

How things look. The 'Physiognomic Illusion'

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'To look at an object is to inhabit it
and from therein to grasp all
things in terms of the face they
present to that object.'

Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

This paper considers objects of everyday use in terms of their communicative effectiveness rather than their function. Often based on anthropomorphism, the expressive form given to such objects is of crucial importance in the emotional relationship established with their users. Some art historians have described this relationship as being 'physiognomic'.

According to Ernst Gombrich,² what we call the 'expressive' character of sounds, colours or shapes, basically arises from nothing else but our own 'physiognomic' reactions to those things. Gombrich thus seems to forge a close link between physiognomic perception and expression. All around us, we see our own face reflected in things. We glimpse the warty-nosed faces of revellers in clouds (as Gombrich himself observes with regard to certain paintings by Mantegna)³ or we may see frowning men lost in their thoughts in massive rock formations. We see our own face not only in the natural world but also in artefacts, quite independently of the original maker's intentions. Look, for example, at Hogarth's *The Calais Gate or O the Roast Beef of Old England* (Fig. 1). To the background of the city gate, a greedy friar and famished border guards eye an enormous side of beef, the very symbol of English prosperity. With its gaping maw, the mouth-like gate performs the same sort of function as those backgrounds resonating with human passions in the so-called *paysages état d'âme* in the Romantic period.



Fig.1

William Hogarth, *O the Roast Beef of Old England*
(*The Gate of Calais*), 1748,
Oil on canvas, 788 x 945 mm,
London, Tate Britain.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, 1945, 81-82: 'Regarder un objet, c'est venir l'habiter et de là saisir toutes choses selon la face qu'elles tournent vers lui.'

² Ernst Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, London, 1963, 48.

³ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York-London, 1959, 190.

Our irresistible tendency to project our own body onto any form that allows even remotely for such transformation is, says Gombrich,⁴ the fruit of habit. After all, what is more familiar to us than our own appearance, our own body? This force of habit arises from our resistance to change, our striving for continuity. This is why, for example, the very first railway carriages had to ape horse-drawn vehicles and the earliest gaslights had to look like candelabras. Not surprisingly, the human face and its set of expressions are of fundamental importance in the work of contemporary designers, engaged as they are in constructing everyday objects with a human look (or simulacra that serve in the interaction between people and everyday objects). A good example of anthropomorphism in industrial design is the legendary *Radiogram* designed by Pier Giacomo and Achille Castiglioni in 1965 (Fig. 2-3). This 'modular musical robot' combined radio, amplifier and record-player (both singles and LPs) for the first time. With updated technology but in the original form, it has recently even been re-launched.

There are many linguistic clues to how our body serves as a cognitive frame of reference. For example, a bottle has a 'neck', a comb has 'teeth' and tables have 'legs'. But this physiognomic characterization of the world goes beyond the mere imposition of a corporeal schema. It generates an 'immediate' and 'direct' mode of signification, even though we may not be aware of how it works; the effect is there in front of us, and we react instinctively. This is why Gombrich⁵ takes the problem of physiognomic perception as being at the very core of the interaction between *seeing, knowing and expecting*.



Fig. 2 Radiofonografo rr226 Brionvega.
Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, 1965.
Courtesy Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni.



Fig. 3 Radiofonografo rr226 Brionvega.
Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, 1965.
Courtesy Achille e Pier Giacomo Castiglioni.

'How does this type of perception work?' he asks.⁶ What are the limits to the validity of the type of interpretation it generates? Citing Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's bizarre experiments regarding dogs' tails and eighteenth-century

⁴ Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 1979, Oxford.

⁵ Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, 99.

⁶ Gombrich, 'On Physiognomic Perception', in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 45-55.

gentlemen's hair tied in pigtails, Gombrich argues that Lichtenberg's droll comparison touches on a fundamental point regarding abstract forms and their 'expressive' qualities. 'Physiognomic perception' truly exists, says Gombrich, and it is that instantaneous perception that occurs every time we look at someone's face. That this perception is then extended to include everything around us is borne out by the existence of the metaphors that we use in talking about colours as 'cheerful' and sounds as 'moving'. Whenever poets talk of 'smiling' skies or 'glowering' clouds, they fall victim to this 'illusion'. Such phrases, says Gombrich,⁷ reveal that, when scrutinising the world around us, we always ask the same question of that world: are you friendly or hostile? Is our encounter with you going to be a good or a bad thing? It is this vital question that leads us to apply physiognomic categories when classifying the world, Gombrich argues, citing the work of Bruner and Lorenz. However, he adds the fundamental proviso that these categories are not established or pre-established links; they are merely indications, clues.

From the point of view of effective communication, what makes these categories particularly interesting is the fact that the qualities concerned often involve other sensorial experiences; they are *intersensorial*. For example, a smile may be associated with experiences that are warm, gentle or glowing; a frown is cold, menacing or sour. No theory of art, Gombrich claims,⁸ can entirely ignore this phenomenon. In the ancient theory of music, notions of the character of modes and keys were developed on this basis, while orators discussed the physiognomy of words, rhythms and sounds, and architects analyzed the physiognomy of the various Classical orders. The physiognomic approach even applies to the issue of style. Gombrich, for example, agrees with the idea of style implicit in Levi-Strauss's claim (1971: 605) that it is very important to discover why – and how – we often only need to hear a couple of bars of music before identifying the style as that of a particular composer. Similarly, Gombrich says, we only need to see a few features to be able to identify immediately a statue or building as expressing Baroque exuberance, Rococo buoyancy, Gothic mysticism or Classical serenity and poise.

Gombrich (1959) also wonders whether seeing faces in stains, rocks and drapery is the result of biological conditioning. How far are such reactions innate and how deep is the cultural influence? To illustrate the exact nature of this problem of expression, Gombrich draws on the special, shorthand style of caricatures,⁹ which he claims demonstrate an equivalence;¹⁰ caricatures show how artistic images can be convincing without being objectively realistic. This central idea is reiterated in his subsequent works. For example, in the last preface to the 2000 edition of *Art and Illusion*, he argues that the concept of mimesis, of natural verisimilitude, is a crude misunderstanding. No image has ever resembled nature; images are all based upon conventions. To make an expressive face, all one needs is a pencil and a sheet of paper. According to what Gombrich calls 'Töpfer's Law',¹¹ each figure that can be interpreted as a face will *ipso facto* have its own expressivity and individuality, no

⁷ Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 47.

⁸ Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 48.

⁹ See Gombrich, 'The Experiment of Caricature' in *Art and Illusion*, 330-358.

¹⁰ Gombrich, 'The Mask and the Face' in *The Image and the Eye*, Ithaca, 1982, 105.

¹¹ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 336-342.

matter how badly drawn. We can all apply Lichtenberg's approach to any scribble or stain. However, Gombrich argues, regression is not the way to understanding.¹² One should not confuse reaction and comprehension or expression and communication.¹³ No pencil line or brush stroke can by itself, without the aid of other factors, 'render the sorrow of an individual'. Without a reference framework to help us adjust our first impressions, we are left helpless, with nothing but our initial projections. In music, for example, the hints of the first chords can be confirmed or negated by what follows. Scholars investigating sounds have discovered that each single component is influenced by the succession it occurs within and that the sequence alters the way in which the various sounds have an effect upon each other. What is at issue are the relations between them:¹⁴ we perceive the distribution and succession as forming a single whole without being able to identify the individual components that play a role in that succession. In the visual arts, too, Gombrich argues,¹⁵ one must develop 'a valid theory of articulation' that does justice to the character of expression and the mystery of the order in forms.

As in listening to music, physiognomic perception involves us in trying to make sense of what we see, with the initial fleeting impression – the first chords – then being corrected and adjusted as other clues come into play.¹⁶ An initial expression of a glum face will suggest the possibility of other symptoms of glumness in the same individual. However, should his voice and smile contradict that expectation, we ditch the first impression to then categorise the person in another way.

Nevertheless, those initial clues are more important. Without them we could not even formulate an hypothesis that can be corrected by additional data. Here Gombrich acknowledges his debt to Karl Popper for having demonstrated the importance of the first uncertain attempt to make sense of things, and how this first attempt contributes to the formation of an initial hypothesis which can then be confuted or contribute to making a further falsifiable hypothesis. As Gombrich says, 'we would not operate with physiognomic reactions any longer than necessary to perform the first unstable act of categorization which serves as a starting point for subsequent probes.'¹⁷ This process of inference should also serve as the epistemological model for art historians when tackling the often fragmented and confused evidence left by the past.

Thus a person's visual identity lies not in a fixed form but in a process: no face is ever identical to itself unless it is frozen in rigor mortis (and even in that sad case, it is only before us for a short time). Not only are there changes in lighting and point of view (as with all objects), but the entire configuration of the face is in constant motion. This motion, however, doesn't undermine the experience of visual identity or what Gombrich proposes should be called 'physiognomic constancy'. The

¹² Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 52.

¹³ Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 59.

¹⁴ Gombrich, 'From Representation to Expression', in *Art and Illusion*, 359-389.

¹⁵ Gombrich, 'From Representation to Expression', 359-389.

¹⁶ Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 50.

¹⁷ Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, 50.

recognition of identity in diversity, or unity in change, presupposes a faculty which we share with all other animals, given that they too can identify a single member of their species within an entire herd. However, the problem of the permanency of visual identity also concerns the world of artefacts, as can be seen in Jean-Marie Floch's studies of such artfully constructed identities as Coco Chanel's 'total look' or the Apple and IBM logos.

What is it that guarantees this constancy, even as appearance changes? Gombrich¹⁸ argues that what makes it possible for us to recognise identity is our ability to see the essential within a face and to separate it from the accidental. The problem is understanding what constituents 'the essential' – what Gombrich elsewhere calls the 'permanent trait'. As we all know, the basic structure underlying the face is constant, but this presumed invariable is always changing because of the play of expression across the face. And it is through the fusion of these dissimilar appearances – through what Gombrich calls a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' – that our recognition of unity in change, of identity in diversity, comes about. Physiognomic recognition is based on an overall impression. It is the outcome of a number of factors which interact to create a unique physiognomy – that which Petrarch calls a face's *aria* ('air'). In effect, Gombrich says that just as we can generalize about a person's voice or handwriting in spite of any number of variations in tone and line, so we are able to grasp the dominant expression – the general tone – in a person's face. And this tone is the result of transitions between a fixed range of relaxed to tense forms which characterize the animation of individuals' faces, their way of walking and their speech rhythms.¹⁹

Gombrich argues²⁰ that this principle even applies to the rigid orders of Classical architecture, which would appear to have nothing in common with categories of psychological or physiognomic expression. Vitruvius, in fact, recommended that temples to Minerva, Mars and Hercules should be in the Doric order, those to Venus, Flora and Proserpina be Corinthian and those to Juno, Diana and all the other gods that lie between these two types, should have Ionic temples. Clearly, within the range of means available to the architect, the Doric order was more virile than the Corinthian. We say that the Doric is an expression of divine severity. This is true, but only because it lies at the more extreme end of the scale, not because there is necessarily much in common between the god of war and the Doric order. Hence the importance of what Gombrich refers to as 'master copy, keyboard, scale',²¹ which is very close to what in semiotics is called 'semi-symbolic' codification.

The dominant trait that guarantees constancy of physiognomy is so strong that it can withstand all the changes due to humour and age; it can even be handed down from one generation to the next.²² This feeling of constancy continues despite the changes in appearance that take place over time. In most cases, no growth or decline ever destroys the experience of identity that enables us to greet someone we

¹⁸ Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 109-110.

¹⁹ Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 130.

²⁰ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 373.

²¹ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 373.

²² Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 114.

have not seen for years with 'It's you!' or 'How you've changed!' What the four-year-old and ninety-year-old Bertrand Russell have in common is the fact that behind all the variations that have taken place; we sense the same sharp awareness, the same degree of tension and elasticity, which are evoked by his particular physiognomy. Gombrich argues²³ that, on account of this tension, when some artists wish to understand a physiognomy, they draw on their own experience of how facial muscles work. Similarly, we observe the world and examine objects for the effect they might have upon us and we might have upon them. Some objects, such as stones or tree trunks, are rigid and hard and so we have to be careful not to bump into them. Others, such as grass and reeds, will bend easily yet are incapable of bearing our weight. Hence the function of affordances (based on Gibson's notion of 'affordance'), which Gombrich uses to describe an object's ability to 'afford' us opportunities or occasions for action.²⁴

It is from this system of relations binding together humans and objects that designers tend to draw most of their inspiration. The results come under the generic description of 'anthropomorphic' or 'emotional' design. However, this is where the difficulties start due to a preconception, also commonly found in a certain type of industrial design: the tendency to belief that everyday-use objects will have a greater emotional hold the more they are 'realistically' endowed with anthropomorphic features, such as faces with eyes and mouths. On the contrary, an object's ability to engage us is more effective precisely when that object does not take on a form that is too blatantly or ironically anthropomorphic. According to Gombrich, 'the ability to engage us is not limited to the images of certain precise objects; abstract configurations of form and colour also have the power to act upon our emotions.'²⁵ People thus prefer suggestion – a pure act of evocation with no well-defined outlines – to a representation that is too detailed in character. They prefer to adjust their own expectations in a way that enables them to fully enjoy the acts of intuition and projection.²⁶ When faced with an incomplete form, the observer is invited to cooperate. This is the case with Ettore Sottsass's *Self-portrait lamps* (Fig. 4). Gombrich's words might be applied to what gradually happens as we observe these objects: 'the more intently we look the more we may also find that the image "dissolves" and recomposes itself according to various possible readings'.²⁷ And it is in this indeterminateness that one should look for the aesthetic function of a type of form that falls within a category that Gombrich calls 'the elusive mask', a fairly common motif in the decorative arts. 'All we know' Gombrich says, 'is that the elusive mask (...) surfaces and disappears (...) in a variety of styles and a variety

²³ Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 115.

²⁴ The object is understood through what Merleau-Ponty called a 'syntagma of adaptation', which occurs when the powers of one's body adjust (*s'ajustent à lui*) to that object and match it. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 256.

²⁵ Gombrich, 'The Visual Image: Its Place in Communication', *Scientific American*. Special Issue on Communication, 272, 1972, 82-96. Reprinted in Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, 140.

²⁶ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 186-191.

²⁷ Gombrich, *The sense of Order*, 264-265.

of forms, and often we are left guessing whether the configuration which reminds us of a face is the result of accident or design'²⁸



Fig. 4 Ettore Sottsass, *Ashoka*, 1981, Collezione Memphis Milano, Lampada da tavolo con struttura in metallo verniciato a fuoco - Dimensioni L.74, H. 85 cm. Courtesy Ettore Sottsass.

The ability of objects to engage us is therefore heightened when their anthropomorphism is limited to a few slight hints and discrete suggestions. Their function as an *alter ego* – a substitute – is triggered and projected more effectively when the anthropomorphic analogy is merely alluded to; when there is only something that might be called rudimentary about their form. What matters is the relation between objects, and this is not best conveyed by a detailed, blatantly anthropomorphic form (or mimetic form). A design may work more effectively when, for example, the object is simply turned towards us with the tension and torsion of its entire body. This was the case with the *Brionvega* television sets of the 1970s, which curved out towards the viewer (Fig. 5). Shorn of any recognizable figurative references to the human face or body, the objects enunciative function lay in the plastic modelling of their form. Often, in fact, it only takes a simple movement in our direction to establish a complex deictic system which allows the possibility of action/reaction between object and user. And to achieve this all that might be required is a plastic 'formant', a form that is almost entirely abstract and yet produced by movement that seems to originate within the object itself. This form thus only needs to be the result of a process appearing to originate from within objects that are endowed with secret intentions towards us.

²⁸ Gombrich, *The sense of Order*, 265.



Fig. 5 Marco Zanuso e Richard Sapper, Televisore Alcol Brionvega, 1964.

The emotive effect of objects – the ‘physiognomic illusion’ that their presence can often produce – is therefore an effect of meaning arising not from their manifest descriptive/illustrative character but rather from their ability to address and engage us. Just as a person’s ‘state of mind’ can, at the level of expression, distance or bring together, cause a person to open up or withdraw into themselves, so objects with no actual illustration of facial expressions but endowed with plastic formants or pure directional vectors, can conjure up visual ideas of modesty or arrogance, serenity or agitation. Accentuating the curve in the handles of an innocuous coffee jug is all it takes to reproduce the petulant obstinacy of the Francisco de Zurbarán cup, which stands defiantly like a belligerent housewife, hands on hips.

A number of objects that only suggest rather than depict a passion achieve an enigmatic and elusive status, embodying what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘le non-figuratif du désir’. One example is Francesco Binfaré’s chair with its ‘depressed’ attitude (Fig. 6). The chair’s form simply closes up, looks gloomy and appears to turn inwards upon itself. This is the very opposite of Richard Hutten’s *Sexy Relaxy* chair (Fig. 7), which artfully opens itself up for us. In semiotics this kind of deep figuration is described as semi-symbolic signification.

Modulations governing the expressive forms of human emotions – with all their variations in intensity, rhythm and dynamic shifts – are embodied in the lines of these chairs. Their forms express fields of force that serve to articulate expression – that is, generate a physiognomy – by playing upon the oppositions of uneasiness and serenity, instability and calm, asceticism and gently regressive pleasure. These are forms of feeling – *pathosformeln*²⁹ – whose meaning emerges not only in relation to our body, but also through the system of oppositions which bind them together

²⁹ *Pathosformel* (pl. *pathosformeln*) is a term coined by Aby Warburg to indicate certain archetype images that re-appear in different contexts over centuries of art. These *pathosformeln* condense an image of emotion, an original state of feeling (*pathos*), and the repetitiveness of a canon to which they unconsciously refer (*formeln* – i.e. formulae). They are images – motifs – in which form is inseparable from content; they carry as their legacy physiognomy and content.

in a network of relations (such networks of relations can also be observed in the work of an individual designer).



Fig. 6 Francesco Binfarè, Sgabello rosso Magis, 2006, acciaio inox lucido rivestito.

Fig. 7 Richard Hutten, *Chair Sexy Relaxy Wood for E & Y (JP)*, 2002, 73 x 59 cm, Richard Hutten Studio ed.

The study of the production of identity in these forms of objects (identity not in differential terms but rather as embodied in tension and orientation) thus opens the way to a semiotic aesthetics concerned with the description of the relations between sense perception and intelligibility. Though descriptive in practice, semiotic aesthetics draws a large part of its theoretical substance from the work of Gombrich. At times this debt is explicitly stated. At times it is so profoundly embedded in the epistemological outlook of semiotic aesthetics that it is experienced as being congenital to it – just like that family *aria*, that physiognomic trait handed down from generation to generation and perceived as such only when someone suddenly points to strange dissimilarities or surreptitious, unexpected likenesses.

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