

# What's Pain Got to do With Design

By Komal Sharma

BASED ON *THE BODY IN PAIN: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE HUMAN BODY*, by Elaine Scarry. This paper will attempt to make the inherent, more obvious. Scarry's book is broadly about the politics of torture and war, and more specifically about the making and unmaking of the human body. In her exploration of pain lies a talisman for designers and this paper's endeavor is to interpret and fine-tune that for a design-oriented reader. With the backdrop of *The Body in Pain*, this paper will primarily focus on the chapter *The Interior Structure of the Artifact*, since that is of direct relevance to designers.

## **NATURE OF PAIN**

Pain is an absolute, universal reality of all human life. It overarches pretty much everything else. It demands an urgency that is singular and unflinching. When one is in pain, there is no other reality, no other priority, no other agenda but to relieve that pain. And design, in some measure, may be

seen as trying to find antidotes to all kinds of sufferings. If, in fact, design's agenda is to relieve suffering of some kind, it seems natural to start at understanding the nature of suffering.

Scarry's discourse on the nature of pain begins at its ability to destroy language, or the inability of the one in pain to articulate it. Scarry quotes Virginia Woolf to express its "unsharability":

"English," writes Virginia Woolf, "which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear has no words for the shiver or the headache.... The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language runs dry. ... Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."

The fact that a designer cannot understand another's pain by means of language—let alone feel its intensity physically—implies that he or she cannot measure it effectively. Which consequently means that his/her intervention comes from an imagined pain. That might be the closest we can get to the nature of pain, but it is often problematic because of another peculiarity of the nature of pain. Misunderstanding pain can completely turn the conclusion, on its head. It creates the 'antithesis.' One can miss the obvious and ascribe it with reasoning that is not only just alternative but possibly an inverse of the truth. That is a pitfall most designers would dread. This paper is based on the belief that the problems of perception are the biggest problems facing designers.

Scarry gives several examples of this misreading, of which one is reproduced here:

...in the young, industrial world described by Marx, the exclusion of the women and men who are the *creators* of made objects from the benefits of those objects is perceived as resulting from their inferior creativity (spiritedness, interest in education, capacity to create good lives, capacity for risk-taking and adventure).... The recurrence of such inverted descriptions suggests the existence of a general phenomenon....(which is)....as

physical pain destroys the mental content and language of the person in pain, so it also tends to appropriate and destroy the conceptualization abilities and language of persons who only observe the pain.

As Scarry continues to diagnose and describe the workings of pain for the benefit of the observer, there is an agenda for design as well. If a designer were to approach pain with this knowledge gained about it, there could be a better, more equipped game plan to fight it. If they were to be well versed with the dynamics of pain, they would be in a better position to eliminate it or work around it. Even figuring out *how* to tackle pain—whether to eliminate the origin or relieve it by a more acupunctural approach—would have more clarity.

## ***POLITICS OF PAIN AND DESIGN***

The premise of *The Body in Pain* is rooted in case studies of torture and war. By doing that, Scarry has lifted pain out of a strictly medical context and given it a human and a political context. She looks at political events like war and brings the reader closer to the need for political justice in their creations or interventions.

War is an event that has marked most

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of human history. Torture is coloured as politically correct if looked at as a tool of ‘information gathering.’ Scarry reveals our inability to understand such complex issues, let alone solve them:

That war, relentlessly centered in the reciprocal activity of injuring and only distinguishable from the other means of arriving at a winner and loser by specific nature of injury itself, should so often be described as though injuring were absent from or, at most, secondary to its structure, again indicates the ease with which our descriptive powers break down in the presence of a concussive occurrence, and may lead one to worry how we can set about to answer ethically complex questions about war when even the phenomenology of the event so successfully eludes us.

The case studies of torture and war become relevant here because design inherently is about political justice. Even before one begins to solve something, they have to first assess the contours of the situation, understand the context, find out who is benefited and who is hurt by it. Every choice then made is political. Scarry says, “it is hard not only to assess the ‘rightness’ and wrongness” of what is taking place but even to perform the much more elementary task of identifying, descriptively, what is taking

place.”

Scarry is clearly aware of our collective ignorance about the nuances of making and unmaking. She says, “Knowledge about the character of creating and created objects is at present in a state of infancy.” Yet in doing so, she acknowledges that there is a bigger purpose of design. If design were to be seen as something that holds the capacity to bring order to the world, if it can deliver political justice, as opposed to mere making of an object, then the reading of pain—which is political, overarching, experiential—becomes even more logical.

After getting a sense of the nature of unmaking/pain, let us consider the opposite end of the spectrum—making or creation.

### ***THE MEANING OF MAKING***

Though the title of the chapter under consideration includes the word “artifact”, it must not be confused as design for a singular product. Scarry’s conception of design is design as a process: “making making,” as she puts it.

She makes a clear distinction:

Torture and war are not simply occurrences which incidentally deconstruct the made world but occurrences which deconstruct the structure of making itself;

*Leg Splint, Ray and Charles Eames, 1942 | The Eames' design of the leg splint was made during World War II as a solution to the existing leg splints that were made with metal, a material that caused additional pain to the wounded at the slightest jolt. The molded plywood form, sculptural yet functional proved to be a sound design for it was modular, lightweight and the design allowed openings for bandages and strapping.*

conversely, western religion and materialism suggest that ongoing work of civilization is not simply making x or y, but “making making” itself, “remaking making,” rescuing, repairing, and restoring it to its proper path each time it threatens to collapse into, or become conflated with, its opposite.

Scarry goes on to elucidate how manmade design is a projection of human body parts. The bandaid mimics skin, the camera works on the principle of the human eye lens, Freud’s phallus has all kinds of references. She takes it a notch higher and shows how objects are projections of human attributes. She says: “The printing press, the institutionalized convention of written history, photographs, libraries, films, tape recordings, Xerox machines are all materializations of the elusive embodied capacity for memory.”

All such projections have an underlying message—that the basic tendency of all creation is to project itself. For instance, when a poet projects their aliveness onto inanimate objects like a river or a sunset, it suggests that it is trying to project its own aliveness onto inanimate objects.

Scarry says:

To, finally, conceive of the body as “aliveness” or “awareness of aliveness” is to reside at last within the felt-experience of sentience...” She continues to argue, “and it is this most interior phenomenon, that is in some very qualified sense projected out onto the object world.

In this transfer of sentience, there is a very ephemeral but crucial idea for designers to grasp. On one hand is human creation that pretty much makes up the built world, on the other hand is physical pain that leads to the destruction, the unmaking of the human world.

And if this paper were to imagine the designer being a bridge between these two shores, then their role would be one of mediator. One may argue that a designer creates only the artificial world. But this artificial world resides within the natural world. It would be naïve to think that the built world exists in its own vacuum. It lives within the natural world and the natural world is not the most sentient of beings. Its capacity to inflict pain is quite unforgiving and inevitable.

Scarry notes:

The naturally existing world—whose staggering powers and beauty need



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not be rehearsed here—is wholly ignorant of the “hurtability” of human beings. Immune, inanimate, inhuman, it indifferently manifests itself in the thunderbolt and hailstorm, rabid bat, smallpox microbe, and ice crystal.

Let’s face it. Pain isn’t going anywhere. It is here to stay. It marks every point of human life, even the most joyous occasions—like birth. John Berger, in his poetic essay, *The White Bird*, captures the role of pain and how it plays out in a life that is lived amidst a harsh nature.

“Urban living has always tended to produce a sentimental view of nature. Nature is thought of as a garden, or a view framed by a window, or as an arena of freedom. Peasants, sailors, nomads have known better. Nature is energy and struggle. It is what exists without any promise. If it can

be thought of by man as an arena, a setting, it has to be thought of as one which lends itself as much to evil as to good. Its energy is fearsomely indifferent. The first necessity of life is shelter. Shelter against nature. The first prayer is for protection. The first sign of life is pain.” (Berger, 363)

With that backdrop, the role of the designer, and her/his ability to understand pain, becomes paramount. The designer interrupts, intervenes, and through his made objects mediates between the ‘hurttable’ humans and the indifferent nature.

Scarry continues:

The human imagination reconceives the external world, divesting it of its immunity and irresponsibility not by literally putting it in pain or making it animate but by, quite literally, “making it” as knowledgeable about human pain as it were itself animate in pain.

Consider a more design-oriented example. Scarry articulates the purpose of a chair, a blanket and a wall:

A chair, as though it were itself put in pain, as though it knew from the inside the problem of body weight, will only then accommodate and eliminate the problem. A woven blanket or solid wall internalize within their design the recognition of the instability of body temperature and the precariousness of nakedness, and only by absorbing the knowledge of these conditions into themselves (by, as it were, being themselves subject to these forms of distress), absorb them out of the human body. (288)

## ***THE ANSWER LIES IN THE QUESTION***

However, the inclination of this paper to insist on the understanding of pain is not just as an empathy-learning exercise, but because there is a real, tangible tool in there for designers. Scarry saves the best for last and arrives at the insight that within the perception of pain lies the wish to relieve it. And that's a great start. In other words, an answer to the problem lies within the problem. That could possibly be step-one in the design process that is geared towards finding a solution.

Scarry notes:

If one imagines one human being seeing another human being in pain, one human being perceiving another in discomfort and in the same moment wishing the other to be relieved of the discomfort, something in that fraction of a second is occurring inside the first person's brain involving the complex action of many neurons that is, importantly, not just a perception of an actuality (the second person's pain) but an alteration of that actuality (for embedded in that perception is the sorrow that it is so, the wish that it were otherwise.) Though this interior event must be expressed as a conjunctive duality, "seeing the pain and wishing it gone," it is a single percipient event in which the reality of pain and the unreality of imagining are already conflated. Neither can occur without the other: if the person does not perceive the distress, neither will he wish it gone...

In between this wishing away of pain and the actual elimination of pain lies the object, the designers' creation, the artifact. The object itself goes through two stages—the imagined object or 'making-up' and the realized object, 'making-real.' In this process, as an object is being imagined in the mind and as it is being configured physically, the awareness of the nature of pain gets transferred onto the inanimate object. A responsibility is embodied within its physical parts and that is why it can mediate between an indifferent natural world and a fragile human body.

Scarry shows how this embodiment of responsibility comes through not just in customized, thoughtfully made objects for *a* particular person's needs, but even mass-produced objects—if they were to say something in words—would be this: In Scarry's words, "...anonymous, mass-produced objects contain a collective and equally extraordinary message: Whoever you are, and whether or not I personally like or even know you, in at least this small way, be well."

Why is it that for an object to manifest a message, for a designer to create such a sentient object, one requires going through the visceral process of exploring pain? How does the inexpressibility of pain get metamorphosed into a designed artifact that alleviates a collective anguish? Especially at a time when technology is so seductive—simply for the scale of power of creation it allows for—what is it that can keep an object from being an alienated, technical device that is completely removed

from all human and natural reality?

Answers to such questions may be found in the seemingly unlikely pages of *The Body in Pain*.

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