

GESTALT-IDEAS AT THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

By Alan N. Shapiro

“Stories and technologies: two objects of knowledge-inquiry heretofore strictly separated from each other in our knowledge-culture, now brought together as a single object of inquiry, rethought from scratch as a paradoxical hybrid union [...]”

Text of the keynote speech given at the “Zurich Design Biennale”, 08th September 2017.

Suggested citation: Shapiro, Alan N. (2018). “Gestalt-Ideas at the Interface between Theory and Practice.” In: *Interface Critique Journal* Vol.1. Eds. Florian Hadler, Alice Soiné, Daniel Irrgang
DOI: 10.11588/ic.2018.0.44741

This article is released under a Creative Commons license (CC BY 4.0).

What is design as a “thinking discipline”? What is the relationship between “academic” ideas and the wider capitalist-practical-business-society?

The information society, the hi-tech society, the society of digital culture, the society of universal networked connectedness – where the answer to every question is seemingly available at our fingertips, by little scrolls of, and little finger inputs into, our smart devices – has brought many benefits. We can now all communicate with each other. We have access to online existence from anywhere and at any time. New communities and new contacts are formed.

But online life has also brought many disadvantages. There is hiding behind anonymity, disembodiment, texting with strangers through your smart phone instead of talking with your family at dinner, the formation of radical right political groups who talk only among themselves and invent fake news, information overload, and the reduction of knowledge to mere information.

One of the negatives which online life has brought about is that it seems to be more and more difficult to get inspiration, to develop original ideas, to introduce ideas into our democratic discussion as a society, ideas about individual and social life, about human existence, about our place in the city or in the universe. A democratic society very much needs ideas.

In the 20th century – regardless of whether one’s ideas opposed or embraced the business-consumer world – ideas were a wholesale attitude of either critique or acceptance, principles that one believed in, and

capitalism (or its alternatives) was /were judged *en bloc* in relation to self-contained integral principles.

Traditionally, one major source of ideas has been from the humanities. And from the sciences. And from the social sciences. And from the arts. We have whole fields study at large universities which are dedicated to ideas. There is philosophy, sociology, theology, literature studies, art history. These fields are devoted to ideas or theory or knowledge. I do not make any judgments about these fields. I am neutral about them. (This is a rhetorical technique that I have learned from Donald Trump. You say that “you would never say something,” but at that very moment you are saying that very thing, and you “cleverly” distance yourself from any moral responsibility for having made that statement.) If I would say something about these mono-disciplines like philosophy or critical theory, I would draw attention to their “purism,” to their “abstraction,” to their self-referential discourses. I would point out that they are part of a system of a certain extreme separation between theory and applications or practice. A dualism, a binary opposition. We are tending to train students, and to disseminate forms of theoretical knowledge, on the one side, and practical skills, on the other side, into the world, which are either pure theory or pure practice.

I learned about the dualisms or binary oppositions which underlie much of Western culture and Western thinking by reading the works of the philosopher of “deconstruction” Jacques Derrida. And from reading some Buddhist texts.

At the elite humanities university in Trumpland where I myself studied, known as Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*) was considered to be the queen academic science of knowledge in the humanities.

The eminent professor of intellectual history, Dominick LaCapra, was my mentor. However, now I think that the history of ideas takes as an unreflected-upon assumption an inherited notion of what an “idea” is, a 20th-century idea of an idea. An idea as an illumination, a metaphorical light bulb lighting up over my head, as often depicted in comic books, cartoons, and caricatures. This needs a revision and a rethinking.

The potential of the field of design in the 21st century is to contribute to society a different kind of idea, something which is actual and fresh. Somewhat of a hybrid between theory and practice. On the border between theory and practice. *Leben an der Grenze – Living at the Boundary* (the title of a book by the co-founder of Gestalt Therapy Laura Perls). Design as a thinking, feeling and action-oriented discipline. Design Universities can and will offer this.

In the 20th century, when the “idea-paradigm” was ideas which were whole and self-contained, the capitalist-business world, the consumer-media culture, advertising and the cyber culture, what left intellectuals like to call “neoliberalism” and the globalization from above of big corporations, were judged as whole entities, measured ethically against or according to the standard of these integral ideas.

The 21st century “idea-paradigm” for dealing with the capitalist economy is different: to bring together (fragments of) powerful ideas with very pragmatic design projects, a sort of hybrid of meaning and technological artefact, an amalgam of stories and technologies as a unified object, beyond their habitual dualistic separation, humanism and post-humanism brought together. Stories and technologies: two objects of knowledge-inquiry heretofore strictly separated from each other in our knowledge-culture, now brought together as a single object of inquiry, rethought from scratch as a paradoxical hybrid union, addressed with fresh philosophical-practical concepts.

The humanities (*die Geisteswissenschaften*) are essentially about meaning, about stories, about narrative. Humanism or the human sciences studies how human cultures and individuals tell stories to themselves to make sense of life. Anthropology studies collective meaning-making in cultures. Comparative literature studies meaning-making by authors in the written and performative works of novels, plays and poetry. Psychology studies meaning-making in the person’s psyche, consciousness, and unconscious mind.

But now we are in a posthuman era of new media, new technologies and Artificial Intelligence, and we need to consider the nonhuman perspective. Information has displaced meaning. (In his bestselling book of futurism *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari is willing to entertain every sort of monumental change in social-technological existence, except for

that of the diminishing validity of the academic-historian humanist conviction to which he adheres that all societies can be understood through their self-telling narratives). We must consider the consequences – especially for our own methodologies and worldview – of the paradigm shift of information having replaced meaning. One consequence is that we must become seriously involved with design, rather than caricature it as the manipulation of sense and feelings.

Stories and narratives are still important, but rather as fragments to be brought together with the active hands-on media imagination, with “phantasmal media”¹, expressive computational media, and with interaction design and experience design.

When we think ecologically about “nature,” when we consider the viewpoints of animals and plants, when we wear eye-glasses or get body or medical implants (we are already cyborgs), when we interact at all with media and technology, when we watch a science fiction film about “aliens,” when we read the novel *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem about an entire ocean-planet which is “alive” and has “consciousness,” then we are appreciating the “non-human perspective.”

Now I will consider the example of the blockchain (a potential project of “techno-logical anarchism,” as I call it): blockchain networking database technology, originally a spinoff of the bitcoin virtual currency project, and now a major technology design

project in its own right. Ethereum-based blockchain commerce payment solutions are examples of the new 21st century “idea-paradigm” in action. Banks and financial middlemen are to be eliminated from customer-retailer transactions not because “capitalism is evil” (a 20th century idea in both content and in the form of what an “idea” was considered to be), but because these exorbitant fee-charging financial institutions have taken advantage of the circumstances that no globally trusted system has existed for all these years.

Ethereum is a Swiss-based company and non-profit foundation. Its open-source technology is a distributed computing platform built on a blockchain architecture and offering “smart contract” capabilities. A “smart contract” encapsulates into a single entity the terms of an agreement among two or more parties, and the execution of that agreement. The “smart contract” deals with business, law, and software code. Macro languages are currently being developed that will be used by software-literate attorneys, and which are halfway between law and code. Smart contracts enable decentralized payment processing platforms with built-in and full-fledged trust and reputation systems.

A decentralized – indeed, a sort of anarchist – system will be implemented, not thanks to a political ideology (as would have been the case

1 See the recent book by D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to*

Imagination, Computation, and Expression (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

in the 20th century), but because a media technology to make economic conditions more fair has been designed. Good moral values to benefit both society and individuals have been algorithmically programmed in a sort of “technological anarchism.”

This “technological anarchism” has a certain connection to earlier historical pragmatic-utopian ideas in social theory about humans becoming liberated from the drudge work of survival required of them in an industrial economy of scarcity. It was thought by thinkers of the 1960s such as Herbert Marcuse in his book *Eros and Civilization* and Murray Bookchin in his book *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* that technology carries the potential for human emancipation as we move towards a post-industrial and post-scarcity situation. A society of true abundance.

The updated version in 2017 of this 1960s vision is that ethics can be algorithmically programmed as an alternative, or as an addition, to trying to get human beings to act or behave ethically. What is emerging today is an instance of what I call the non-human perspective, in this case, a trusting in intelligent algorithms of software technology to make a better society.

The flaw of socialism or communism was that they were still humanist perspectives. The idea of a benevolent state that intervenes in the economy to offset the inequalities and injustices of a pure free-market private enterprise economy was basically a good idea. Bravo for that. But the idea had the major defect of relying on humans to be the agents running this benevolent state. Humans

are notoriously selfish, greedy, corrupt, and power-hungry.

There are many startup companies operating in the blockchain galaxy. Blockchain (and other “distributed ledger”) technology will be worked up into new software applications, many of which will benefit artists, designers and creators. These applications will help the growth of what I call the “Internet of Creators.” Creators will be better positioned to capitalize on or monetarily convert their symbolic wealth. As creators make money, they will transform what money is.

The artist or creator does not produce a “substitutable” commodity, as the rules of the capitalist economy generally dictate. He or she creates a singular object which circulates more along the lines of “gift-exchange,” as in so-called primitive societies studied by anthropology. The artist gives his or her creations to the society, and then they belong to the society, and a spirit of gift-giving circulates further. In the “Internet of Creators,” will we still be in the realm of economic exchange in the capitalist sense? Or will something else arise, something post-capitalist, some sort of symbolic exchange? What kind of social relationship is established with blockchain- and distributed ledger-enabled decentralized interactions?

A second example of a contemporary “Ideen-Gestalt” or idea-design composite is that of self-driving cars. Autonomous vehicles connected in an AI traffic network have the potential to overcome the century-old cultural contradiction between the drive for individual transport-logistical advantage and

the social necessities of safety and ecological sustainability. The most significant economic (and ultimately philosophical-existential) change occasioned by the self-driving car is that its advent leads almost immediately to the self-owning car. Once the car can drive on its own, without a human at the steering wheel, it becomes a potential profit-center-on-wheels which can be on call and on the road twenty-four hours a day. Given the widespread availability of self-driving cars in a coordinated transport system, people will not want to own a car anymore, and they will want the cost of a ride to be as low as possible. It will not be a new set of large corporations either who will own the cars, but rather the cars who will own themselves. Each car will manage its own finances, customer service responsibilities, and maintenance. Decades ago, Artificial Intelligence was understood as being the achievement-believed-to-be-on-the-horizon of robots or software attaining to sentience or consciousness. Today this is no longer the goal. Already Alan Turing had allowed that a simulation of an intelligent conversation would qualify the software entity for AI status. Today, if an AI being attains to the operational level of being an economic equal to humans in the democratic-capitalist society, then this is a landmark meaningful change. The self-driving and self-owning car will be the best and most trustworthy vendor-and-customer transaction partner possible, because it will be intelligently programmed.

As with blockchain transactions, these advances in decentralized trust technologies in the mobility

domain of autonomous vehicles similarly enable a new era where Transdisciplinary Design breakthroughs become possible which are realistic and utopian at the same time, beyond the binary opposition between realism and utopianism which was always the case in the past. Design and technology work together to become a force for good in society. The positives of both capitalism and socialism get finally unified – and by a technology. Cars become what we might previously have called a “public good,” but ironically becoming that through an act which we might previously have called “private ownership.” This previously believed-to-be-impossible synthesis of the advantages of “private” and “public” is made possible through a paradigm shift to a non-human perspective.

Are the money sphere and the public sphere to be understood as being separated from each other or intertwined? The notion of their separation inherits from the historical background of a simplistic social democratic model of the “mixed economy.” According to this old-fashioned left-liberal idea (a “pure idea”), commerce and monetization are a “necessary evil” for society, an involvement to be avoided when high up in the rarefied air of “public goods” like culture, art, education, and creativity. In reality (in our situation of “virtuality”), the two spheres are already intertwined on all the most intimate detailed levels.

There is no private anymore. There is no public anymore. I sit at my computer in my apartment, and skype and facebook tell me when eve-

ryone I know comes online or goes offline. These other people are sitting at my computer with me. When I am forced in the train to listen to someone else's personal or business conversation that they are conducting on their cell phone, I am effectively sitting in their bedroom or living room or office. Or something like that – you can no longer explain it with "private" and "public." We need entirely new "political philosophy" terms and concepts to grasp this new situation.

There is no "public space" anymore – although architects, urban designers, and street artists continue to speak of it. It is part of the titles of many of their books. Instead, I will speak in my work about "the simulacra of public space."

A third example of the paradigm shift to what I call "technological anarchism" and "post-scarcity economics" (beyond capitalism and socialism) and the "non-human perspective" is what I call "learning from androids." There are two ways of thinking about robots or androids, distinguished by the different associations evoked by the two terms robot and android. I want to synthesize the two perspectives. The robot perspective is about engineering and economic benefits. The android perspective is about us humans growing to become more embodied, more ethical and more in touch with our feelings and emotions, as we learn from androids.

We see this difference between the robot perspective and the android perspective in science fiction films. In the film *I, Robot*, the robots are treated in the story as servants or slaves, and, as a consequence, they

rebel violently against their condition and against us (their masters). In this narrative, we treat the robots as things, as machines. We offload some of our drudge work to them, and miss the golden opportunity that the historical-SF project of building androids affords us to finally place into question the civilization of production and work – the opportunity to change ourselves.

In films about androids like *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina*, and in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* TV episodes about the android Data (played by the actor Brent Spiner), on the other hand, androids teach lessons to humans and they are our "partners." Their existence raises questions of emotions, ethics, embodiment, and creativity. Androids have rights and subjectivity.

Androids will have greater flexibility than humans have had until now, in both mind and body. Androids will teach humanity this new flexibility. Androids are enchanting, seductive, theatrical, and magical. We should be concerned about the freedom and happiness and identity of androids, because we are going to learn from them how to become freer and happier ourselves.

I conceive of three successive (historical or science fictional) phases of the role of the university in transmitting (or failing to transmit) ideas to society.

In the first phase, which I call the era of the "pure idea," the university maintains its traditional role as an "ivory tower" or separate idealistic sphere within the modernist democratic society, carrying on abstract

self-referential discourses like philosophy and history, generating and discussing ideas which have very little or no direct application in the “real world.”

This was the 20th century way of “opposing capitalism.”

In the second phase, which I call the era of the “specialized idea,” universities arrive at the viewpoint that they should become more relevant to business. Large humanities, social science, and natural science universities become more like vocational schools (*Fachhochschulen*). There is no longer knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Universities make the decision that students should study subjects which directly prepare them for jobs. The diploma is achieved by passing a series of exams demanding a lot of memorization (as in the so-called Bologna reforms). The day after the exam, the student forgets what he or she has binge-memorized (“crammed into the brain”). This was the 20th century way of “accepting capitalism.”

In the third phase, an alternative to both of these idea-paradigms appears which I call the era of the “Idea-Gestalt.” Fragments of ideas from the humanities are bound together with practical design projects, in the educational venture which I call Transdisciplinary Design. Then these “Ideen-Gestalten” are brought into the commercial economy as entrepreneurial design patterns. But not only in order to function within the business world – but rather, to *transform the business world* (like blockchain payment transaction applications and self-driving-self-

owning cars and “learning from androids”).

The third idea-paradigm will originate from art-and-design universities and from the designers whom they educate.

This will be the 21st century science fictional way of neither opposing nor accepting capitalism, but rather steering capitalism in a new direction. Capital enjoys an absolute initiative as an historical event, and it is only by anticipating the future in a science fictional mode that significant change is possible. Science fiction is the privileged mode of radically dealing with capitalism.

The transdisciplinary intention is deeply embedded in the German historical-cultural tradition, going back to the 18th century. The classical German idea of *Bildung* (meaning education or formation) is also related to transdisciplinarity. The notion of the literary genre of the *Bildungsroman* as coming-of-age novel originated in Germany in the 19th century and was exemplified by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. *Bildung* as a concept is associated with the theory of education as all-around human development elaborated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (Alexander Humboldt's brother), the philosopher, linguist, diplomat, educational reformer and founder of the Humboldt University of Berlin. The Humboldtian model of higher education integrates appreciation of art and science, nature and culture, subjective humanist values, and the objective external reality of the world.

Transdisciplinarity is important today because the existing classification system of knowledge,

the division of knowledge that we have in the existing disciplines, is holding back the advancement of knowledge. Each existing knowledge discipline has its own private self-referential discourse or terminology that almost nobody outside of that field understands. Mono-disciplines tend to be conservative in defending their own territories. When fields of knowledge come together in a trans-disciplinary way, then breakthroughs in knowledge can occur. Transdisciplinarity is good for humanity.

Transdisciplinarity is science-fiction-oriented and futurist-design-oriented. Science fiction is not about the future or predictions of the future. It is more about the reality of the present that the ways of thinking of the dominant culture prevent us from seeing.

In Transdisciplinary Design, there are elements of personal, existential, biographical, and performance-oriented creativity. The way that knowledge is presented should be consistent with the content or message of that knowledge.

The goal of Transdisciplinary Design is to have a hybrid of theory and practice, to be continuously on the boundary between the two. Many art and design universities in Germany teach theory or ideas in a serious and rigorous way (and this is good), but, for the most part, they institute a strict separation between theory and practice. Philosophy, sociology, media theory and art history tend to get taught in conventional academic ways that are directly taken over from the large contemporary German humanities universities, without ever having engaged in an

explicit, conscious project of reflection on the development of a new pedagogy of the hybridity of ideas and practice which could truly be beneficial for art and design students.

Should not the practice of making films, for example, be taught in ways that are integrated with the study of film theory and film history? How else can students develop a feeling for rich creativity in storytelling and narrative to go along with learning top-quality practical filmmaking skills? With a hybrid approach, students could develop into really good filmmakers.

Should not the practice of making websites be taught in ways that are integrated with the study of Creative Coding and software engineering object-oriented concepts? With a hybrid approach, students could develop into real software innovators.

I take the idea of the Idea-Gestalt from the psychological practice of Gestalt Therapy as developed primarily by Friedrich "Fritz" Perls, Laura Perls, and Paul Goodman. Compared to classical Freudian psychoanalysis, or Jungian analytical psychology, or the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis, Gestalt Therapy has received relatively little attention among left intellectuals in the Western countries, and in the academic fields of critical sociology and cultural studies.

It is very difficult, and even undesirable, to systematize or codify the ideas of Gestalt Therapy into academic writing. In his autobiographical book called *In and Out The Garbage Pail*, Fritz Perls talks about his seminal ideas in psychology in a

performative and personal way, using lengthy poems and jokes as modes of writing. To exist completely and freely in the world, according to Perls, one must live situations where one can freely express one's feelings and emotions.

Perls felt that classical Freudian theories downplay the emotions. "Nature is not so wasteful as to create emotions as a nuisance," writes Fritz Perls. "Without emotions we are dead, bored, uninvolved machines."² Breathing, both literal and metaphorical, is essential for the life of the organism. The experience of Gestalt Therapy is about contact, about engagement with life and with other people. Contact stimulates a greater appreciation of differences.

Laura Perls recommends to live on the boundaries, and not within a fixed border. On the border is excitement plus interest, which becomes growth. The content of what I am saying or recounting in this moment is less important than sensing how I feel in this moment when I say what I am saying, and the practice of becoming ever more attuned to the reality and validity of my feelings.

What is essential in Gestalt Therapy is contact, and direct conscious experience with and of other persons and objects, and passionate involvement with the world. One accepts the risks and dangers of becoming a human being.

There is a relation between the German terms *Gestalt* and *Gestaltung*, even though they appear to

have two different meanings. The German word *Gestaltung* and the English word *design* are, surprisingly, not exact equivalents, and they are not interchangeable. This is made clear by the fact that *design* is, in certain contexts, translated as *Entwurf*, as in *Entwurfsmuster* (*design patterns* in English).

What does *Gestalt* mean in English? Laura Perls explains:

The term *Gestalt* cannot be represented in English by any single concept. It covers a whole range of related terms such as appearance, form, figure, configuration, structural unity, and a whole that is something more, or other than, the sum of its parts.³ [translation by the author]

In Gestalt Therapy – or, by transference, in Transdisciplinary Design – there is no fixed technique.

Design will be a thinking discipline. That is our goal. But it will not be the same kind of thinking-work as is done in academic universities. It will rather be connected to practice. And it will be connected to feelings, the body, dance movements, emotional and social intelligence, the physical-virtual and analog-digital interfaces, and to performance.

2 Frederick (Fritz) Perls, *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (Gouldsboro, ME: The Gestalt Journal Press, 1992), 50.

3 Laura Perls, *Leben an der Grenze: Essays und Anmerkungen zur Gestalt-Therapie* (Cologne: Edition Humanistische Psychologie, 1999), 97.

REFERENCES

- Harrell, D. Fox. *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.
- Perls, Frederick (Fritz). *In and Out the Garbage Pail*. Gouldsboro, ME: The Gestalt Journal Press, 1992.
- Perls, Laura. *Leben an der Grenze: Essays und Anmerkungen zur Gestalt-Therapie*. Cologne: Edition Humanistische Psychologie, 1999.