Before the Idiot, the Poet? Aesthetic Figures and Design.

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the aesthetic figure of the poet and considers how it can complement and combine with the conceptual persona of the idiot as a means to enhance the speculative in epistemic design practices. Employing a case study involving engagement with energy-demand reduction communities by way of a designed research device, the chapter considers how aesthetics invites questions around affect, feeling and the perceptible and how knowing and concomitant epistemic questions are prefaced by aesthetics. That is to say, what we know is always preceded by what we feel – that something must be felt before it can be known. Crucially, the chapter invokes a particular non-bifurcated, more-than-human understanding of aesthetics, drawing on A.N. Whitehead, where affect, experience and feeling are fundamental to the immanent becoming of all entities and phenomena and not simply the extraneous preserve of human actors. The chapter proposes that the role of the poet is to protest against the exclusion of such aesthetics from knowledge practices and to elicit a speculative sensibility and attunement toward the possibilities of the production of existence and new aesthetic values, in this case involving design and experiments in living with energy, technology and the environment.

Introduction

In a number of recent writings, the conceptual persona of the idiot has been held up as means for opening up the meanings of practices and knowledges presupposed by various practitioners, notably academics and designers (e.g. Michael, 2012b; Wilkie et al. 2015, Tironi, 2018). However, for the idiot to operate in this way, we argue, it requires certain qualities and capacities, not least those that modulate or mitigate its more extreme or disruptive guises. In what follows, we explore one particular means to such modulation, namely the figure of the poet. This figure, we shall argue, allows us to think how the idiot can be productive in terms of resourcing the design process, both at the level of designing artefacts and methods, and at the level of engaging with participants. Central here is the idea that the poet enables a "possession by the richness of the world" – that is to say, a capacity to become attuned to the world in its complexity and becoming. In what follows, we begin with an account of the idiot and the design uses to which it has been put. But we also document a number of the ways in which the idiot has had to be modulated in order to function as a figure that slows down thought and opens up potentiality. In this regard, we consider how the conceptual persona and aesthetic figure can be combined to enhance the speculative in design processes.

The idiot: tool or tool?

In Stengers' (2005) *Cosmopolitical Proposal*, the figure of the idiot, drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) discussion of conceptual personae, is assigned the role of slowing down the thinking of practitioners who are involved in composing common worlds. As such, the idiot prompts practitioners to resist consensual ways in which circumstances and emergencies present themselves, mobilising reasoning and action. However, rather than offer a solution or explanation, the idiot merely invites those

involved in modern science and its attendant politics to pause and reappraise the common worlds in whose construction they are participating: "the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know" (Stengers 2005: 995). In design, this means that the idiot, embodied in for example cultural probes (Gaver et al. 1999) or speculative devices (Wilkie et al. 2015; Wilkie and Michael, 2018) that are playful, non-functional, open-ended, obscure, and so on, can encourage research participants to rethink their usual ways of thinking and to question standard forms of practice (e.g. Michael, 2012a). However, these idiotic artefacts don't always perform in this way. They often misbehave.

If the idiot is a tool in relation to design, let us reflect on the dual meaning of 'tool'. On the one hand it is an object that allows certain tasks to be accomplished. On the other, in a different colloquial idiom, a tool is a derogatory term that points to someone who over-estimates their talent, cleverness or amiability and behaves in ways that they think make them appear talented, clever or likable, but ironically have the opposite effect of making them appear ridiculous and less congenial. Synonyms include 'prick', 'dick', or 'schmuck', where shmuck can also be a synonym for idiot.[1,2] The point here is that the idiot is not straightforwardly an asset to the speculative design process. To be sure, the obscurity of an idiotic research device might prompt less speculation, and more rejection. For instance, let us consider the Home Health Monitor (Gaver et al. 2009): in brief this entailed a series of sensors installed throughout a home that detected a range of physical conditions and their frequency of occurrence (e.g. whether a door was opened or shut over a period of time, whether a sofa was used, etc). These measures served as indices of particular domestic situations such privacy, social intimacy, cleaning. The sensor data was translated into a range of aphorisms, photographs, and depictions of daily metrics. Rather than engage playfully with these obscure 'products' of the sensor measures to re-think the 'health' of the home, the participants focused on the accuracy of the outputs. In essence the participants did not really see the point of the project. For Gaver et al. (Ibid.), this lack of engagement could be attributed to a range of factors which can be boiled down to the sense that the system afforded few meaningful experiences within a particular domestic setting (see Michael, 2016).

Here, we see how an idiotic design was tool-like, meaning that it was too 'clever' – too opaque -– for its users, and tended to push them toward a reaction against it. After all, we should not forget that even the idiocy of the naïve Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's (2004 [1868]) *The Idiot*, rarely precipitated an 'appropriate' engagement, but served to re-trench the prejudices and status-seeking of his various interlocutors. The question that follows, then, is what is 'required' to render the idiot a tool of speculative intervention?

In their final adventure in thought, *What is Philosophy?,* Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 65) draw a sharp distinction between *conceptual personae* and *aesthetic figures*. Where conceptual personae refer to the capacity of concepts to elicit beings into thought, as it were, providing what they call a 'Thought-being' and, as such, play a key role in the philosopher's repertoire of creative reasoning, aesthetic figures designate processes of experience that operate on and in (political) compositions. If conceptual personae exceed commonsensical understanding, then aesthetic figures have the power to go beyond customary or mundane experience, affect, and objects of perception. In accordance with this contrast between conceptual personae and aesthetic figures, we can see how Stengers' version of the conceptual persona of the idiot has its impact on thought – rendering a greater ideational creativity through its non-sensicalness that prompts both a slowing down and a questioning of the thinker's (or the practitioner's) authority to believe they "possess the meaning of what they know" (Stengers 2005: 995).

This is depicted as primarily an epistemic process. The idiot is predisposed to questions of knowledge, of what 'we' know. But as we have seen, the idiot can dis-able this creative and questioning thought because it is the wrong sort of tool. This should come as no surprise. The idiot – in its murmuring – can be hugely threatening, not only to one's commonsensical thoughts or habitual ways of thinking, but to thinking *per se*. The idiot can be dangerous as well as intriguing, threatening as well as promising. Here we glimpse the essentially affective dimensions of the idiot: it has in operate at a particular affective register in order to function as the right sort of (speculative) tool.

The poet's feeling

There are numerous ways in which the affective underpinnings of the idiot's functionality can be entertained. Consider the case of the Energy Babble, a research device designed to broadcast more or less nonsensical talk about matters concerning energy demand and its reduction (see Boucher et al. 2018: for details about its design and implementation). The purpose here was to encourage, in its various users and audiences, speculations about the nature of energy-related information, the parameters of community, the delineations of the future, and the complex and unfolding meanings and practices around energy and energy-demand reduction. However, its idiotic 'useability' had to be affectively shaped and designed. As part of making the Babble device feel less alien and more 'relatable', it had to be instrumentalised. This meant downplaying its more speculative dimensions and emphasising its more utilitarian capacities. As Wilke and Michael (2018) document, this included portraying the Babble as, amongst other things, an energy saving appliance, as a means of solving problems, and as a marketing tool. In tempering the idiocy of the Energy Babble in these ways, rendering it more approachable, people could draw on what was left of that in-built idiocy, engage with it in a speculative fashion.

In partial contrast to this partial instrumentalisation of the speculative design device (see below), we can explore a different mode of affectively rendering a speculative intervention more accessible that focuses on aesthetics. Here, we take aesthetics as inviting us to ask different kinds of questions, of what we 'feel' and what is perceptible. As above, we assume that epistemic questions are prefaced by aesthetic questions: what we know is always preceded by what we feel, or at least, what we *can know* requires the semblance of what we feel. We have to *feel* something before we can *know* it.

In seeking a pertinent aesthetic figure that can 'support' and make workable a conceptual persona, we turn to the poet. We ask how the poet and their poetry can set up the conditions that allow the idiot to do its idiotic work – to slow thought, to trouble the authority "to believe we possess the meaning of what we know". Heidegger (1971) sees poetry as a means to engaging with the complexities of dwelling, where dwelling entails the recovery of our 'home' – our relation to the world - that has been corrupted by technologization and instrumentalized as a 'standing reserve', that is, a mere means (Heidegger, 1977). Of course, there is much to be critical about this schema: what world precisely are we talking about? is technology not intrinsic to humans (see Michael and Gaver, 2009). But in drawing upon poetry, Heidegger usefully suggests that by virtue of its unkempt relation to representation, its paucity of transparency, it affords possession by the richness of the world. But, if the poet's works provide affective access to the richness of the world, in what does that richness consist? In keeping with the speculative turn in philosophy and the social sciences (Halewood, 2011; Stengers, 2011; Savransky, 2016; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Debaise, 2017; Wilkie et al. 2017) we regard this richness as encompassing complexity, multiplicity, heterogeneity, becoming and virtuality. If the poet and poetry can affectively convey sensibility toward this richness of the world, evoking "a vivid feeling of what lies beyond words" (Whitehead, 1968 [1938]: 50), then this suggests that the idiot can operate more effectively.

In becoming sensitized to the figure of the poet, as an aesthetic persona, we can also begin to discern another, more thought-provoking, and for our purposes, promising understanding of aesthetics – a version that has been eclipsed since the success of Immanuel Kant and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in establishing the foundations of modern aesthetic thought (Sehgal, 2018: 114). Here, we follow Sehgal's critical account of the bifurcation of aesthetic reasoning. This split is engendered by the bifurcation of nature (Whitehead, 2004 [1920]: 30), where aesthetics is designated a special domain and compartmentalised into the experiencing and expressive (human) subject and the aesthetic 'art' object. By contrast, Whitehead provides a radically alternative and generalized version of aesthetics where aesthetic 'values' are fundamental to the becoming of events and, as echoed in Guattari's 'new aesthetic paradigm' (Guattari, 2006 [1992]: 91), in the very production of existence. The paragon of Whitehead's version of aesthetics can be found in the figure of the poet, and more specifically the romantic poet.[3] Wordsworth is particularly singled out, as it is he who bears "witness that nature cannot be divorced from its aesthetic values; and that these values arise from the cumulation, in some sense, of the brooding presence of the whole in its various parts" (Whitehead, 1997 [1925]: 87-88).[4] For Whitehead, then, aesthetics is not predicated upon the experiencing and judging human subject nor a special category of objects imbued with beauty or the sublime, but rather upon the generalized and 'creative' production of existence where all entities have the capacity to feel and be affected. In other words, aesthetic values are not conferred on the world, but are immanent to its situated becomings as entities preferentially feel other entities and, in the process, concresce to generate new entities. Here lies the richness of the world, and the poet's role is partly to 'protest' against the exclusion of such aesthetic values and the plethora of feelings from matters of fact (or for that matter, matters of concern and care). More positively, the function of the poet is to invite a speculative sensibility toward the possibilities of the production of existence and the values and practices entailed therein. Put baldly, the poet evokes the richness of the world in its heterogeneous, unfolding, aesthetic complexity that lies at the heart of even the seemingly most straightforward observation.

We can unpack this further by drawing on Savransky's (2020) account of immanent aesthetic values. If, crudely, the poet more or less gently evokes the richness of the world, and the idiot confrontationally posits the possibility of that untapped richness, Savransky suggests a way of accessing that richness. By attending to aesthetic values, we can engage with that richness understood as 'the plurality and manners of living and how these interoperate and interplay with other ways of being in … an 'ecology of values' (ibid. 7). From this, we can take it that aesthetic values – the feelings for, resonances with, relationalities to – are what the idiot gestures enigmatically and troublingly toward, and that the poet mitigates through evocation. But, of course, we are arguing for the idiot as a useable tool, one rendered useable through the poet, as it were. Savransky's suggestions, is that this useability – the right sort of toolness – can be found in particular forms of experimentation. In other words, the task, that incorporates both poet and idiot, becomes one of experimenting *with* others' practices of existence, recognising the values at play and appreciating – as grasping and recognising the worth – of such values. But this is a proactive process precisely because experimental practices are engaging with aesthetic values as they are being concretely recomposed and redefined.

In the next section, we consider this nexus of figures and relations in more practical terms. Specifically, community engagement with, and involvement in, novel energy-demand reduction practices provides a case in which new aesthetic values and modes of living are being cultivated, tested, trialled and negotiated. Can we find examples where before the idiot, the poet does their work? Or can we re-think cases where a poetical component might have allowed the speculative design's idiocy to have taken a more fruitful – that is, experimental – hold? Can we rethink aspects of the Energy Babble, as a

'speculative design', in terms of its poetical components and content – that operate to allow the device to work 'better' as a speculative device to engages aesthetic values.

Energy-demand reduction and aesthetic values
Let us take stock. We are suggesting that the poet mitigates the potential threats posed by the challenges of the idiot by hinting at the range of immanent aesthetic values (that together comprise the richness of the world). In the case of the Energy Babble, its idiocy was mitigated by a rather impoverished poet, as it were: an instrumentalized enactment of the Babble served only to point to a few, rather familiar aesthetic values. Specifically, these took the form of feelings for, resonances with, relationalities to such elements as practical modes of energy demand reduction, or commonsensical notions of 'energy community' rather than the opening up to more inventive notions of energy demand reduction, or more atypical conceptualisations of community. So, the poet was at work in rendering the Babble's idiocy palatable. However, our argument is that poet can also support such idiocy to be exciting, promising, expansive. Just as we discussed above in relation to the 'tool', there are 'bad' (debilitatingly threatening) idiots as well as 'good' idiots, so there are 'bad' as well as 'good' poets.

In retrospect, and in light of the foregoing, the problem we faced is how practically to introduce the 'good' poet and idiot so that speculative engagement with energy demand reduction becomes a possibility. Drawing on Savransky's suggestion of a particular version of 'experimentation', the Babble might have been, for example, accompanied by a more proactive presence of the researchers in the energy communities: their (poetical) co-presence and (poetical) articulation of the Babble might have served to generate discussion about the participants' aesthetic values while at the same time directing them toward the aesthetic values enabled by the Babble, in the process concretely recomposing and redefining them.

But this should give us pause. As Savransky hints, there is an ecology of values at play. The experimental interventions of the poetic-idiotic Babble must locate themselves within, and to some extent reconfigure, this ecology. The issue, as we have written elsewhere (Wilkie and Michael, 2018), is that this ecology entails aesthetic values that are shaped by such factors as, for instance, the need to compete against other energy communities (necessitated by the structure of the energy-reduction funding process). In some respects, it is difficult to imagine how our speculative design intervention can have purchase in such an ecology in which longstanding values seem paramount. And yet, the very fact that our project was invited into energy communities suggests that perhaps the poetic-idiotic Energy Babble did offer attractive aesthetic values or engender the reappraisal of existing values. Most obviously, participation in our project offered a reframing of the energy community as one especially willing to innovate and collaborate in pursuit of energy demand reduction – to re-situate itself within the ecology of values (including advantageously within the competitive landscape of energy communities). Perhaps less obviously, our speculative research project offered another aesthetic value – one of simply doing 'something different' from the usual social scientific participation (energy communities have been some of most studied groups in the UK – Clark 2008). It was its very otherness that was attractive.

But again, we should proceed cautiously. The term aesthetic values connotes something tangible in the sense that 'the feeling for, the resonance with, the relationality to' has a substantive degree of discreteness, demarcation. What the poet-idiot does is not so much identify, indicate or even implicate an aesthetic value so much as hint, suggest, insinuate. It plants a seed of a value, occasioning the (com)possibility of crystalising new experiences, feelings, practices and knowledge. New aesthetic values might not have been apparent in the responses we received when we returned to talk to those

participants who had lived with the Energy Babble, but perhaps down the line – in the absence of the stream of barely intelligible talk – an aesthetic value takes shape, a feeling for a feeling emerges as it were. The experiment yields not a result but the prospect of a result.

Concluding Remarks

What we hope has become clear, in the above, is that idiotic design, as a tool in staging and engaging in epistemic practices, affords practitioners the prospect of experimentally accessing the complex ecologies of aesthetic values immanent to practices of existence – in this case communities engaged in novel forms of energy-demand reduction. The relevance of this lies not merely in the production of knowledge of and about others' knowledge, so to speak, but in how the interplay of values undergirds what we know and can know as well as the possibility of bearing witness to or seeding new modes of valuation. Indeed, our case suggests that those involved in experiments in living with the environment – of actively reconfiguring the relationships between nature, energy-technology and practices of living – where established ecologies of aesthetic values are *in* play and undergoing processes of re-evaluation are precisely the settings where the figure of the poet aids the appraisal of more-than-human possibilities begotten by the idiot.

Endnotes

[1] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Tool

[2] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Schmuck

[3] It goes without saying that we are keenly aware that Whitehead, as a person of his times, draws upon the figure of the romantic poet that is embodied as white, western and male, and oftentimes practically enabled by the female (Day 1996). There are, of course, "other great figures of aesthetic thought" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 65) that make perceptible new compositions and formations of existence, be they witches (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: xviii), or fugitives (Moten 2018) for instance.

[4] It is not without quite some irony that Whitehead (1997 [1925]: 54), lamenting on the "practical outcome" of modern scientific reasoning based on the bifurcation of nature, exhorts poets to "address their lyrics to themselves…" to "…turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind."

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