
(Notes Towards) Speculative Design

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Craft and being crafty

I want to sharpen our grasp of cunning, to reckon with its twists and turns, allures and horrors, insights and blindnesses... I tend to worry about focussing on what's good. It makes it too easy to sound syrupy, high-minded, like a bad Sunday school sermon or an inspirational greeting card. The sheer nastiness of the cunning will keep me honest. It will force me to give the devil his due, every step of the way.

Herzog, 2006: 9

The briefest rummage through the dictionary reveals implies that designers aren't to be trusted. They often speak about what they do in terms of its practical benefits and poetic potential, and have systematically evaded discussion of the odd fact that even the most banal terms in their vocabulary imply something altogether dubious: the sense of design, the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser noted, as the activity of 'a cunning plotter laying his traps' (Flusser, 1999: 17). 'Among other things', Flusser observed, a 'design' is a scheme, a plot, a concoction, and a simulation, 'all these (and other meanings) being connected with 'cunning' and 'deception'' (1999: 17). Consider how terms linked to design have associations with conspiracy: 'scheme' and *scheming*; 'plot' and *plotting*; we talk about how she or he *has designs* on him or her; in a case that seems to sum up the rest, the link between *craft* and *crafty*.

The literary historian Jessica Wolfe tugs at this thread, finding that, since the first modern dictionaries appeared, words like “‘machine’, ‘engine’ and ‘device’ [are treated] as synonymous with fraud, cunning, and other non-mechanical forms of power that work by deception or obfuscation rather than force’ (2004: 10). ‘Cotgrave’s 1611 French-English dictionary’, Wolfe writes, defines *engin* as ‘toole’ or ‘instrument’”, but, additionally, as ‘understanding, policie, reach of wit; also sottletie, fraud, craft, wilinesse, deceit’ (*ibid.*). Consider the etymology of the English word *plot*, for instance, which originally designated a space in the landscape - as in ‘ground plot’. Through the 1600s, it was adopted in theatre practice to describe the stage (‘platform’ comes is a variant of ‘plot-form’), and the practice of arranging actors and objects on stage in order to tell a story through their movement became known as *plotting*; from there, the sense of the *plot* of a narrative developed - as also did the conspiratorial idea of a plot (‘a plot against the king’) implying events determined by an invisible director-of-affairs lurking in the figurative ‘off-stage’ of everyday life (Turner, 2006).

We’ve unwittingly stumbled here on a kind of plot ourselves, finding all about us the fragmented evidence of a secret counter-history of designing where artisans are treated as deeply suspicious figures: purveyors of an unruly practice that broadens its palette beyond wood, stone, metal and animal parts (and latterly, plastic and pixels) to human behaviour. As in the case of the word ‘plot’, we can see that crafting the arrangement of a space, on the one hand, and being crafty about it, on the other, flow easily one into the other. But there’s a bigger story that underlies these etymological intrigues. To kickstart our survey, let’s begin with a very old text indeed that calls for *the suppression of design*, precisely because it identifies the thought that goes into making certain kinds of artefact as also tutoring a devious, even seditious, sentiment.

Plato’s trap

Let us... ask ourselves what animal traps reveal about the human spirit...
Do animal traps, in their bare, decontextualised presence, tell us no more
than that human beings like to consume animal flesh?

Plato's *Laws* is reckoned the last of his dialogues, penned sometime around 350 BCE. In it, Plato has his mouthpiece - an unnamed Athenian - expound to Spartan man-about-town Megillos and Cretan lawmaker Kleinias about the laws that would prevail in an ideal society. Toward the end of the eighth book of the dialogue, the Athenian holds forth on the forms of hunting that are acceptable in this utopia. Oddly, this doesn't take place in the midst of a conversation about the practicalities of keeping a population fed, but inducing, good-shepherd-like, the 'right' kind of values amongst the people by encouraging particular types of activity, 'the praise being assigned to that kind [of activity] which will make the souls of young men better' (Plato, 1960: 201).

Let us address young men in the form of a prayer for their welfare: O friends, we will say to them, may no desire or love of hunting in the sea, or of angling or of catching the creatures in the waters, ever taken possession of you, either when you are awake or when you are asleep, by hook or with weels, which latter is a very lazy contrivance; and not let any desire of catching men and of piracy by sea enter into your souls and make you cruel and lawless hunters. And as to the desire of thieving in town or country, may it never enter into your most passing thoughts; nor let the insidious fancy of catching birds, which is hardly worthy of freemen, come into the head of any youth.

Plato, *ibid.* 202

To us it might seem faintly absurd to see angling with bait and tackle as continuous with piracy, and the catching of wild birds as an incubator of covetous thoughts. The link that Plato asserts is that traps of all kinds embody an 'inauthentic' attitude to the world: an ignoble, even downright *sneaky*, evasion of the 'proper' effort. We discover the following to be the general rule: any form of hunting 'in which the strength of beasts is subdued by nets and snares, and not by the victory of a laborious spirit' (Plato, *ibid.*), is culturally toxic. '[O]nly the best kind of hunting is allowed at all - that of quadrupeds, which is carried on with horses and dogs and men's own persons, and they get the victory over the animals by running them down and striking them and hurling at them' (*ibid.*). *The chase* is an appropriate way to conduct oneself, a sacred pursuit in which formidable skill is coupled with great effort against a worthy opponent. While such trials of strength and fleetness are improving to the soul, traps are 'lazy contrivances' that permit the wily hunter to procure undeserved success. It's dangerous to allow this attitude to develop,

the Athenian holds, if what one's after is a safe and virtuous society. The making of traps 'foster[s] the qualities of cunning and duplicity which are diametrically opposed to the virtues that the city of the *Laws* demanded from its citizens' (Detienne & Vernant, 1991: 33). In Plato's brief and highly unsympathetic meditation, *craft*, applied to more sophisticated tasks than extending human prowess through straight-up prosthetics like shield and spear, cultivates *craftiness*, which is entirely the 'wrong' sort of political sensibility.

Plato's writing, needless to say, casts a long shadow, but he is representing here a more general Greek tendency to intellectually disparage practices of making on the grounds that it fostered a tricky kind of thought. Suspicions about the use of technology to contrive results without 'proper', 'fair', 'authentic' or 'natural' effort were felt widely and deeply. It's not that the Big Thinkers of that time and place omitted, of course, to talk about the arts of construction; they certainly did so, in some cases at length. Two terms that attracted their attention are of particular note, words that have descended to contemporary English in one form or another: *poesis*, roughly meaning 'making', and from which we derive *poetry*; and *techne*, approximating to 'art' or 'skill', persisting in words like 'technique' and 'technology'. (The original words are still used in certain circles of design discourse today, given a hefty boost back into academic consciousness by Heidegger.) But there was also a third term, one that precisely describes the kind of unpleasantness which Plato wanted to oust from the world: *mêtis*. This is a word that doesn't translate neatly, and we've inherited no variant of it. It was roundly ignored by any of the major writers whose august shadows continue to colour Euro-American culture, despite the fact that it was personified in an array of cultural figures (Hermes, Prometheus, Odysseus, Penelope, and Hephaestus, amongst others), was a commonplace of everyday language, and had a meaning that remained remarkably stable over about a thousand years from Homer to Oppian. Widespread and long-lived, *mêtis* was nonetheless 'never explicitly formulated, never the subject of a conceptual analysis or of any coherent theoretical examination'; it was mentioned in passing, but almost nothing was written about it in any of the philosophical tracts that have travelled the millennia from then to now (Detienne & Vernant, 1991: 3). 'It is absent from the image that Greek thought constructed of itself' (de Certeau, 1984: 81); '[e]ven Aristotle had nothing to say about it' (Chia & Holt, 2009: 192).

So what does *mêtis* mean? It denotes a form of cunning, wily intelligence, which animates acts that are not exactly 'skilled' (contra *techne*), because they are often improvised; nor are they 'productive', in the conventional sense of 'making an object' (contra *poesis*) - the

operation of *mêtis* does not necessarily leave a material trace, at least not in the rather obvious form of, say, a table or a building. It compounds 'skill, ingeniousness [and] prudence' with 'trickery' and 'wiliness' (Vernant, 2006: 12). It's this association of *mêtis* with guile that provides the starting point for the only extensive discussion of the term to have appeared to date, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society* (1991). They describe *mêtis* as:

a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation or rigorous logic.

Detienne & Vernant, 1991: 3-4

Given its operation in shifting circumstances, *mêtis* operates 'on the cusp of its own dissolution', and must be regarded less as a 'concept' to be deployed than as a 'spirit of approach' (Chia & Holt, 2009: 194-195). It escapes a steady, conceptualising gaze and is more likely to be glimpsed in action; so a better way to grasp it might be to range out the kinds of activities in which it is implicated, and where, momentarily, it becomes visible. Daisy-chaining examples, Detienne and Vernant explain that *mêtis* is what's involved in, and unites,

the stratagems used by the warrior the success of whose attack hinges on surprise, trickery or ambush, the art of the pilot steering his ships against winds and tides, the verbal ploys of the sophist making the adversary's powerful argument recoil against him, the skill of the banker and the merchant who, like conjurors, make a great deal of money out of nothing, the knowing forethought of the politician whose flair enables him to assess the uncertain course of events in advance, and the sleights of hand and trade secrets which give craftsmen their control over material which is always more or less intractable to their designs. It is over all such activities that *mêtis* presides.

Detienne & Vernant, 1991: 47-48

As a loose shorthand, we could say that *mêtis* is the intelligence implied in the process of

eliciting extraordinary effects from unpromising materials. It works with situations that are volatile, slippery, stubborn, or some combination of the three, and it finds ingenious ways to transform their current arrangement into a new one.

The negative contour of work

To expand a little on this, let's quickly pass back to Vilém Flusser and *The Shape of Things*, the work in which he notes - as we saw above - the dubious connotations of 'design'. Flusser remarks that what is deceived by design are, quite specifically, the laws of nature. Here, he ruminates on a device of a humble sort, the lever:

The lever is a simple machine. Its design copies the human arm; it is an artificial arm. Its technology is probably as old as the species *homo sapiens*, perhaps even older. And this machine, this design... is intended to cheat gravity, to fool the laws of nature and, by means of deception, to escape our natural circumstances through the strategic exploitation of a law of nature.

Flusser, 1999: 19

Like a magician's trick, the lever conjures an unlikely occurrence from materials in the environment: it allows a person to lift a boulder, say. This example of a lever is not, we should add, Flusser's own, although (to put it delicately) his writing typically shies from academic norms of reference-giving, and we require a forensic approach to identify his source. Flusser is, it would seem, restating an argument that first appears - down to the use of the lever as an example - in a pre-Archimedean Greek text, known as the *Machina* or *Mechanical Problems*. The *Machina* has often been attributed to Aristotle in the past, although contemporary evidence suggests this to be very unlikely; lacking another authorial candidate (although Archytas of Tarentum seems plausible), it is usually referred to as the work of 'the pseudo-Aristotle'. Whatever its provenance, the *Machina* is an extraordinarily accomplished text. Introducing any number of serious conceptual

innovations, such as the differentiation of mass and weight, it expounds on the principles behind oars, gear-trains, windlasses, and other ancient machines, and describes mechanics as the art which adjusts the movements of 'Nature', useful because 'Nature, so far as our benefit is concerned, often works just the opposite to it' (quoted by Winter, 2007: 1). In the *Machina*, we find the lever, and other simple machines, are described as exploitations of existing physical phenomena, redirecting them in the service of human projects:

Such it is where the lesser overcomes the greater, and when things having little impetus move great weights... The matter of the lever is concerned in matters of this type, for moving a big weight with a small force seems absurd, and the more so the bigger the weight. What a person cannot move without a lever is moved - even adding the weight of the lever - easily.

quoted by Winter, 2007: 1

Craft, in the sense understood by the *Machina*, is the art by which 'the lesser overcomes the greater', the material world cunningly bent into new shapes, guided by a wily intelligence. Incredibly improbable phenomena - like the ability of a person to use a lever to lift a boulder - flow from an environment arranged *just so*, and is a collaboration of all its parts. And so it is that Detienne's co-author Jean-Pierre Vernant elsewhere describes artefacts as 'traps set at points where nature allowed itself to be overcome' (Vernant, 2006: 313). To set such a trap requires a deep sensitivity to the materials at hand - a responsiveness, that is, to the opportunities available in the environment: an unnerving ability to coax effects *from* it, rather than imposing effects *on* it by the application of force alone (Eliade, 1978); an activation of hidden possibilities, rather than, as it were, barking instructions at the world. And barking them louder when the world doesn't obey.

Harnessing an environment's dynamics in this oblique way can, of course, be quite a spooky affair, especially when as an onlooker it's not clear *how* some material situation could possibly have been brought about by a person. *Mêtis* invites this sense of (often distrustful) wonder. The most intense displays of *mêtis* appear, at the first glance of the uninitiated, to be resolutely *magical*. Anthropologist Alfred Gell observes that, most obviously when technologically-basic cultures come into contact with those that have accomplished more sophisticated feats of material dexterity, it is the effortless accomplishment of the apparently impossible that seems most captivating aspect of all technology. Echoing Arthur C. Clarke's third law - that 'any sufficiently advances

technology is indistinguishable from magic' - the idea of 'magic' itself is perhaps, Gell writes, best understood as a manifestation of 'the ideal technology' (Gell, 1999: 179):

All productive activities are measured against the magic-standard, the possibility that the same product might be produced effortlessly, and the relative efficacy of techniques is a function of the extent to which they converge towards the magic-standard of zero work for the same product. Magic is the baseline against which the concept of work as a cost takes shape... Magic haunts technical activity like a shadow; or, rather, magic is the negative contour of work... [M]agic is the ideal means of technical production.

Gell, 1999: 179-180

This ability to coax unforeseen effects from mundane materials is central to one of the longest-running suspicions about the people we, today, call designers. They have often been associated with the supernatural, activating conduits to the unknown; the fully *métic* craftsman brings forth *remote possibilities* (Helms, 1993). It labels productive activity *not* in the sense of 'the blind routine of a man who works at a craft' (Vernant, 2006: 312), or, much later of course, the systematic assembly that goes on in a factory. Such cases are bound by procedural rules - one does this and then this and then this - that can be known, learned, and passed on, even if they resist being put easily into words. *Métis*, on the other hand, implies the exception to the rule, rather than the expected result of applying it (Bok, 2001); it's what distinguishes 'the 'true' potter and the man who merely works at making pots' (Helms, 1993: 14-15). It is precisely *not* 'technical, routine, impersonal, and oriented toward the continuous production, in series, of goods' but 'unique, strange and potent' (*ibid.* 16, 56). It draws this potency from harnessing what Mary Helms calls 'the beyond', the movements of a world that are not immediately obvious to most people - something that, historically speaking, has frequently resulted in artisans being seen as trafficking with some kind of supernature, although in these more secular times it seems more appropriate to say they're meddling with a world of material behaviour whose deep-down quantum strangeness is far odder than most superstitions have ever shown the imaginative prowess to match.

The scholar of shortcomings

Given the layering of this occult connection with the literally *unsettling* ability to create something new from what's at hand in the environment, it's no wonder, Helms says, that while artisans' most ingenious constructions are often elevated into something like the acme of human achievement, artisans *themselves* have generally been seen as societal liabilities at best, downright dangerous at worst. So called 'traditional' cultures brim with the sentiment that they are 'lazy, guileful, irresponsible, untrustworthy, overly independent, poor providers, unfit (polluting) commensal companions, and inappropriate or unwise marriage choices... By virtue of their special abilities, artisans may be recognised [i.e. lauded]... [But] by virtue of those same special abilities, they may be condemned as perpetual children to sit by the sidelines in community discussions, ignored by the majority of fully adult folk' (Helms, 1993: 52).

Yet this can't be put down simply to suspicions that artisans commune with some kind of unpredictable and poorly-understood 'beyond'; that wasn't, we might recall, really the problem that Plato had with it, and the same can be said of the philosophical tradition that follows him. Lisa Raphals notes that any hint of a "moralist' tendency' tends to treat *mêtis* as 'vicious' (Raphals, 1992: 3). Why? To find out, let's return to traps of a rather more familiar sort than 'those placed at special junctures in nature'. In animal traps, Alfred Gell writes, 'we are able to see that each is not only a model of its creator, a subsidiary self in the form of an automaton, but each is also a model of its victim' (Gell, 1998: 201). This goes beyond an attention to the victim's outward form (an arrow or a stake must meet its victim with sufficient force to penetrate its body without breaking); traps also 'subtly and abstractly represent parameters of the animal's natural behaviour, which are subverted in order to entrap it'.

The target of the trap is an active, if unwitting, participant in springing it; traps are 'lethal parodies of the animal's *Umwelt*... the rat that likes to poke around in narrow spaces has just such an attractive cavity prepared for its last, fateful foray into the dark' (*ibid.* 201). And, for Gell, there is a certain disturbing poetry to this: 'The fact that animals who fall victim to traps have always brought about their downfall by their own actions, their own complacent self-confidence, ensures that trapping is a far more poetic and tragic form of hunting than the simple chase. The latter kind of hunting equalises hunters and victims,

united in spontaneous action and reaction, whereas trapping decisively hierarchises hunter and victim' (*ibid.* 202).

It's this deviousness that Lewis Hyde picks up in *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), a compendium of global trickster lore that is also a subtle mediation on the cultural significance of these characters, who turn up so often it appears no mythology is truly complete without at least one. The trickster is, Hyde observes, almost always associated with the invention of technology *as such*, usually as some sort of short-term trick to extract himself (it's usually, but not invariably, a *he*) from a sticky situation. And what's invented, in this primordial act of design, is, more often than not, a trap of some kind.

Stories of the trap's genesis usually run along something like these lines: The trickster's not physically imposing, but he *is* dexterous; and while he's never settled in one habitat - if he has home, it's on the road - he is *very* good at improvising. And coming into some new place he's hungry. He's weak and even if he wasn't, he'd still be lazy; he has the special quality, though, of knowing this - he's what we might call a *scholar of shortcomings*. Its from his shortcomings that his inventiveness begins: he recognises that if he is hungry, why, that probably means other creatures are hungry too. So with what little food - not enough to fill his belly - he can scavenge, he sets up to tempt other creatures that are too wary and too fleet for him to chase them down, even if he could be bothered; he seduces them with some tasty morsel until they're close enough to lock them down somehow and make of them a meal.

And so he invents the net, the snare or the fishing-line, a device that allows him to exploit the hunger of other animals in order to satisfy his own. Hyde calls the trickster, therefore, *a technician of appetite and instinct*. It's often the case, Hyde observes, that these stories position this moment as the fall of the world from perfect, unchanging and just, to the far crazier and more awkward - though not necessarily *worse* - ones that human beings now inhabit, and in which they relay these stories. The trickster's inventions have ramifying effects that he never thought of, and a kind of escalation or contagion occurs, whereby his trap creates new situations that mean other people have to devise their own ruses to deal with them, and these create new quicksands to get stuck in and modes of predation to contend with, and in turn... - on and on. Such is the way of the world in folklore: 'Nothing counters cunning but more cunning', observes Hyde, half rueful, half delighted (Hyde, *ibid.* 20).

And at the route of Hyde's ambivalence about whether the *unsettling* nature of *mêtis* is to be greeted with consternation or glee is not trivial. Just as *mêtis* slips over into

interpersonal encounters, so does its root condition of being the way the weak prevail over the physically stronger, regardless of which party, if any, we find sympathetic. Chia and Holt, for example, observe that *mêtis* is, definitively 'a cultivated *art* for reversing unfavourable or disorienting or even unrecognised situations into ones replete with potential that involves alertness, sensitivity and a peculiar disposition that is particularly attuned to emerging opportunities contained in unfolding circumstances' (Chia & Holt, 2009: 197). It is *mêtis* that 'enables the smaller and weaker to dominate the bigger and stronger', so that 'the defeat of the weak and the frail is not a foregone conclusion' (Detienne & Vernant, 1991: 44, 46). Detienne's co-author Jean-Pierre Vernant explains *mêtis* in a way that will help us reinforce this connection between craft and political action:

Employing every kind of ruse, shrewdness, craftiness, deception, and resourcefulness, it is a practical form of thought that struggles against obstacles and faces every opponent in an ordeal of strength whose outcome appears both decisive and uncertain. For the wise and sensible man, an expert in many twists and turns, *mêtis* brings success in situations where at first it seemed impossible.

Vernant, 2006: 12

Given that it is understood to operate in amongst human affairs, this *craftiness* grants it a very strange political status, one that it is quite alien to the customary political scripts of the West, which have shown a strong fondness for abstract dictations of what and who is 'good' or 'bad'. Detienne and Vernant write that *mêtis* operates in any situation 'in which man must learn to learn to manipulate hostile forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves, without ever being confronted head on' (1991: 47). And this is 'is morally and ethically problematic because the abilities we recognise and approve as wisdom may be the same abilities we disparage as cunning and cleverness' (Raphals, 1992: 3). Its logic is that of outsmarting, evading capture, prostheticising itself with what's at hand, and then moving on. Subversively exploiting 'sweet spots' in the environment, *mêtis* is directly contrasted to a vision of the intellect that aspires to be 'pure, ordering, embodying the solar world of clarity and light'; instead, it 'insists that there are always cracks and gaps in such perfect architectures; intelligence moves forward by keeping on its crafty toes, ever opening into a world that is messy, unpredictable and far from equilibrium... [a] fecund space of possibility and innovation...' (Davis, 2004: 21). The world of *mêtis* is a world understood to be a 'fund of opportunity', as Detienne and Vernant put it, which is also 'a world of snares'. Or, perhaps more

accurately, the *mêtic* world is one that funds opportunity *because* it is full of snares: ‘a system of complicity, a whole fierce and subtle mechanism’ (Genet, 2006: 38).

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