

Empty Space and Silence

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Abstract

Empty spaces in art and design have a very technical purpose. Rests have aesthetic functions in music, so does silence in films. However, their implications go beyond pure composition. The perception of hiatuses is related to psychological qualities. But more importantly, negative spaces enrich the meaning of the artwork itself in a way one does not necessarily perceive consciously: emptiness has significant artistic, cultural, and philosophical meanings.

Keywords

Art, Design, Negative Space, Empty Space, Minimalism, Gestalt, Visual Perception, Hiatus, Silence

Introduction

In art and design, a number of principles have been stated, developed and utilized as means of conveying messages. Artists have investigated a variety of methods to use or not use the space as an essential tool for making sure these messages can be clearly understood and assimilated. Scientists, psychologists and artists researched onto what seems to be vacant and even, at times, what appears to be meaningless. Previous studies demonstrates that empty space is an instrument to create balanced and harmonious layouts: Ruder declares that blank areas are one of the fundamental principles of composition (Ruder, 1981). In addition, Hagen and Golombisky address emptiness as an essential concept and practice for producing effective visual communication (Hagen & Golombisky, 2013). Boulton defines empty space as a bridge from passive to active design apprehension (Boulton, 2007). Lawson, Kristina and Butler mention the hypothesis of an association of empty space with egalitarian societies (Lidwell, Holden & Butker, 2010). Moreover, according to Beck and Grajeda, silence can hold a narrative status in films (Beck & Grajeda, 2008). Achino-Loeb sees silence as a cultural construct (Achino-Loeb, 2005). Further to this literature, the significance of this article consists in examining the implications of the use of emptiness in art and design: besides its theoretical perspectives such as the influence on perception, empty space reveals cultural and philosophical substance that deserves to be considered. As a matter of fact, what appears in the artwork becomes a complement of what does not appear. In these terms, the invisible reveals as much as the visible.

1. Visual Perception/ Simplicity

1.1 Gestalt Psychology

The German word Gestalt means “essence or shape of an entity's complete form”. The theory maintains that the brain is holistic, parallel, and analog, with self-organizing tendencies. Phenomenal experiences have fostered the Gestalt interpretation. It illustrates the presence of part or whole structures in the investigations. Configurations have a substantial share in the experiences. From psychological perspective, Gestalt appears from the brain processes. It is developed by the field forces, which formulate a simple solution, given the nature of stimulants. The visual systems work through some inference mechanism; this mechanism incorporates elements of unconsciousness. Distal sources can be a possible origin for the proximal stimuli. The notion of sensory wholes adds up to the conceptual integrity of art. The unconscious mechanism constructs visual stimuli. It follows the quantification of distinct visual interpretation (Johan, 2012).

Any mark drawn on paper stimulates an active, interpretive response from eye and brain. The human eye sees objects in their entirety before perceiving their individual parts, hence allowing human interaction with the human mind to break up the elements from the whole situation into what it really is. This ideology positions empty space as a pivotal concept in design for the brain to virtually re-organize the layout for comprehension.

Gestalt Principles:

- Similarity
- Continuation
- Closure
- Proximity

- Figure and Ground

These 5 terms involve negative space in the artwork to evaluate and compensate the way human eyes navigate in a design composition. A sensible interpretation for this theory is the search for simplicity; as suggested by a basic law of visual perception: any stimulus pattern tends to be seen as a structure as simple as conditions permit. Further to these findings, designers investigated negative space, positive space, and more importantly ambiguous space. These terms rely entirely on emptiness in the layout.

1.2 Dynamic Balance

Balance is the equal distribution of visual weight in a design. Asymmetrical balance is casual, interesting and more dynamic than symmetrical balance because it involves the observers as an investigator on a journey into the artwork, orchestrated by the composition. This feeling of movement or energy originates from the layout itself and how the forms are arranged to create a motion in the design. To do so, empty space is crucial.

1.3 Horror Vacui and Minimalism

In visual arts, Horror Vacui is the filling of the entire surface of an artwork with details. The practice of Horror Vacui came into being as a response to the fear of empty space (William, 2010). The concept of Horror Vacui acknowledges the Aristotle theory (Karlin, 2003). It explains a universal observation about natural processes, suggesting that nature abhors empty spaces. In art and design, Horror Vacui explains the technique of filling the empty spaces in an art piece. The dominance of fullness becomes logical. Therefore, Horror Vacui illustrates the presence of some patterns in the space. The idea is to diminish the presence of emptiness. Similarly, in art and design, a special place is given to monochrome themes. Still, Horror Vacui is a reaction to a blank space: the nature of art first values simplicity. The opposite: the notion of minimalism, is a true manifestation of pure ideals. Minimalism refers to the artist's ability to convey a message using minimum elements. The artists eliminate all the unnecessary in order to maximize the effect. The beauty of a design lies in its organization on a space, the composition. Here, composition does not refer to color contrast; rather, it refers to the blend of techniques and ideas. The principles of minimalism serve as a guideline in a variety of fields including music (Hartmut, 2009). Some composers take the use of silence in music to an extreme: 4'33" is an experimental musical piece of "no-playing" by Avant-Garde composer John Cage. In movies, Japanese artist Takeshi Kitano uses silence as a tool to build experimental narratives and achieves a unique story telling with hiatuses. Director Michael Haneke investigates periods of mere emptiness in his movies. Filmmaker Terrence Malick uses empty gaps to construct a story with what appears to come from between the meaningful parts of the narrative. Empty space is the underlying foundation for the art to emerge.

2. Influences

2.1 Japanese tradition: Ikebana and Wabi Sabi

Art and design share great similarities with culture. It is apparent that culture has been able to influence art and design to a great extent. But it is also true for culture being greatly affected by art. Ikebana is an example of this connection: a Japanese art of arranging the flowers in a pot; it deals with the composition of natural elements and allows one to project his respect for nature by enhancing the stem and the branch in a specific space. Art emphasizes on the elements of creativity (Kasuya, 2005).

Japanese traditions present distinct intimation from the aesthetics of art and design. Wabi Sabi is the art of seeking aesthetics in the natural imperfections. It is a view of the world centered on the acceptance of transience: the art demonstrates the uniqueness of accepting the natural cycles of life including development, decomposition, and death; it follows a slow and delicate theme by adopting a simple view to the natural phenomenon, which may not be appreciated in actual life. This Japanese art focuses on celebrating the aesthetic values in the cracks, rust, and dust. It follows the theme of modesty. The nature of quietness illustrates the value's undeclared beauty. The art teaches to embrace the crevices and liver spots. Dust has an essential value in Wabi Sabi. It presents the truth of transitioning to dust for every living creation (Juta, 2010). The empty space, in art, reflects the idea of comprehending the unseen and undeclared; the undeclared beauty celebrates the elevation of values in the unacknowledged portions. It reflects the significance of conveying the philosophy of composition in space through the emptiness and subtle balance. It is essential to understand that these philosophies have reshaped the aesthetic sense for the people. For art admirers, it portrays the themes of empty space and continues to influence the people with an exquisite stimulation (Johan, 2012).

2.2 The Asian Painting Tradition

Ink wash painting illustrates the work with space in monochromatic themes: black and white (William, 2010). The two colors have extreme natures. Japanese ink paintings are a true manifestation of monochrome natural

inflictions. The idea is to enable an artist to paint his natural feeling toward the object. This accounts for an oriental mind. Therefore, the ink painting presents an astonishing influx of sentiments. In the Japanese paintings, the technique of Suiboku: a monochrome ink painting technique first developed in China during the Sung dynasty is a popular practice (Saito, 2001). It relies heavily on negative space and unbalanced composition with large unused areas to open the space.

2.3 Space and Silence/Physical Condition

The history of performing arts is as old as the history of human beings. It is simply because arts activities are an integral part of human life. The underlying thread is the need for simplicity to achieve health through peace of mind. Chinese traditional performing arts integrate all aspects of spaces, pauses and rests in meditative poems, musical compositions and ink paintings on rice paper.

3. Cultural Implications

3.1 The West: Conceptual

Much of the manifestation of empty space in western culture is purely related to aesthetics, shaped by a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. Minimalists wanted to remove suggestions of self-expressionism from the artwork. The statement started with the idea: "what you see is what you see". Such a message is entirely intellectual, and was criticized for being so. It pertains to a concept as a reaction to what was considered obsolete: feelings expressed in an artwork. With Minimalism, evocations and metaphors were banned from the process to create a new kind of art that did not connect to any of the previous movements. What is truly meaningful here is the fact that the artists wanted to produce a fresh work of art with a notion of purity. This could be the only connection of western art with its eastern counterpart in the use of empty space.

3.2 The East: Philosophy/Spirituality

In the eastern world, silence and empty space have different values from occidental theories. They connect to a notion that goes back into the roots of the culture. The symbols are strength, elegance, the universe and the void. Chinese poets, who were the elite of the country for centuries, used calligraphy on rice paper in a subtle but rigorous composition, which included a substantial space with nothing at all but the light creamy color of the paper.

Enso (meaning circle in Japanese) is another example of the deep meaning of oriental philosophy: used in many paintings on a large blank background, the form made of a single circular brush stroke can symbolize the Japanese aesthetic itself as an "expression of the moment". It can be found in temples and is generally drawn by monks for meditation. The concept of empty space in Asian tradition is strongly associated with spirituality.

3.3 General Cultural Influence

Art is a concept which has a wide spectrum. Its vastness, in the term, is observable, and so is its influence on culture. The subject has gone through constant progression. For this reason, there is ample literature on the dimension of art and design. Art is a composition of contrasting notions. It involves the discussion of concrete and abstract, seen or unseen, and tangible or non-tangible (Avital, 1999). Art is subject of inspiration. For this reason, the subject seems to derive ideas from distinct philosophers (Pipes, 2002). This relation of positive and negative can also be found in the use of space.

As for silence, it was suggested that in social animals, including humans, it can be a sign of danger (Jordania, 1997). Beyond the attention it catches, silence is a signal for awareness. This very idea is one with a profound meaning: the physical reaction that emptiness requires brings the audience to a state of presence, to be able to witness the art: the visitor is involved in the artwork by being requested their attention.

In addition, muteness is also a way to manifest respect and solemnity. Such behavior can be observed during a moment of silence on commemorative gatherings (Achino-Loeb, 2005). Furthermore, the influence of art on culture first requires discussing the case of art and non-art. The idea has rumbled the intellectual arenas for years (Robert, 2003). However, the uncertainty of what can be named art has enabled minds to differentiate art from design; which may be a source of confusion for many (Bernard, 2003). The issue leads to the exploration of the strong association between the two terms. Representational art is another name for figurative art (Robert, 2003). The second interpretation is about the non-representational art. Avital (1992) defines two terms to lock the contrast: Realism and Abstract Art. The history of art manifests that anything can fall into the vibrant line of Abstraction. A figurative painting has a cognitive connection with the real world. Art and design complement the human intelligence in the most aesthetic way. Art and design can be instrumental or cognitive (Bernard, 2003). This very notion explains how both fields influence and complement the development of a culture, hence

giving cues to a society to progress, expand, understand and mature. If the notion of empty space in art or design is discussed, it is therefore the notion of the cultural perception of emptiness that is also addressed.

4. Balance/ Yin and Yang

Chinese culture has influenced the breadth and scope of the arts. Ancient principles have built up the energy exchanges among the working entities. Yin and Yang, the symbolic working principle, presents the balance of black and white: positive and negative spaces. The boundary circle represents the wholeness of the life system. The portions, black and white, represent the combination of emptiness and fullness. Just as the Ying represents the downward notions of emotions, Yang highlights the presence of strong and vibrant elements of life. The understanding develops the balance of continual movement. The main notion is that the two energies have a contradicting nature; still, it is important for them to co-exist as per the nature. An art piece may have black and white empty spaces (Ando, 2010): here, the ambiguous space is emerging.

Art uses the Chinese symbolic representation for black and white as foreground and background do to relate to each other. The black portion can convey a number of emotions such as submission, softness, femininity, coldness, quietness, and many other similar elements. Stillness and contraction serve as an important theme for art and design. The white section illustrates the presence of brightness, spark, strength, light, dominance, and active creations. The black and white dots have a significant meaning in the Chinese tradition. It demonstrates the presence of opposing natures and themes in the contradicting elements. The Chinese traditional concepts have influenced the crafting of art and design. It works equally for the paper art and the physical arrangement. In this way, they are able to reflect the combination of contrasting elements. Similarly, the concept impacts the interior decorators. They draw values from the Yin and Yang concept. In this way, they are able to create a harmonized and balanced living environment. Yin and Yang illustrate the dimensions of living and non-living objects. The concept circulates the intimation of seeking balance through opposing themes (Ando, 2010). Generally, this symbol addresses the idea of overall balance in the universe. Further, it can explain why, in the middle of an expansion of information, a society needs to produce artworks with emptiness and quietness as a counteract: why, amid positives shapes and forms, empty space is fundamental.

Conclusion

The main notion of empty space and by extension silence is to balance a composition. But in fact, it conveys underlying philosophies of natural aesthetics. A number of Asian traditions served the purpose of art. In music as in visual arts, interruptions are essential to the overall perception of the artwork. It goes beyond the sense of bounded imagination. As suggested by the Yin and Yang concepts, the equilibrium comes to a state of achievement when the two opposites are of equal measures. The rest is vibration between two states.

The development of communications and the generation of ubiquitous information call for the other extreme: a thirst for vacuity to conciliate the antipodes. Emptiness communicates artistic messages such as closure, continuation and rhythm. But empty space and silence also generate philosophical implications of quality, peace and respect. Moreover, they convey profound metaphors of development, awareness, balance and wisdom.

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