

Question 2:

Define skill in the context of your own practice and the work of two

artists/designer/makers/ from the lecture series

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Originating from people who had the skill to reshape stones, in order to create tools, ultimately gave us the gift of power to construct a world, and through that came the change of how we lived and our thinking. These people who inhabited the ability of change were called 'axemakers', they developed a precise and consecutive system to shape their tools, which lead to the generation of language and logic (Burke and Ornstein, 1977, p.16). Regarding the job of a designer, they have played a crucial role within this progressive system of working and thinking, because of the ability and skill they hold in order to transform one's environment, as well as generating new tools and techniques with the fundamental purpose of enhancing societies (Boehnert, 2018, p. 1)

This essay is an investigation into the definition of skill, specifically that of pattern designing, from the perspective of two designers, who's ideologies both explore the function and purpose of machines within their practice, and how this effects the overall experience and process of making their products. The essay initially begins by exploring the work and theories of William Morris, who ultimately valued the personal within the making process and denounced the machine in all parts of design (Naylor, 1980, p. 106). Following on from William Morris, the essay will then delve into the integration of machines and technology, within the work of contemporary furnishing company Timorous

Beasties. This will discuss the theories of hand skill within the designer and the intricate relationship they have with the machine, within this advancing technological society.

The designers ability to create has stemmed from a progressive order, in which we've developed a 'precise and sequential process', (Burke and Ornstein, 1977, p. 16) consequently giving way for us, the talent of retaining and building upon information from our environment, as well as the capability to bring around change from it. Exploration into this idea leads to the concepts presented by Tim Ingold, who states:

Skill is not an attribute of the individual body in isolation, but of the system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment. (Ingold, 2000, p. 291)

This delves into the idea that skill derives from the interaction of artisan to environment, its subjective to the individual as each interprets their surroundings differently. Looking into the environment, Ingold's work (2000), as well as Burke's and Ornstein(1977), refer to the physical connection we have with nature and this can metaphorically represent the relationship an artisan has when producing their work, through the contact between natural material and maker, in addition to the conceptual connections of nature within an artisan's work.

This theory that nature correlates to that of the development of skill, can be seen through the work of, designer, writer and activist, William Morris, whose practices and ideologies revolve around the notion that designing (particularly that of pattern making) should be taught through the process of first hand contact , as skill cannot be communicated through the teachings of a professional or book (Naylor,1971. p. 104). Morris's theory reflects onto his work with the imagery he uses, as well as the actual process that is undertaken to create his pieces, *Strawberry Thief* (fig.1) is a fabric-piece well known throughout Morris's extensive collection, and is a primal example in relation to the ideologies he explored.



Fig.1, Strawberry Thief, (1883)

This fabric piece is comprised of cotton, which has undertaken an indigo-discharge process, with other colours hand-dyed back in, the imagery was directly inspired by Morris's surroundings, thus resulting in elements taken from the local thrushes who regularly stole the strawberries from the bushes of his garden (V&A, 2019). In relation to skill, *Strawberry Thief (1883)* reflects Morris's ideas that:

Patterns should express the vigour and growth of the plant form that inspired them...as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth...but above all, pattern, in whatever medium, should have the inevitability of nature. (Naylor, 1971, p.106)

This passage explores the idea of a rooted connection with nature as well as the language that is conveyed across Morris's work.

Morris's compositional and pattern designing skills, created a new engaging language, because of the way in which he comprised fragments of flora and fauna imagery, all originating from a primal system that ultimately gifted us with the skill of knowledge and language (Burke and Ornstein, 1977, p.16).

Delving further into the progressive system that Morris conveyed through his visual work, one can explore the theories of Richard Sennett's work (2009). He

investigated the idea that, “highly specialized skill represents not just a laundry list of procedures, but a culture formed of these actions” (Sennett, 2009, p.107). Although there may not seem to be a connection between the two ideas, there is, however, a transitional shift seen through the notion of language and culture.

Regarding William Morris’s work in accordance to Sennett’s work (2009), the skill that he embodied, which reflected into the language generated within his work, formulated a language of pattern that has given way to the concept of culture. Culture is the ultimate gift derived from this system that we created; it determines the skill involved within a designer, as well as the transitional shift of skill for the future.

The language expressed within *Strawberry Thief (1883)*, reflects Morris’s notion that pattern should encompass that of nature’s energy and growth, this can be observed through the hand-drawn elements of the plants that are interweaving around each other, giving way to the suggestion of nature’s inevitability of growth and transformation.

Looking deeper into the idea of growth, it metaphorically can reflect upon the progression of values and perspective of skill, regarding the integration of the machine within the designing process, during Morris’s active years. As the use of machines matured within the industry, the comparison of man to machine

also arose. the artisan was pushed against the “rigorous perfections of the machine” (Sennett, 2009, p. 84). These ‘perfections’ explored within Sennett’s work (2009), imply the artificial element that is involved within a machine, because the value of skill in relation to a craftsman, is measured through the individuality of a piece. A piece that narratively tells the viewer of its flaws and irregularities, to Morris, this is what made an object whole and what placed it within the world. It ultimately encompassed the essence of the skill, something a machine could never replicate.

Through the intricacies of William Morris’s hand drawn patterns, this had ultimately given way to a whole new system of language, as well as the fundamental values revolving around the relationship between artisan and object. However, with the gradual incline of machine use within the making process, the progression of hand, to tool, to machines, has led to an inevitable era where, “human beings are becoming less and less natural and more and more artificial” (Flusser, 1999, p.44). Here Flusser explores the notion of industrialisation and the apparent effect it has and will have, regarding design and the transferability of skill between human and the machine.

This leads into the theme of technology within design, William Morris detested the “impersonality of the machine” (Naylor, 1980, p. 109), as this ultimately caused a rift between the designer and artefact, thus resulting in the absence

of human presence within the making process; to Morris, this took away the personality of a piece, and the notion of skill was ultimately discredited within the making process.

Unlike that of William Morris's views on the impersonality and detachment machines have to the designing process, as well as the absence of designer, Flusser's work (1999), explores the notion that "machines are simulated organs of the human body" (Flusser, 1999, p. 51), although the word 'simulated' theoretically means that of a non-organic structure, it suggests that the machine is merely an extension of the designers body, thus implementing the validity of skills which is needed to control and take best advantage of this 'extension'.

Looking further into the relation of machine to the skill of a designer, this combination has presented a rich and vast variety of options for designers to take advantage of (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walton, 2016, p. 1). It will allow artisans to go beyond the normal conventions of design, consequently forming a new system in which skill, can once again transform and strive.

Regarding the use of technology within design, contemporary furnishing company Timorous Beasties, explores the capability, technology has to offer within their designing process, and final outcomes. Timorous Beasties embody an overall "unique diversity of pattern" (Timorous Beasties, 2019) in their

work, and with a distinctive reference to time-honoured motifs, similarly to Morris's theory, they are influenced by the inextricable relationship we have with our environment, thus resulting in the patterns impacting the space they inhabit.

Interestingly, Timorous Beasties combines the traditional and technological within their designing process in order to create the patterns they do, a primal example of this can be seen in their wallpaper, *Damsel Damask* (fig2, 2017).



Fig 2.

Damsel Damask, 2017

Damsel Damask (2017), has distinct references to that of traditional damask tapestries, they were usually made of silk and depicted the likes of fruit, flowers and animals (F&P Interiors, 2018), there are also clear connotations to that of acanthus leaves, which was an additional traditional element used within damask.

Damsel Damask (2017), perfectly encompasses the traditional values embedded within William Morris's ideologies regarding the connection between nature and work, as well as the notions explored within Flusser's work (1999), that revolve around the progressive relationship of man and machine. This can be seen through the hand-drawn floral elements, which reflect that of the traditional damask aesthetic. In contrast to this, layered behind the botanical imagery is an array of vibrant colours and textures, which has been created through the means of digital, and as a result, this has caused the piece to evoke a sense of balance, through the constructed composition which houses these two opposing elements.

It's interesting to observe the contradicting elements explored within *Damsel Damask (2017)*, because it reflects upon the balance needed, regarding the combination of technology and design. This idea of balance is expressed through the ideologies of Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter (2016) who state, "making the digital tangible relies upon the connection with the material

world” (2016, p.1). This extract explores the theoretical notion that the combination of technology within the creation of design, cannot exist without the foundation of the material world, as a result, there is an implication that skill is required, in order to maintain these two elements, and this balance ultimately determines the power we hold over technology.

The balance of technology and traditional methods explored within Timorous Beasties’s work is giving way to a new system, a system transitioning from the ideologies explored heavily within William Morris’s work, which revolved around the importance of the relationship between artisan and artefact, to modern theories which now involve the role of the machine in relation to artisan.

With the increasing involvement of machines within the industry today, this continues to question and contribute to the developing factors of the skills involved within the manufacturing process. This transitional system involved, is formulating an evolving language, which is causing designers to be thinking “innovatively through the practice of traditional design, with that of digital tools” (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walton, 2016, p. 2). This delves into the idea that designers are having to go beyond what they know, in order to effectively apply the use of machines within their process, these indications of progressive

thinking, feed into Flusser's theories (1999) regarding our relation to machine and fights that of Morris's ones.

Timorous Beasties methods of thinking, support into this idea, because they innovatively integrate the use of technology within their work, they combine their hand- skills, which is associated with nature, with that of digital, and this transforms their design, which goes beyond the traditional conventions. In relation to skill, this ability of effectively combining and controlling these elements (which is seen throughout their work), goes beyond that of William Morris's theories, because this balance of control, evokes a sense of enlightenment regarding the way of using the machine (Sennett, 2009, pg.106). They have harnessed within their process, to judge its potential and utilize its functions, all in accordance to their own skill limitations.

Instead of alienating machines, Timorous Beasties and others, have accomplished to unify both parties. This initially developed a new system of language (far from Morris's), and as a result, has given way to a new artisan, who embodies the skills to positively contribute to this advancing technological age we're entering.

In conclusion, the value of skill involved within a designer, has transformed throughout the centuries, due to the contributing factors of machines. Artists like William Morris believed that skill orientated around first-hand contact of

experience and the relationship artisan had to their object. This linked into the work of Tim Ingold's (2000), who explored the notion of systems, in relation to, the links between the derivation of skill and the artisan's interaction of their environment; this formulated a progressive system, which is continually transforming.

Although machines altered the way in which designers had to work, the interaction of machine to artisan, has given way to a system which has progressed from the one explored within Morris's theories. Through the likes of Timorous Beasties, a contemporary furnishing company, they express the skill required to maintain balance of the traditional and technological. Between this system, it has created a language to which designers can push beyond the conventional boundaries of skill and design, enabling them to formulate a new system, that will ultimately benefit our advancing technological age.

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Imagery:

Figure 1: Morris, W. (1833) *Strawberry Thief*. Available at:

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O78889/strawberry-thief-furnishing-fabric-morris-william/#> (accessed: 28 November, 2019)

Figure 2: Timorous Beasties (2017) *Damsel Damask*. Available at:

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