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the elusive meaning of form
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It is hard to say where content begins, or ends. Consider, for example, books. They are certainly full of content. Tables of contents – lists of names and locations that catalogue the parts of a book – are needed to guide us through their collected texts, images and ideas. Gathered together, these books become collections, libraries or even archives, of which the books themselves are the contents. We scour through these books, using their contents to create new meanings and new messages, to construct new books, new ideas - new content collaged from the content that we have found. And books are not the only things with content. Movies, photographs, institutions, contracts, conversations; all of these are full of content, and become the content of other things. Content is a Babushka Doll from Russia. Pull it apart, and you'll just find more of the same.

What then *is* content, and what is it that makes it so hard to pin down? By definition *meaning* or *significance*, content is the message that something actually or potentially transmits. But while meaning itself is immaterial – it is related to thought and thereby an intellectual process – content is always experienced as a material thing: it is something communicated through or embodied within the forms of a physical medium. Think about it: we can never get directly at the thoughts and ideas of others; we can only experience the tangible forms that they express. Ludwig Wittgenstein once used the gramophone as a metaphor to describe the interrelation between thoughts and communicable forms; he proposed that the wavy grooves of a gramophone recording are connected by *internal relations of depicting* with the ideas that underlay the piece. Along the lines of this analogy, a musical thought – let us take, for example, the song “Stormy Weather” by Arlen & Koehler – can occur in the heads of the songwriters, but we experience it only when it takes on a tangible form, such as published sheet music, the sound of Billie Holiday’s singing voice or the 1952 Verve recording of the same. Since they share the ancestry of a common musical thought, the various forms through which a thought can be expressed could be said to be homologues of the original idea. An idea can take on many numbers of homologous appearances; each of these formal depictions makes the idea accessible to the world, and therefore capable of being shared with others.

Finding meaning in these materialized forms is the beginning of communication. But if we reject, as did Wittgenstein, the notion of private meanings, then communication is not something we perform alone. Harold Arlen & Ted Koehler obviously needed to talk to each other, to hum or to play piano in order to compose their musical pieces; you can be sure that they didn’t simply “think” the lyrics or the score to each other. What they also had to have is a common understanding of what their words or notes should mean: homologous forms of ideas only have meaning when there is some sort of agreement as to what these forms should mean in use. This is true not only for makers of form, but for its “users” as well. There must be, for instance, some accepted means for reading the sheet music of “Stormy Weather”, so that different people can create similar musical sounds when they play the score. There also needs to be some sort of common understanding as to what the words of the lyric signify. Form mediates by making ideas – in this case musical thoughts – accessible; forms communicate meaning when their users can agree on what they refer to in everyday use.

This is important, for design is concerned with meaning in everyday use. The designer’s task is to produce solutions for *use-problems* - which are the functions that a design project must fulfil – but we need to remember that content is not limited to a use-problem alone. Design exists in a world full of people - producers, users, and designers - and these people form a social context in which a design “performs”. The performance of a design is not only a question of function, but also one of the meanings a design must convey. Consider what is at stake when one works for an institutional client. What, for example, do the institutions behind the project stand for? Who are the persons who define this position? Where do they agree? Where do they want to take the institution and how do they want it to be perceived? What is an ideal use-solution for them? Conversely, who is the intended user? How do they perceive the institution? How should this be changed? And of course, what is an ideal use-solution

for them? All of these questions point to complex, interconnected meanings relevant to each of these intricate social groups. Taken together with its use-problem, these meanings, expressed or implied, are the *content* of a design. In order to make a design perform, designers must cull relevant meanings out of content, in a sense “get inside the heads” of all the players involved.

Yet try as we may, it is impossible to get in there. We can read the clients’ brief, but we can’t hear their thoughts. We can immerse ourselves in an organigram, but we cannot live out the social games that exist behind it. We may want to know what our business partners think, but we can’t read their minds. We can only communicate using tangible forms of expression, with the media that transmit these thoughts. Examining forms only lead us to other forms whose meanings must also be divined; as Marshall McLuhan once said, “*The content of any medium is always another one*”. The score of “Stormy Weather” allows us to perform music that, when recorded, can be transcribed back into a score. There is much that these media can do, but what they can’t do is get us into the mind of the songwriters. We simply can’t dig deeper than homologous forms. They’re as deep as we can go and they’re all that we’ve got to work with.

So that is what designers do; they work with homologous forms. Given a set of materials and information – briefs, sites, plans, images, client-interviews, texts, materials and data of all sorts – designers must both interpret and manipulate these forms in order to transform them into a new and internally coherent product (which is to say: the design that they get paid for). Content – this set of materials and information – is, of course, the starting point of any project, and it is both constitutive and self-reflexive. Constitutive in that it is the *substratum* of a project, it is the material out of which the design will be made and from which it will derive its specific qualities. Self-reflexive in the sense that it contains information about the intended forms, usages and meanings that the substratum must assume, embody and express when brought into its transformed state. One might say that content provides the messages that inform its own transformation. So, picking through forms, shifting from substrate to information, designers sift through content and strive to find the larger sense that is encoded within it, and apply these insights to the synthesis of useful and meaningful form.

Yet, while we can hold content in our hands and we can identify what form it takes, interpreting what it means relative to the design problem at hand is another thing all together. Meanings arise out of use; the meanings of forms are never absolute. Context is decisive; one group of players reads a form in one way, another group reads it another. In everyday use, even obvious readings can be slippery things. For example, a red traffic light. Its significance would seem to be different in Düsseldorf than in Naples; it appears that *stop!* is not the only possible interpretation of this well-known form. But the differences of use and meaning need not be as crass as this example seems to suggest. In everyday use, we see that meanings are often subtly shaded and dependent upon inside knowledge of the speakers and the language that they use. The idea of *reading between the lines* is a reflection of how words, which are the tangible forms of language, often derive their meaning from how they are said - or what has *not been said* - rather than through any fixed definition of what semiotics might describe as their signifier/signified relation.

Thus, the challenge to the designer is to make the subtle connections between the forms that a project contains. This means looking carefully at information, examining traces, looking in between and questioning the motives behind. Information is by nature ambiguous, and forms are loath to disclose their ultimate meanings – if they “know” them at all. The designer must be curious and above all unrelenting: an archaeologist, a therapist, and a practitioner of the hermeneutic, ever bent on teasing meanings out of all that lies at hand. Speculating on the significance woven into the content of a design, interpolating between its homologous forms, designers extrapolate a new, more legible form that speaks for the guardedly revealed interests that surround them. The designer must know all the players in the game, must form an opinion on each and every, fully knowing that the actual thoughts and motives remain screened behind the elusiveness of form. Everything must be measured, and the final interpretation is our own. Content is what we begin with, what we interpret, what we transform - and in the end - what is produced anew.