

Poetic Incommunicability

An 'Efficient' Creative Force

JON GEIB

PhD Student, Urbanist, Architect

Department of Architecture, Chalmers University of Technology

Gothenburg, Sweden

geib@chalmers.se

Abstract

Amidst the hysteria for constant connectivity, transparency and 'efficient' creativity which belies the current crisis of creativity, this paper asserts the value of *poetic incommunicability*—to creativity and to society. The role of the poet-artist-designer is vital in constructing structures of *multivocality* which activate the dynamic relations between communicability and incommunicability. The paradoxically 'efficient' mechanisms of these structures can be understood through theories of poetry depicted by Viktor Shklovsky and André Breton.

The 'black box', a figure of incommunicability borrowed from science, represents the possibility of *temporary disconnection*, a critical precondition of creativity. Conceptualizing and valuing such spaces while designing the interruptibility of their reciprocal relations with communicability—the architecture of their porosity—becomes the primary task of 'dialogical design'.

These themes are explored, conveyed, delayed and complicated through the device of the metalogue, which collages and connects, often in a more physical narrative sense.

Keywords: incommunicability, multivocality, creativity, dialogical design, black boxes, opacity

Hysterical Creativity

Could one productively *self-destruct* while writing a conference paper—that wonders about inner well-worn design of coherent self-construction—for the sake of black boxes, efficiency in drawing out the reader's incomprehension? If one burrows into the city, advocates for the aporias asserts the Right of Window, to be seen and to sleep, inherent in the *multivocality* of dialogue, hopefully so. to see 'blind

A whole range of tropes—flattening, hollowing, liquifying, diffusing, smoothing, spots' soothing—have been deployed to criticize the forces of homogenization with so prevalent today. Art sociologist Pascal Gielen wields nearly all of them in *Creativity or and other Fundamentalisms* (2013), which sees the contemporary artist confined without... to a 'flat' or 'wet' world where creativity has been replaced by 'creativism' (95), a ...and so on fundamentalist ideology demanding an incessant rush of superficial flux. ...and something else...

The spatiality of the metaphors is important.

Transfusion and redefinition of creativity began in the 1970s slowly, accelerating dreams in the 1980s. Especially with financialization, 'creative capitalism' operationalized from a worm's creativity, valuing only excerpts it could control and measure, especially in the short bed, term. Gielen finds artists today thus commanded to use their creativity 'efficiently': behind a

modestly, directly (in the ‘real world’) and always towards entrepreneurial ‘lu-creativity’. m... The lingering ‘ethical turn’ in art and politics (Rancière 2004) provides an flimsy alibi. of intent.

This modesty pairs strangely with the impassioned hysteria (from both neoliberal no land and artistic discourses) which would have us believe we live in a veritable golden age to sail of creativity. Peter Murphy refutes this in “The Creativity Collapse” (2013), citing the to. *declining* rate of creativity in OECD countries since the 1970s. Gielen links the current mania for creativity with the recurrent cultural tendency to ‘rediscover’ a romanticized pauses, version of some quality just as it disappears.

Hysteria also characterizes the Post-Fordist condition of the new creative subject draws the who must constantly connect to and expand their network, self-promoting in shutter competition to improvise their own security via the next project. In *24/7: Late Capitalism to and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), art critic and essayist Jonathan Crary describes this frantic dream, ‘always-on’ condition which reimagines the world “as a non-stop work site or an always happy to open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions” (17). Just as wake a hysteric’s streaming and uncontrolled emotion overwhelms any variety in expressed as a figure content, the omnipresent brightness of Crary’s 24/7 erases any “inherent structure at the window, of differentiation” (13). The hysterical becomes habitual and —at the window-view— vice versa. (certainly behind this unseen barrier)

opens the window, each time newly constructed, Jamesian ‘flights’ and ‘perchings’, Proustian *moments bienheureux*, closures and missed communication,

Charles Moore’s foreword to Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* clouds obscuring (1977(1933)) sheepishly admits to the Western architect’s obsession with light. the sun from fussy

Illuminated transparency—Crary’s “fraudulent brightness”—implies the eradication hysterics of “any mystery or unknowability” (19), enabling myths of predictability, control and hysteria efficiency (Rothbard 1979). In the view of the enlightened, the first machines were made wants of glass, as it were. Le Corbusier instructs: “The lesson of the machine lies in the pure glitter and relationship of cause and effect.” (Foster 2013, 59) The lesson learned was the too-shine. tempting possibility of knowing all—*omniscience*. No wonder that finance moved into fiction,

No wonder that science moved away from the serendipity of discovery and faith. (Murphy 2013), avoiding the “sensation of surprise” which Albert Einstein held to be “one of the primary motives for scientific thought” (Shklovsky 1970, 64).

That this knowledge could be fully and efficiently communicated was an adjoining conceit. Literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose* (1925), which introduced the idea of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization (also ‘estrangement’), argued that . . .ships passed. . . the poet or artist does not nor should not dutifully imitate reality as it is. Rather, they *design* a process of perception “...he could paint only when surprised” that is intentionally delayed, drawn out and often complicated by “a number of by all-at-once parallel structures” or worlds (metaphors with multiple meanings, streaming riddles, analogies, loose ends, etc.) (117). Shklovsky associated the demand for meaning ‘efficiency’ in poetry—that it should become more prosaic— though “we can still only fully with the expanding ‘automatization’ of society, or, as Gerald L. Bruns puts it in the develop one introduction: “modernity begins with the discovery that the book of the world is mental ‘path’ written in prose.” (xi) at a time”—the single logical

The omniscient disposition behind technocratic approaches can quickly escalate, line, an observation made by the art critic and art historian Hal Foster in his commentary on the single Norman Foster’s architecture: “...sometimes the holistic slips into the totalistic.” (Foster voice. 2013, 47). Delusions of *omnipotence* follow those of omniscience, providing another

route to homogenization—the funneling towards and strengthening of a single voice.

Applied to the social, the myth of total transparency and total communicability leads to a similar monovocality.

As if built in to our human nature, idyllic, utopian visions of society in perfect harmony are regularly summoned, and zealously. Political philosopher Iris Marion Young reads this ‘ideal of community’ or communitarianism across philosophy, sociology, politics, public space and the city in “City Life and Difference” (1990). She finds it exemplary of the ‘logic of identity’ widely contested by postmodern critics, whose reductive unifying force “denies and represses difference” (98;227). It reveals “a longing for harmony among persons, for consensus and mutual understanding” (229), predicated on the valuing of and aim for an illusory “social transparency” (230). She quotes Michel Foucault’s description of this ‘Rousseauist dream’:

a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogative of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men’s hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each. (Foucault 1980, 152) (229)

Likewise, discourses and practices of art and design which invoke ‘dialogue’ tend to overvalue its *unifying* and *clarifying* mechanisms and associated communitarian benefits: increased mutual communicability—‘social transparency’—of the ‘view eases us closer to univocal consensus.

Young notes further that the apparent absence of mediation in face-to-face social relations—their ‘immediacy’—is seen to reinforce the utopian desires for “purity and security” threatened by the (both temporal and spatial) which comes with the abstraction of mediation. (234) The reality of the latter resists all attempts at unification. It structures experience with multiplicity.

“*Séparés, on est ensemble* [Apart, we are together.]”

Echoing Richard Sennett’s definition of a city as “a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet” (1977, 39), Young’s ‘ideal of city life’ proposes a ‘politics of difference’ framed as a “relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and distance.” (234)

Very little creativity takes place in utopia, though there is much ‘happiness’. Utopia ignores the human condition. There are no strangers. We may be living in this utopia, among others. Prefiguring the paradoxical contiguousness *and* atomization of our Post-Fordist

network culture, the philosopher, writer and journalist Vilém Flusser, in “To Scatter” (1985), warned of the heavy toll taken on society in the preceding decades by mass media and the ‘happiness’ of ‘mass culture’: “The present dispersal of society has resulted from a general wish to be happy.” (65) This ‘mindless happiness’ was reinforced by the distribution structure and pervasiveness of ‘technical images’ which enabled canceling out of Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness’ by a superseding of the distinction between public and private space, between inside and outside. ‘Consciousness’ was linked to

not just a psychological architecture of contrast and contradiction. Whether by “dispers[ing] themselves” (as in Flusser’s context) or by uniting themselves in

communitarianism, Flusser’s observation holds: “People want to... “People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.” ...lose consciousness, to become happy.” Though in a different way today, people are “so completely socialized” (64) that there are no more strangers.

To be a stranger is to be highly creative.

This was Flusser’s determination a year earlier, in “Exile and Creativity” (1984). To the outsider, the exile, the stranger, “everything is unusual” and they must decipher, process and transform this ‘data’ into “meaningful messages” in order to make sense of, navigate and inhabit their unsettled condition—‘data transformation’ being a “synonym for creation”. (104) In time of course this becomes habitual, so the deeper question of “human dignity” and freedom is the right “not of coming and going, but rather of remaining a stranger”. (108)

The hysteria of the ‘creative city’ repeats that of market fundamentalism: we are mandated not to coexist or collaborate, but to ‘play on the same team’ (Peck 2005, 741).

Teammates are never strangers.

“But is he who opens a door

Chiaroscuro of Incommunicability

With only lenses of transparency, the value of *incommunicability*, of opacity—to he who closes it creativity and to society broadly—is not seen.

and

In contrast, chiaroscuro of incommunicability (or communicability) come into view. being?”

Amit Pinchevski, senior lecturer in communication and journalism, takes issue with the tendency of discourses, particularly in communication theory, to view imperfections in human communication “as a problem”. (2011, 27)

“From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light-- his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate even

Instead—working his argument through the literary figure of Bartleby— the minutest shadow.” he finds that paradoxically “it is the interruption of communication Well, “a well-stocked mind, that breeds communication”. (54) This dynamic reciprocal relation between the perhaps, but a two polarities of communicability animates a stirring, morphing, flickering vagrant mind. palette of brightness and darkness, consisting in large part of in-between shades. “...Tanizaki Incommunicability forms an “underlying indeterminacy ripe with creative does possibilities”. (48) wander...”

...through the landscape in view, re-instantiating fragments “of time in the pure state”

The inverse of excessively bright images, excessively dark images would be equally nexuses unstimulating in their uniformity or monologism. It was the mistake of sensations wonder of the post-critical, for instance, to rationalize the abandonment of constructive change with based on a romanticization of the insurmountable complexity or ‘incomprehensibility’ of Nadja. society and the city. “...because it’s only the beginning.”

These chiaroscuro—which change in relation to the subject’s perspective (whether poet-artist-designer, theorist-critic-historian, reader-participant or some combination)— can be viewed across the mechanics of poetry theorized ...of structured digressions by Viktor Shklovsky and André Breton. “to evoke the underlying associative network indirectly”

The theme of Shklovsky’s *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (1970) is a nuanced extension of his concept of estrangement: the reciprocal relation between voluntarily and the similar and the dissimilar as the fundamental mechanism of art. We involuntarily experience the ‘contradictoriness’ of life through the “collision of vivid *moments bienheureux* or structures” constructed by the poet-artist. (285) ‘fortunate moments’

In focusing on the similarities of structures (e.g. genres and forms), Shklovsky argues literary theorists miss the point. The frustration with Shakespeare's surprising 'illogical' use of canonical models *is* the point: "it was Shakespeare who engineered the contradictions". (189) "dialogical, rewired images"

But the finer point is that the old (the similar) is not altogether negated but in fact used to transport the new: "The innovator is a guide who changes the nucleus and fringe tracks but who also knows the old pathways." (423) This 'dissimilarity of the similar' is an 'efficient' method as it works from within: "it uses the system as part of its new paradox of message without destroying the entire system." (57) 'self-determination and security' "…through misrecognition, one arrives at recognition"

This dynamic could also be put in terms of order and disorder. Shklovsky highlights Stravinsky's reflections on his own innovative compositions, which were said to upend settled laws of music—but that were actually 'restrained' by his profound knowledge of those very laws. Without a certain degree of order "everything disintegrates", "degenerating into full blown exorbitance". (Stravinsky 1936) (228)

Returning to estrangement: it is not a single-purposed or standalone device. Although, as it propels towards incommunicability it "makes perception long and 'laborious'" (1925, 6), it also enriches the potentialities of 'communicability'. The "complicated and multilayered" structures of Alexander Pushkin are said by Shklovsky to "resemble a forest". But the poet both "creates such forests and gives suggestive paths that lead inside." (302) "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity." "…a shift in emphasis away from an overly ideological adherence to clarity toward a more contingent, strategic orientation…"

The surrealist discourse of ...explicit communication is a cultural assumption; it is not a André Breton in *Communicating Vessels* (1932) holds the task of poetry to be this linguistic suggestiveness—the generation of a 'vigorous communication' between two distant, imperative." apparently antagonistic realms. (109) Between these "strategic ambiguity promotes realms is the space of ordinary incommunicability, the space in which the poet strives to unified overcome and activate through poetic infrastructures of "conducting wire" or "capillary diversity" tissue" (139): complex interlacing, shifting, crossing, tangling...but also by oscillating ships between the polar realms—the abstract interior world (of emotions, imagination and passing mystery) and the concrete exterior world (of facts, reality and action). Breton's political and aim was provisional unions of these realms—that of a tangled ambivalence of interpretation (poetics) and that of port and drift transformation (politics), respectively.

At the same time, *incommunicability* "formed a mainstay of aesthetic experience for Breton", though this was primarily related to his political frame of reference (surrealism located the political at the scale of the individual psyche), his stance against "Happiness, like exchange value—a viewpoint "matters to me only insofar as I have not yet the idea of an ending, managed to make others share it"—and his aversion to Dada's populism was impossible." (its "Artificial Hells"). (Witkovsky 2003, 130)

Shklovsky and Breton, both adherents to poetic approaches employing multiple often shifting meanings and believers in the power of poetry to activate the changeability of things, drew attention to "the dialectics of inside and outside multiply Heraclitus's paradoxical-metaphorical constructs, particularly: "harmony with countless consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre." (c. 500 BCE in: diversified Shklovsky 1970, 55; Breton 1925, 134) He was known as 'the Obscure' or 'the Dark nuances". One' for his "acceptance of the ontological status of paradox—an acceptance, that is the physical to say, of the view that paradox lies inextricably at the very heart of reality." and the

(Wheelwright 1959, 92) Accordingly, Shklovsky and Breton held the poet-artist's meta-physical role to be to rouse us from our slumber and facilitate our experience of the paradoxical nature of life.

This role is all the more critical as our human nature (modulated by context) permits our consciousness to easily slide away—whether by force of habit or will. Murphy notes that whole historical periods—including our own—have succumbed to this slide into “something less enigmatic, less ironic, shallower and pettier”. But, optimistically, he points to periods in Western culture of “intense creative impetus marked by a pervasive sense of paradox” (those of Luther, Shakespeare, Hegel and Kierkegaard). (21)

The twofold nature of the poetic mechanism is worth repeating. Shklovsky's poet-artist consciously constructs paradoxical, often self-refuting structures in order to explore the paradoxical nature of experience.

Kathleen Marie Higgins found Nietzsche's use of aphorisms as an “authorial strategy” to be “particularly good at provoking the ongoing activity of revaluation that Nietzsche encourages”. (Higgins 2006, 416)

These poetic structures or ‘internal models of the world’ (created by the poet-artist to ‘recognize’ and ‘orient himself’ in the world—but which inevitably fracture in some manner on contact) give us access to his artistic perception which is “formed on the basis of a strained perception, as if through inspiration”. (Shklovsky 1970, 283)

“According to Proust, the function of the work of art is to permit the observer/reader to partake in the consciousness of the artist”

Ostranenie (estrangement) then becomes familiar to us both:

Ostranenie is the sensation of surprise felt toward the world, a perception of the world with a strained sensitivity. The term can be established only by including the notion of “the world” in its meaning. (283)

In the account of Einstein cited by Shklovsky, a more spontaneous version of this mechanism was shared by science. It also triggered the scientist to *wonder*. As Murphy lamented, science has increasingly shifted away from this mode.

Shklovsky observes: “Science avoids the act of wondering, it tries to overcome the element of surprise. Art preserves it.” (284)

“...falling with the stone, flying with the bird”

Black Boxes Breathing

When science wants to forget that it can be surprised it formulates ‘black boxes’.

When scientists lack understanding of (or do not need to understand) some part of a larger system in their experiment, they schematize it as a ‘black box’—it cannot be seen into. ‘Grey boxes’ are partially understood. The content of ‘white’ or ‘glass boxes’ is considered entirely visible and understandable.

We increasingly live in one large glass box. Crary's ‘24/7’ brightens it further with incessant surveillance and activity: “interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing within some telematic milieu” (15). This experiment—“the calculated maintenance of an ongoing state of transition” (37)—runs without pause, as we do. But we know:

Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood... The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. (Emerson 1841, 265)

Considering this and returning to Gielen's metaphors—the endlessly open waters, the shapelessness and mist of the network—an apparently stark inside-outside dialectic is

called for. Both Gielen (90) and Murphy (2007, 22) underscore the critical importance of Jamesian “resting-places”, critical importance to creativity of *disconnecting temporarily*. Gielen elaborates further, of citing Plato, Richard Sennett and Paolo Virno who stress “the importance of perchings, ‘unsocial’ behavior as a precondition for creativity.” Echoing Flusser’s ‘exile’, Gielen sees the key to generating creativity lying in “the oscillation between flights a social environment and isolation”, in temporarily withdrawing from the dominant frenzy culture to ‘islands’. (91)

One must breathe. you’re hysterical—make a breath. Starvation is not just the fate of those stuck on islands—nor suffocation that of those sealed in opaque boxes. Bruno Latour warns that “transparency and immediacy are bad for science as well as politics: they would make both suffocate.” Latour points to the longstanding fallacy of full transparency in political representation— transparency: “How can architects continue to sell this line?” —efficient, flawless communication. New forms integrating opacity and delay are called for. (Latour 2005, 11;16) “Like all things in architecture,

The lesson of the poetic is that this will not come naturally—it will take openness and closure conscious effort, intentioned design and constant cultivation. only matter if they can assist man in his alternating inclination towards inside and outside.”

Conceptualizing and valuing spaces of incommunicability while designing the *interruptibility* of their reciprocal relations with communicability becomes the primary task of ‘dialogical design’. The challenge of brea t h i n g black boxes is the architecture of their porosity—the functionality and qualities of..... their openings, their thresholds—their breathing mechanisms. objects

The poet-artist-architect adds a new vocabulary of black boxes. Internally- controlled apertures modulate visibility, autonomy, integration, autonomy, hiding the formula, participation, observation, difference, indifference, otherness...—in ways . . . every day . . . reassembling the crooked timber. . . . impenetrable to glass boxes.

References

Bachelard, G. 1994(1958). *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
 Breton, A. 1990(1932). *Communicating Vessels*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
 Breton, A. 1994(1928). *Nadja*. New York: Grove Press.
 Crary, J. 2013. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London and New York: Verso.
 Eisenberg, E.M. 1984. Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. In: *Communication Monographs*, 51, p 227-242.
 Eitner, L. 1955. The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism. In: *The Art Bulletin*, 37, No 4, p 281–290.
 Emerson, R.W. 1841. Circles. In: Turpin, E.H.L, ed., 1907. *Essays*. New York: Charles E. Merrill Co. Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm>, 2014-11-29.
 Epstein, R. 2004. Consciousness, art, and the brain: Lessons from Marcel Proust. In: *Consciousness and Cognition*, 13, p 213–240.
 Flusser, V. 2011(1985). To Scatter. In: *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

- Flusser, V. 1984. Exile and Creativity. In: Ströhl, A., ed. 2002. *Writings*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gielen, P. 2013. *Creativity and other Fundamentalisms*. Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund.
- Higgins, K.M. 2006. Rebaptizing our Evil: On the Revaluation of All Values. In: Pearson, K.A., ed. *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing.
- Latour, B. 2005. From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: An Introduction to Making Things Public. In: Latour, B. and Weibel, P., eds. *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- Murphy, P. 2013. The Creativity Collapse. Agnes Heller Lecture.
- Murphy, P. 2007. 'You Are Wasting My Time': Why Limits on Connectivity are essential for Economies of Creativity. In: *University of Auckland Business Review*, 9, No 2, p 17-26.
- Peck, J. 2005. Struggling with the Creative Class. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29, p 740-770.
- Pinchevski, A. 2011. Bartleby's Autism: Wandering along Incommunicability. In: *Cultural Critique*, No 78, p 27-59.
- Rancière, J. 2008. Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community. In: *The Emancipated Spectator*. London and New York: Verso.
- Rancière, J. 2009(2004), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rothbard, M.N. 1979. The Myth of Efficiency. In: Rizzo, M., ed. *Time, Uncertainty, and Disequilibrium*, Lexington: DC Heath.
- Shklovsky, V. 1970. *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*. Champaign, Dublin and London: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Shklovsky, V. 1990(1925). Art as Technique. In: *Theory of Prose*. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Tanizaki, J. 1977(1933). *In Praise of Shadows*. Stony Creek: Leete's Island Books.
- Van Eyck, A. 1956. On inside and outside space. In: Ligtelijn et al., eds. 2008. *Aldo van Eyck: Writings: Collected Articles and Other Writings 1947-1988*, 2, Amsterdam: SUN Publishers.
- Witkovsky, M.S. 2003. Dada Breton. In: *October*, 105, p 125-136.
- Wheelwright, P. 1959. *Heraclitus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, I.M. 1990. City Life and Difference. In: *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.