computers did not have the resources that are available today. This deficiency was a double-edged sword. Users did not have available online essays or image banks, so typically anything a designer needed to create had to be original. Early computer graphic work usually looked like it was made on a computer. True, we did have scanners, but they were at best minimally effective. Today, it is obviously a different story. Students can mechanically 'cut, copy and paste' their way into total ignorance. That is, they can bypass both thought and creativity and simply borrow pieces of other works. This shortcut is true with written work as well as with visual arts. In creating visual work today, students must recognize true originality and creativity.

In maintaining the aesthetic in art, originality comes to the forefront. Now, with the current technology available to students in the visual arts, the definitions of aesthetics, ethics and originality are constantly questioned. Having worked with a number of honors students on their tutorial and thesis projects, I know that they do benefit immensely from the honors process. As I have already suggested, the benefits, as exemplified by the following four students, come about in many ways.

The first student is named Kara. Her honors thesis was on the use of natural movement in computer character animation. The focus of Kara's research was to understand how the origins of beauty in Western civilization and throughout the world affected the development of character animation programs and projects.

In the case of Kara, the sense of accomplishment in an arena that was foreign to her was her greatest gain. Usually with an artist this sense of accomplishment comes from viewing a visual or tactile product. In this honors situation, the sense of accomplishment came from finishing a unique and atypical task, that is, completing research that culminated in a paper. Kara exhorted when I collected her paper for review, "Be gentle with it; I can't believe I wrote all that!" Her exclamation revealed how much the paper and its respective research lead her to a broad range of thought and analysis. Her thesis focused on the need for an understanding of actual beauty before an animator could invest aspects of beauty in humanistic shape and form. As background, Kara needed to research some of the philosophical ideas about pure beauty from a perspective of multiple cultures. She started with Plato's writings and worked up to the contemporary use of modeling an animation after an actor's qualities.

Her experience with metaphorical thinking came from the written works of Plato and from other cultures, accepted concept of beauty. Through these writings she could understand a logic and sense that are the actual basis for beauty. From reading Plato Kara realized that his belief in the origin of beauty came about via the object itself and not in its replication. This helped Kara challenge the "wow" factor involved in appreciating computer-generated effects. Kara learned that the beauty of character animation was not so much in the technical solutions but found more so in the beauty of logic that these programs and machines create.

Through studying these writings, Kara saw how the relative perfection contained within the movements of the human body embodied greater accounts of beauty than the efforts to replicate those movements. She came to appreciate the logic and beauty of the human as a traditional symbol of perfection more so than the ability of a computer to replicate those actions. This appreciation, I believe, was brought about by Kara's involvement with Plato's theories on beauty. The construction process of her thesis also aided her in her artistic work ethic. She found out both firsthand from her research and later unintentionally that everything needs to be planned and that all good final work comes from a structure, whether it is surface or substance. She found this process to be especially true once she studied how much planning and detail are used in creating one character animation. This form of metaphorical thinking is not necessarily unique to the student artist/designer, but when used to create a final product, it astounds them.

In this next case Michael was constructing a paper on the international redefining of clean water as a commodity. He truly relished his research. His weekly Emails became a diatribe of facts and figures, of linkages and statements. The only problem was he seemed to be fighting with his artistic belief that creation comes from a blast of inspiration. During his tutorial and thesis process, he realized that in this case creation would come from an accumulation of facts and a desire to do something with those facts. His intentions were earnest and focused; his approach, however, was not. My first goal with Michael was to help him focus on the structure of the project.

By nature Michael is an artist not a designer. He is inquisitive and thorough, and he already exhibited a broader range of thought than just the arts. He was at the time involved socially, politically, and morally with his selected subject. Typically an artist

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works via the moment, waiting for inspiration to elicit a response or action. The same is true with some creative writing, but usually one must fight through a research paper, and during my sixteen years of teaching, I have found that most art students frequently complain about the lack of originality or creativity involved in such a methodical process. This changed, however, once Michael became immersed in the honors tutorial. Through his research he became involved directly with Public Citizen, a group of political activists. Once he saw how their ideas were formulated and brought together, he started to understand the power of research and planning. Here Michael realized that his involvement was more the architecture of the project than the fine art. His final paper documented that he had learned to organize, compare, edit, and refurbish the thought process. He produced quite an admirable thesis and subsequently a fine interactive presentation. Yet the presentation in its earlier incarnations was chaotic and whimsical. Once he started to use his research structure as part of his artwork's structure, it all fell into place. And he did not lose his personal style and approach.



Michael Kane,
Water for All,
digital media, 2002

Through these materials and their use, he has built such a reputation as a local expert for the field of water reclamation and privatization that he has actually turned this knowledge into a movement that has had federal authorities come to his hometown to pay for cleaning up the local pond. Currently he is presenting his findings via different performance artworks on campus and in New York City. His use of metaphorical thinking was not as great a leap as other students must make. Michael's transformation came directly through witnessing how others have dealt with a social issue or movement. He had to fight not to lose the creative artistic sequence that he had integrated into his process while dealing with and understanding the resulting stamina and power that comes from learning how to construct a proper research system.

This third case displays in a more traditional sense how, through the honors tutorial and thesis process, students gain expertise in their respective art or design field and also enhance their understanding of the theoretical basis for a piece of good design or art. In Julianne's case, however, this led to a greater understanding of the human psyche than to the actual use of art and design principles.



Julianne Lovejoy,
Fear, digital print 2003

In the arts a culmination of expertise tends to bring together years of visual information and decision-making. While doing research Julianne reflected on how she had always thought that one commercial design was completely original and often questioned how the designer had come up with the concept. She also, from my viewpoint, believed that art was again inspirational rather than a generation of complete thought and construction. Once she started her paper on “Fine Art versus Graphic Design,” she discovered the resources available to the artists and designers she was exploring. As she put it, “everything started to make sense both visually and theoretically.” For a visual artist, especially a designer who typically has only one to three mandatory art history courses, such research is a blessing in disguise. This comparison of multiple techniques truly allowed her to see the long development of these new designers, how one work might reflect years of research and discovery. In studying a book written by a designer, David Carson’s *End of Print*, Julianne appreciated how even though these elements and principles of design were true, they needed to be tested and subverted in order to rightfully present their meaning and duality. She stated, “I first came to realize how this worked through doing the research and seeing what [Carson] was doing.” This was brought about once she was coerced into placing one image next to another, or one statement next to the other and then could physically and mentally see the relationships. This process then became for her another example of how analogy or metaphor worked into the thesis process. She also came to understand how a trained sociologist like David Carson could essentially create a new design style. Quite simply, I explained to her, “he knew his audience.” To explain this further, I told Julianne a bit of Carson’s history. I explained to her how he was a sociologist for a number of years and was also one of the top-ranked surfers in the world. I also explained to her that Carson came to design as a profession late in his life, approximately in his late thirties. Nevertheless his work started a revolution in visual design. The theory behind his work appears to deal directly with the psyche of the community he is addressing and is reminiscent of the work of the Neo-Abstractionists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. By this I mean that Carson, like the work of Rauschenberg and Johns, dealt directly with the times in which he was living. He was not replicating current designer methods but was truly creating a new vision and style (which came about by actually using old constructs). I explained to Julianne that Carson was directly of his time, but he had at his disposal a huge arsenal of intellectual and diverse weaponry. He, like Rauschenberg and Johns, was creating directly from the time they lived in - a sort of zeitgeist mentality.

One of Carson’s first publication designs for *Raygun* magazine was groundbreaking, a watershed for the design world. Carson’s work has been discussed for over twenty years. A recent promotion for Curtis Paper cites this review of Carson’s

design: “To those in the know Carson is a Master of Typography, ... but whether one’s in the trade or merely an admirer of the style, there’s no denying that Carson’s pioneering use of typeface in design has had a tremendous impact. With its usual penchant for the grand statement, *USA Today* even proclaimed that Carson’s work would save the world... Okay, so what it actually said was that his work would get young people reading again, but in our book that amounts to the same thing.”

These dramatic changes in the tenet of the design community were later revisited in the design of publications such as *Speak*, *Wired* and *Blue*. His juxtaposition of images and words created a chaotic structure that led many in the design community to challenge his credibility and staying power. Carson was commonly referred to as a “flash in the pan.” He would later quote this remark at an award ceremony marking his twenty years in design. I explained this history to Julianne in hopes of her understanding how a reservoir of previously collected materials can impact the decision-making process. Through this designer Julianne could experience the use of metaphorical thinking firsthand while still being influenced directly by his work.

I will address the fourth student in this series after the following preface regarding developing a new aesthetic for digital art.

SAVING THE AESTHETIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Another place where all of these resources come together dynamically is in an interactive art or design environment. Here the artist or designer has to deal with a diverse set of realities. True, in good design or fine art the artist/designer does deal with diverse resources, but in an interactive structure the creator deals with resources that come from such diverse sources as psychological case studies, user-interaction studies, information architecture, programming trials and visual design. The artist/designer needs to completely embrace the basis of aesthetics while sorting through this data. Given my background in interactive design, I can empathize with these young explorers. Displayed below are two samples of the same interface design in similar yet slightly diverse styles. The first focuses on a visual dependency, using overall thematic feeling to generate the proper response from the user. The second is geared more to usability and less to theme. These two designs are at best tenuous and were later reworked to a more information-based format.



First two interface samples



Final interface design
© Patrick Aievoli

In the redesign of this interface, the goal became to focus more on functionality and less on the visual aesthetic. As it pertains to the study of design, Kant's belief in *Critique of Judgment* that beauty need not be functional could not be more wrong. However Kant's theories on empirical knowledge and the establishment of a priori are used to validate and substantiate the selected metaphor.

Everything about design is functional, and it finds its beauty in that functionality. Once a design is started for an interactive environment, the function of the design becomes the primary goal. Here the research is everything, and the emotional component falls by the wayside. What gets particularly interesting in interactive art is mixing the components of research, emotion, and ergonomics. Here the user's experience, based on a preset theory of usability, denotes the success of the final product. This is where the user's supply of resources is as necessary as the artist's, whether they pertain to art or to simply walking through life. Interactive art requires involvement and cannot just be a simple surface aesthetic. In this arena, metaphorical thinking becomes a basis and not an end product of a muse or inspiration. The best part is no one realizes it until it is over and they have passed through to the following sections or on to other artworks. Through lectures and via samples of interactive projects I have related to my students how interactive work utilizes Kant's theory on empirical and pure knowledge. While the third case study emphasizes the relationship between art and society (product and audience), this fourth example raises questions about the nature of aesthetics.

In this fourth study, Charles started to examine the creation of graphical user interfaces via the accepted theories of beauty and function. After much discussion and research, Charles has changed his thoughts on the matter of designing just for the look and not the feel via our discussions on the credo "form follows function" espoused by the Bauhaus school and its founder Walter Gropius versus the theories of Immanuel Kant. This new conviction of, functionality over visual aesthetic, Charles found to be especially true given that the nature of interface design is for the user to engage with the information as opposed to passively reading it as one would in a traditional information venue. Charles has challenged himself to redefine the graphical user interface and to even change the route with which he develops this artistic environment. In the sample of his work displayed below Charles balances the need of pure visual aesthetics versus the aesthetics of function and engineering.



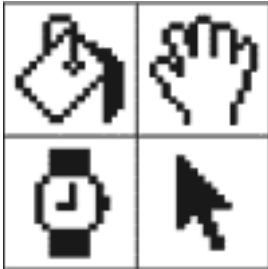
Charles Roth, *Warsongs*,
digital media, 2003

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For his project Charles is now reviewing commercial application of this environment and is also starting to look outside of his myopic commercial attitude towards the influence brought about by the new fine art movement, “Net Art”, which was recently exhibited at the Whitney Biennial 2002. He has discovered how “Net Art” is changing the way the world views the Internet. Although he is only in the tutorial semester of his thesis work, he has already benefited from the process just by seeing the linkages and understanding that much thought goes into the placement of icons and how they are made into metaphors for the user and the common world. I explained to him how the Macintosh hard drive icon appears in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen by design, not by choice. Someone, in this case, Susan Kare, thoroughly researched shape and placement before she designed the actual screen and icons.



Macintosh Icons © Susan Kare



The icons and dialogue boxes represented here are the work of Susan Kare. Ms. Kare’s work has become a benchmark for all computer iconography. These simple and direct images reflect the concept of the interface as a metaphor. Although these original icons were restricted in their use of curves or volumetric shading, each one successfully relates back to the users experience outside the “box” of the computer.

Kare has been responsible for all of the Macintosh icons since the start of the product line. She has compared her work to the early Roman mosaics. In “The Mother of the Mac trashcan” (*San Jose Mercury News*, Business Monday, May 28, 1990), Ron Wolf states: “Although computer iconography may be a new specialty, Kare traces its lineage to ancient roots. ‘There are ways people have expressed themselves in the past that are analogous. The tile mosaics of the Romans can be thought of as an early form of bit-mapped graphics,’ said Kare, who holds a doctorate in art history. ‘Similar techniques appear in medieval weavings and tapestries.’”

I also explained to Charles that the artistic community has not always embraced other forms of computer art, most recently interactive art. Charles needed to understand that the community critiquing “Net Art” work may not see the level of thinking and universal thought that the originator of the work considers in order to create work of this magnitude and effect. The concept of metaphorical thinking as it relates to something as abstract as interface design or “Net Art”, in my opinion, becomes more important than in the appreciation or understanding of

most concrete representational art. The need to associate a more factual structure with an ephemeral art form is required by the viewer as well as the artist/designer.

SUMMARY

The arts will continue to shift and change as they have since the start of recorded history, from the cave drawings of Lascaux to the recent Whitney Biennial. The question is how do teachers of the visual arts accommodate and convey that shift in ways that expand a student's thought without turning these new young artists and designers into mirrors of themselves? A catalyst towards that end is for these apprentices to explore and expand their thinking through the written word. This task is not easy. Typically artists and designers work with images rather than words. This practice is not an excuse or criticism; it is simply a fact. The written word is more foreign to them as a form of expression than the visual image.

One structure, however, that has helped these students to discover, digest and denote their own respective talent has been an embracing of metaphorical thinking. My experience has been that this process works best outside their respective disciplines. The honors core has helped make these connections. Through that structure these young artists and designers take pride in their efforts and gain a new respect for their own intellect and the intellectual reservoir that is available to them through their use of critical and metaphorical thinking. My experience has been that this new respect and newly formed reservoir lead these young artists and designers to create something that they have been searching for: a personal voice and vision.

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