

Revitalizing the rhetoric of ‘sustainability’: A Kenneth Burkean diagnosis of symbolic (dis)orders

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This paper offers a new perspective on the rhetoric of ‘sustainability’ especially within dialogue around ‘design for sustainability’ (DfS) by applying and advancing the work of twentieth-century rhetorical theorist and cultural critic, Kenneth Burke. Burke’s rhetorical theory is presented here for its potential to not only highlight but also transcend the common disjunction between theory and praxis that emerges in the ‘symbol-foolishness’ underpinning various forms of unsustainability. This paper presents Burke’s theory of symbolicity and discusses four key symbolic ‘disorders’ that he identified over the course of his career, namely, *hierarchic psychosis*, *technological psychosis*, *trained incapacity*, and *the bureaucratization of the imaginative*. In conclusion, this paper suggests how enhanced rhetorical literacy, or greater ‘symbol-wisdom’, could serve an important role in reviving the notion of ‘sustainability’ itself.

Keywords: Design for sustainability; sustainability rhetoric; terministic screen; symbolic disorders; Kenneth Burke.

Introduction

In much popular and scholarly discourse, the notion of ‘sustainability’ has become ‘unsustainable’ (Kearns 2016; King 2013; Mezzaqui 2018; Ozimek 2012). Having entered general vocabulary in relation to human-environmental interaction only in 1972 and since becoming increasingly part of everyday vocabulary (Goldsmith & Allen 1972; Kidd 1992), it has frequently been redefined and mythologized, and so has also become rhetorically ticklish (Calvelli 2007; Goldsmith & Allen 1972; Kidd 1992). Indeed, it is now one of our age’s clearest instances of ‘mere rhetoric’ (Holden 2010; Young 2006). Already in the late 1990s, Myers and Macnaghten (1998) noted that the increase in rhetoric around ‘sustainability’ was not often accompanied by behavioural shifts, and arguably this is still true. Far from inviting a deeper ontological engagement, ‘sustainability’

has often become a nominalist occlusion of the ontological. This has implications for design itself, especially where it reinforces what Arturo Escobar (2018, 70) refers to as a “dualist ontology of human dominance over nature”.

Because of this and its implications for ‘design for sustainability’ discourse (hereafter, DfS), this paper offers an engagement with the rhetoric of ‘sustainability’ in light of the work of rhetorical theorist and socio-cultural critic Kenneth Burke (1897-1993). This paper does not attempt to provide an in-depth exposition of DfS theory but introduces Burke’s rhetorical perspective on socio-cultural dynamics to reflect on how these may influence the rhetoric of (un)sustainability within design discourse and praxis. Keeping with Burke’s desire to expose subtle ways in which symbols construct meaning,ⁱ this paper focuses only on rhetoric, as that which informs perceptions and intentions, rather than on offering practical directives.

The central aim here is to adopt a Burkean approach to challenging the assumptions accompanying the rhetoric of sustainability and explore how perhaps the notion of ‘sustainability’ can be revitalized. Burke’s (1955, 287) advice is to systematically question the ‘symbolically-stimulated goads that are now accepted too often without question’. Since design products are significant ‘symbolic resources’ by which we ‘construct, reconstruct, and project our identities and social relationships’ (Thorpe 2010, 12), insight into human symbolicity is essential for addressing unsustainability.

Burke is only occasionally, usually briefly, mentioned in design discourse (Ehse 1984; Buchanan 2001; Boradkar 2006), primarily for his influence in expanding the field of rhetoric into new domains, including the visual (Gallagher, Martin & Ma 2011, 28). However, there have been no in-depth inquiries into Burke’s ideas from a design, or DfS, perspective. While Burke’s rhetorical theory has much to offer designers

and design scholars, a selection of his lesser-known concepts related to cultural criticism can be constructive for examining DfS issues, as we hope to show here.

In what follows, therefore, we introduce Burke's understanding of symbolicity, beginning with an exploration of how sustainability has become a 'god-term' and example of 'symbol-foolishness' before moving on to a discussion of the concept of a 'terministic screen.' Thereafter, we discuss four key symbolic disorders that Burke identified over the course of his career as they relate especially to DfS discourse, namely *hierarchical psychosis*, *technological psychosis*, *trained incapacity*, and the *bureaucratization of the imaginative*. In conclusion, we reflect on how new life might be breathed into the idea of 'sustainability' through a Burkean symbol-wisdom.

The symbol-foolishness of a god-term

If Burke were alive today, he may have recognized 'sustainability' as one of our time's most prominent 'god-terms'. For Burke, god-terms like 'freedom', 'progress', 'justice' and 'sustainability' are persuasive because they imply incontestably positive values and ideological motives within a culture (Burke 1961, 25). God-terms are potent not because of their definable meaning but because they arouse an uncritical *pathos* without directive. Being vague and malleable, however, god-terms can be co-opted to serve agendas unrelated to, or even at odds with, the concept's intended meaning.

Clearly the notion of sustainability within design discourse has not exactly been neglectedⁱⁱ and much encouraging work has been done in sustainable design since the mid-twentieth century. Still, a growing consensus holds that we are approaching a 'climate emergency' substantially driven by unsustainable consumption.ⁱⁱⁱ Designers recognize that designing more sustainable things changes things only incrementally and that more radical change to entire systems is required to avert disaster. Thus, DfS is increasingly understood as a complex, systemic and socio-technical challenge, rather than a

string of isolated technical problems (Ceschin & Gaziulusoy 2016). Still, our focus is less on the nature of the challenge than on the rhetorical problem of ‘sustainability’ in DfS itself.

While there has not been a ‘consensus’ on the ‘precise meaning’ of ‘sustainability’ even since the early days of its usage (Kidd 1992, 3), design scholars like John Ehrenfeld and Tony Fry argue that it has been hijacked by those who want to conduct ‘business almost as usual’ to grow profits while projecting an image of concern for ecology. Nevertheless, Ehrenfeld (in Ehrenfeld & Hoffmann 2013, 15) suggests that ‘sustainability’ is ‘misused when those who speak it and act in its name do not understand what it means’; it is also ‘abused when it is used by agents that know they do not understand it, but use it as an attempt to fool others into thinking they do’. Similarly, Fry (2003) believes that the ‘rhetoric of sustainability, with its quietism on unsustainability, is not only meaningless but lacks the possibility of ethical decision’. Consequently, ‘sustainability’ as an overused and misused god-term becomes impotent in contributing to real change.

To avoid terminological stagnation and to stop ‘sustainability’ from perpetuating an unsustainable status quo, both Fry and Ehrenfeld reconfigure the term as ‘sustainability-as-flourishing’ and ‘sustainability-as-flourishing’ respectively. In this, Fry (2003) stresses the ontological while Ehrenfeld (2013) emphasizes the ethical and ‘spiritual’ meaning of the term. In both, there is an awareness that the rhetoric around sustainability can affect, sometimes dramatically, what designers end up doing.

This awareness echoes that of Burke, who as a pioneer of the ecological movement (Coupe 2001), is interested in how both verbal and visual symbols shape beliefs, values and cultures, for better and worse. While he is critical of the dubious ends of rhetorical argumentation, his main interest is in understanding implicit forms of rhetorical

deception and ‘symbol-foolishness’. He thus identifies typical symbolic ‘disorders’ or ‘psychoses’ in socio-cultural attitudes and systems.^{iv} Burke’s critical vocabulary on symbol usage illuminates the symbolic character of ‘unsustainability’ and also somewhat explains why many well-meaning sustainability efforts are ineffective.

The troublous genius of symbolism^v

Man is
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)
and rotten with perfection.

Burke’s (1966, 16) above ‘definition of man’ is centered on the essential human propensity for symbol-using and symbol-abusing. For Burke, the experience of ‘reality’ is mediated and ordered through symbol systems. He asks, ‘What is our ‘reality’ for today [...] but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present?’ Burke believes most of our socio-political and environmental problems may be traced back to the naive perception of objectivity, which amounts to our lack of insight into the symbolic constitution of ‘reality’ as interpreted. Burke’s ‘definition’ is an admonition meant to create an awareness of how constructive symbolic abilities also potentially legitimate destructive attitudes and dysfunctional systems.

For Burke, ‘[t]here is an implied sense of negativity in the ability to use words at all. To use them properly, we must know that they are *not* the things they stand for’ (1966, 12). Burke thus seeks to highlight a paradoxical dynamic in symbol usage, namely that there is always continuity and discontinuity between the symbol and the

symbolised. This means symbols only ever provide partial expressions of experience insofar as the symbolic/metaphoric expression does not *equal* the experience.

Symbols are, in essence, distillations. This is what makes them useful. As Burke (1966, 5) explains, ‘a road map that helps us easily find our way from one side of the continent to the other owes its great utility to its exceptional existential poverty. It tells us absurdly little about the trip that is to be experienced [...] Indeed, its value for us is in the very fact that it is so essentially inane’. Representation, substitution and reduction are core principles of symbolicity. Any symbol derives its usefulness by representing a selective aspect of experience. Importantly, Burke wishes to highlight how this selective expression is a strategic and rhetorical act.

The presence of continuity and discontinuity in symbols opens up the possibility of their misuse especially because we tend to ‘cling to a kind of naïve verbal realism’ that inhibits the full realization of the extent to which symbols influence and manipulate us (Burke 1966, 5). One of the primary ways in which language ‘manipulates’ is simply by directing attention: towards something but also away from other things. Burke (1966, 45) refers to this attention framing mechanism as the *terministic screen*, describing how ‘any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, [but] by its very nature as a terminology it must be *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality’. For Burke, a ‘terministic screen’ refers to any symbolic lens or filter through which we view reality. It is, in other words, something that shapes what it is possible to conceive of as ontological and thus, in the design context, shapes how designers think about praxis. It is important to perceive how a given terministic screen might shape action, since, as Escobar (2018, x) observes, “[d]esign is ontological in that all design-led objects, tools, and even services bring about particular ways of being, knowing, and doing.”

As limitations of scope dealing with the impossibility of speaking about or showing everything in its simultaneous entirety, terministic screens are unavoidable, although ignorance of them is not inevitable. In fact, with an awareness of terministic screens, it is possible to imagine alternative rhetorical configurations. The major trouble with any terministic screen, though, and the main reason for needing to identify a terministic screen at all, is that it does not present itself as a screen; rather, it presents itself as a complete and unmediated reality. Our reliance on terministic screens helps explain one of the fundamental problems associated with rhetorically-affected unsustainability, namely *deflection*. Fry (2003) refers to this major barrier to sustainability as the inevitable ‘unknowing’ that ‘has always been a fellow traveller of knowledge’:

From the perspective of the still expanding condition of unsustainability, the most significant consequence of the continuation of unknowing has been a failure to realise [...] that creation is, and always has been, indivisible from destruction. Taken at its simplest, we humans destroyed trees to build ships (while failing to realise the consequences of the destruction of forests)

Fry (2011) further argues that design contributes to an ‘aesthetic of concealment’, whereby destruction is masked by beautiful form. In Burkean terms, design operates via a terministic screen that (over)emphasises aesthetic acts of creation, while deflecting attention away from destruction.

For Burke, a fundamental characteristic of human symbolicity, is the second-level or ‘reflexive capacity’ to ‘develop highly complex symbol systems about symbol systems’ (1966, 24). Design can be regarded as a second-level symbolic activity insofar as its processes involve symbolic articulations in the development of sketches, models, prototypes, and verbal communication. While it is possible to *make* rudimentary tools without needing to symbolically *design* such tools, such as when animals use sticks as tools to dig for insects, there can be no design without symbols. Advanced second-level

symbolicity leads to increased reflexivity or self-consciousness, which significantly affects technological development and design practice. The ability to discuss and evaluate design processes, prototypes, and products enables a distinctive, accelerated dynamic to emerge in the making process. As Cameron Tonkinwise (2005) explains, the ‘virtuality of sketching does not merely allow accelerated trial-and-error evolution, but enables a self-consciousness that promotes approaching situations in novel ways, even when not needed’. The reflexive evaluation of design, along with the continuous search for alternatives, is what makes design a useful and thriving industry. However, as Tonkinwise suggests, this impulse may also lead to unnecessary change and, by extension, unsustainable design.

As this intimates, symbolic reflexivity can be interpreted as potentially both furthering and hindering sustainability. Certainly, it is important to reflect deeply on the deflections that mask unsustainability. Still, the reflective impulse can lead to a discontent that drives insatiable desire. This dialectic between positive potential and dysfunction is central to Burke’s fascination with symbols and rhetorical action. Thus, he believes we should cultivate a ‘distrustful admiration’ of symbolicity that is mindful of how our symbolic capacity can develop into a range of pathologies if left unchecked.

Hierarchic psychosis and perfectionism

For Burke, a *hierarchic psychosis* is one of the primary negative consequences of human symbolicity. This is especially evident in the perfectionist tendency to agonise over defining a word—like ‘sustainability’—before it can be rendered functional. Burke’s claim that people are ‘goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)’ expresses his belief that symbolic order and the establishment of hierarchy are interconnected. Burke (1950, 276) explains how we are persuaded by the very logic of hierarchy insofar as it orders our reality, creates meaning and offers a sense of belonging.

This is neither positive nor negative but simply a fact; hierarchy is unavoidable. The hierarchic principle becomes a motivating force in society responsible for various aspirations and ambitions, as well as cultural and technological developments (Burke 1966, 15). However, Burke believes the unquestioning acceptance of symbolic hierarchies drives actions and behaviours beyond what would be considered reasonable upon deeper inspection.

Related to this hierarchic logic is the ‘principle of perfection’ that Burke (1966, 16) believes is ‘implicit in the nature of symbol systems’. For instance, a definition is meant to encapsulate the ‘perfect’ substance of a thing; but, for Burke, the ‘perfectionist tendency’ is a natural extension of linguistic expression and is the basic underlying principle for seeking ‘perfection’ in other areas of life. As the statement, ‘rotten with perfection’^{vi} highlights, perfectionism causes problems. For instance, on a purely linguistic level, absolutist and exaggerated claims are instances of this drive towards symbolic perfection (Burke 1961, 298). Speaking practically, Burke believes the perfectionist motive is extended into a persistent *entelechial* drive^{vii} which compels us to take whatever we say or do to ‘the end of the line’ or to its most perfect, logical conclusion. This tendency is obvious in utopian visions, as well as modernity’s drive towards progress and structural perfection.

Burke sees this entelechial drive or ‘perfectionist tendency’ as the root cause of other symbolic pathologies, insofar as any excessive or obsessive ‘order’ may become a ‘disorder’.^{viii} The entelechial principle explains how certain characteristics of one’s attitude may become overemphasised or ‘perfected’ at expense of other important values, leading to the development of a psychosis (Rueckert 1982, 38). The entelechial drive is responsible for much that goes wrong in the world since it compels people to follow

narrow trajectories regardless of whether the outcomes are beneficial or desirable. Understanding the persuasiveness of hierarchic order and the related drive towards perfection as embedded in our symbol-using nature helps to explain the persistent drive for progress and growth that is so highly unsustainable.

As mentioned previously, consumer goods constitute identities, interpersonal relations and social hierarchies. The hierarchic logic whereby ‘the new’ is automatically considered ‘better’ plays a central role in unsustainable design production and consumption (Van Hinte 2004; Jongerius & Schouwenberg 2015). As Stuart Walker (in Van Hinte 2004, 308-9) argues, technological developments in the modern industrial age, which emphasize continuous growth, ‘promote “the new” or “the latest” and encourage built-in obsolescence, create markets based on rapid style changes, and escalate the production of increasingly short-lived products’. He observes how ‘product aesthetics are often reduced to the superficial styling’ giving ‘the impression of newness and progress even though the hidden, functional parts remain unchanged’. Similarly, Duncan Reyburn (2008, 6) argues that design in the capitalist system frequently creates ‘a perceived hierarchy of difference where no actual hierarchy exists’. Design can thus potentially manipulate perceptions of value and is frequently critiqued for its role in overstimulating consumption. Unfortunately, sustainability easily gets dialectically subsumed into the hierarchically superior logic of the new, making it possible to have one’s ecological awareness undone by a hidden ‘logic’ of unsustainability. In this way, ‘sustainability’ can act as ideological disavowal which allows us to know very well what we ought to do without taking action (Reyburn 2013, 2-3).

Designers are further complicit in supporting unsustainability through their predilection for perfection. For instance, the obsessive adjustment of minute details is a

common design activity and the ‘perfectionist designer’ is somewhat of a cultural stereotype. As Tonkinwise (2014) notes, *Obsessive Compulsiveness* is the ‘least disputable’ of designers’ psychological disorders. He argues that the ‘excessive concern for detailing derives from design’s craft origins. But where [...] craftsmen celebrate the idiosyncrasies that result from each act of handiwork, including the inevitable imperfections, designers, being the makers of the models that would then be mass manufactured, are fastidious about perfection’.

While attention to detail may be a design virtue, ‘perfectionism’ as a vice also leads to waste. Walker (2000, 56) critiques the ‘[h]igh precision, close tolerances, and perfect finishes’ that designers strive for, arguing that ‘these are the priorities of a design and production system that is, by and large, unholistic—driven by economic rationalism, severely detrimental to natural systems, and often ethically questionable’. He proposes a shift in emphasis towards ‘good enough’ or ‘adequate’ products as a means to reduce resource consumption, waste and pollution. In Burkean terms, an obsessive compulsive drive for perfection is a problematic ‘terministic screen’ that *deflects* attention away from other important values. Perfectionism is part of what establishes false hierarchies of value within a culture of unsustainability. On this, Terri Irwin (2008, 3) asks a provocative question: ‘Can I, in good conscience, continue to teach my students to be concerned about fractions of millimetres between letters, given what’s going on in the world? Is it the design equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?’. Even the more subversive culture-jamming anti-consumerist movements fall into the same problems: almost nihilistically perpetuating a perfectionist rhetoric of sustainability, which involves expending much intellectual energy in an attempt to get the discourse right instead of generating workable strategies.^{ix}

Burke highlights the persistent underlying hierarchic *logic* whereby, for instance, concepts and theories in DfS discourse can become ‘ranked’. This becomes pathological if exaggerated since it can perpetuate rather than clear up rhetorical confusion. While designers are often found challenging mainstream hierarchies, they nevertheless perpetuate an excessively hierarchized understanding of design value which contributes to the widespread discontent surrounding what may be ‘good enough’. ‘Sustainability’ itself, as a term, may be an example of something ‘good enough’—not something that should be discarded as merely ‘unsustainable’.

Technological psychosis & hyper-instrumentalism

Burke explains how the capacity for second-level symbolicity enables the collaboration required to create a variety of advanced ‘instruments’, whether these are technological tools or socio-political systems. However, he believes this ability metastasizes into a *technological psychosis* that is ‘at the center of our glories and our distress’ (Burke 1954, 44). Technology, including the verbal technology of discourse, can be overstressed as the potential solution to all problems. In the process, technologies may provide ‘solutions’ to problems that do not exist.^x This leads to a negative by-product, namely the increased production of waste. In Burke’s critique of Fordist-style production, he remarks: ‘The more we learn to use what we do not need, the greater our consumption; the greater our consumption, the greater our production; and the greater our production, the greater our prosperity’ (Burke 1930). He also laments how production may be increased ‘by developing better methods of deterioration’. This shows an early critical awareness of the problematic practice of planned obsolescence. The contemporary manifestation of such efficient ‘deterioration’ is *aesthetic obsolescence*, whereby desire is stimulated for new product iterations before existing versions are functionally obsolete. Aesthetic obsolescence, as facilitated by design promotion and marketing

hype, contributes to a substantial amount of waste and is, unsurprisingly, a major point of design critique. While there are counter-movements promoting durability, these struggle to gain traction in part because they contradict the persuasive hierarchy and techno-logic of the contemporary market.

Another negative by-product of *technological psychosis* is alienation. Burke's above-mentioned 'definition of man' describes humans as *separated* from their natural condition by instruments of their own making. This technological alienation is nothing new but it still features strongly in contemporary sustainability discourse. For instance, Ehrenfeld believes technological devices can be barriers in our pursuit of sustainability. He speaks of experience being reductionistically mediated by technological devices that separate us from a larger view of what a meaningful life can be. Furthermore, he explains how technologies tend to separate actors from their acts in time and space, and how this 'separation increases the possibility of unintended consequences' (Ehrenfeld 2013, 23).

Various sustainability scholars reiterate Burke's belief that the unintended effects of technology stem from a reductionist, hyper-instrumentalist attitude, characterized by a fixation on utility and functional efficiency. This is affected by thinking erroneously that technology affects us only insofar as we are conscious of it—something countered by various thinkers, including Martin Heidegger (1977, 5), Ivan Illich (1973), and Marshall McLuhan (1964, 3-9). Burke (1981, 165) is particularly critical of the *instrumentalist fallacy* prevalent in techno-scientific fields, whereby 'any improvement in instruments or methods is to be evaluated solely in terms of its nature as that improvement'. In other words, the real-world implications of technological advancement are neglected in favour of 'objectively' measuring instrumental improvements. This hyper-instrumentalist attitude is problematic for Burke because it tends to transform all areas of

human society into ‘laboratories that test for the efficiency of processes’ without asking whether these processes lead to greater wellbeing (Hübler 2005).

Insofar as a modernist technocratic vision is criticised in DfS discourse, solutions in the form of ‘dematerialised’ design services are enthusiastically explored. However, designers often propose cutting-edge technological innovations as part of their solutions. While the overall reduction of ‘stuff’ is needed, designers ought to question whether they are promoting techno-optimism instead of a more holistic view of human flourishing as Ehrenfeld (2013, 23) does.^{xi}

Burke sees technological psychosis as a ‘mechanistic monomania, absorbed in itself and intent upon its own distorted view of the world, man, and human purpose’ (Rueckert 1982, 38). In terms of sustainability, the dominant technical rationality or technocracy ‘leads to a much-diminished view of the meaning of human existence and to many of the pathological conditions visited upon mankind’ (Ehrenfeld 2013, 18). This is because techno-scientific paradigms create a false sense of certainty in what we know about the world. A reductionist worldview, which is reinforced by a particular set of terministic screens, is perhaps one of the biggest barriers in our quest for sustainability. The unreflective, instrumental reason of techno-science is incapable of grasping, let alone effectively addressing, the crisis we are facing (Fry 2011, 3).

Burke’s proposed remedy for treating the *technological psychosis* is an increased emphasis on the humanistic, aesthetic and poetic, to counterbalance the techno-scientific. This is precisely how Burke’s rhetoric needs to be understood here—as an aesthetic-poetic expansion of a terministic screen. He argues that the aesthetic can serve as corrective by converting ‘each simplicity into a complexity’ and thereby prevent ‘expansionistic certainties [from] preparing the way for our social cataclysms’ (Burke 1931, 105). Burke’s proposal is echoed by sustainability theorists who call for a greater

awareness and appreciation of complexity, in the interaction between humans, technologies and ecological systems. As Ehrenfeld (2013, 20) explains, '[c]omplexity, itself, is not one of the root causes of unsustainability, but failure to recognize that social systems are complex is'.

Ehrenfeld and Walker, among others, clearly echo Burke's thinking when suggesting a renewed appreciation of 'spiritual' values as counteracting reductionist and instrumental perspectives. Note, however, that neither Burke nor the above sustainability scholars suggest that we 'reject' technology. However, as the above discussion highlights, 'sustainability-as-flourishing' requires a more critical attitude toward and rhetorical awareness of technology.

Trained incapacity and occupational psychosis

Another negative by-product of symbolicity explored by Burke is the manner in which limited perspectives, or terministic screens, become entrenched through training and habit, leading to *occupational psychosis*.^{xiii} Throughout his work, Burke is critical of disciplinary specialization, insofar as any specialization necessarily over-emphasizes certain perspectives while neglecting others. Burke (1955, 264) acknowledges the inevitability of this tendency, recognising also his own 'occupational psychosis' as a literary critic whereby he overemphasizes textual analysis. While specialization is not inherently problematic it has the potential to become problematic when too rigidly accepted as the only perspective worth paying attention to.

Burke (1950, 30) is especially critical of how disciplinary specialization furthers 'the characteristically liberal principle of occupational autonomy' in which one finds the 'naively pragmatist notion that practical specialized work is a sufficient grounding for morality'. This relates to the above critique of techno-scientific practice, where 'success' is gauged merely on the effective achievement of an isolated task. For Burke,

things go wrong when people separate their immediate specialized acts from their more general civic duty. From a design perspective, James Wang (2013, 14-5) echoes this idea when arguing that designers often ‘care for nothing but the intrinsic excellence of their actions’, explaining why transforming designers ‘into public servants is often difficult, if not impossible’.

Burke (1954, 49) borrows Thorstein Veblen’s related concept of *trained incapacity* to explain how ‘[a] way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B’. So, whatever an occupation is (in the broadest sense), becomes a preoccupation, leading to situations in which ‘one’s very abilities can function as blindnesses’ (7). For Burke, both *occupational psychosis* and *trained incapacity* describe the automatic perpetuation of certain thought-patterns, instilled through education or habitual practice. As a kind of tunnel-vision, they lead a person to ‘*state the problem in such a way that his particular aptitude becomes the “solution” for it*’ (242-3, italics in original). In other words, instead of responding to the problem in context, training and familiarity tend to dictate the solution.

Designers, as trained specialists, also have occupational tendencies. This means they tend to fixate on (and therefore also neglect) certain things precisely because of their professional constitution. The previously discussed perfectionist and obsessive compulsive tendencies, whereby designers identify and adjust minute aesthetic details, are instilled through training and custom. One might even argue that designers have the ‘trained incapacity’ to see the bigger picture amidst all this detail. Regardless of one’s personal assessment of designers’ shortcomings, it is important for designers themselves to reflect on how their occupational orientation may blind them to other important perspectives.

One could argue, of course, that designers are also trained to be critical and reflective practitioners with an inherent rejection of conventional thinking. Their training could therefore, paradoxically, be considered as antithetical to *trained incapacity* and *occupational psychosis*. Many practicing designers and prominent design theorists evidently share Burke's critical views on (over-)specialization, and design praxis itself, especially through design thinking and participatory research approaches. Calls for interdisciplinary collaborations between designers and experts in other fields, as well as with non-expert users, reflect an awareness of the dangers of isolated, specialized design practice. Nonetheless, while critical design discourse and practice continually challenge disciplinary conventions, such design innovations often support the perpetuation of a more general and pervasive (and unsustainable) commercial order. As Fry (2011, 76) argues, 'the design profession, in all its diversity, is unambiguously a service industry bonded to the economic *status quo*'. Similarly, as Thorpe (2010, 15) contends, 'design is a key cog in the wheel of consumerism' and '[m]any designers fall back on the idea of making consumerism "better".' As mentioned previously, this tendency to revert to 'business almost as usual' is considered a significant barrier to a sustainable future. Most 'sustainable development' efforts aim to lower impacts through technical efficiency, but offer only incremental and temporary remedies because they operate within an existing framework that prioritizes economic growth in keeping with a particular hierarchic psychosis.^{xiii}

Bureaucratization of the imaginative

Burke sees bureaucracy as a natural extension of the human tendency to create perfect order and hierarchy. Bureaucracies are pragmatic systems intended to create and enforce order through specialized division of labour, hierarchical structuring and rigid pro-

protocols. They are useful but also create frustrations. As Burke (1937, 314) argues, ‘government necessarily means bureaucratization; and bureaucratization eventually produces a preponderance of unwanted by-products’. Burke devises the concept of *bureaucratization of the imaginative* to discuss his concerns over bureaucracy (225). He delights in the unwieldy, onomatopoeic nature of the term, ‘since it sounds as bungling as the situation it would characterize’. It names the ‘vexing things that happen’ when an imaginative vision is embodied (Burke 1937, iii). Through institutionalized enforcement, bureaucracies tend to turn utopian ideals into dystopian realities.

It is possible to argue that imaginative visions of ‘sustainability’ have become bureaucratized, causing negative side-effects. For instance, the institutionalized sustainability missions of governments, environmental organisations and corporations, tend to emphasize quantitative metrics to gauge (and publicize) the success of their efforts. This tendency again reduces the complexity of the situation and creates a false sense of progress in systematically ‘solving’ the problem. As Fry (2003) argues, the project of ‘sustainment’, which is his attempt to rethink sustainability in ontological terms (Escobar 2018, 4), can only be furthered by rejecting the ‘false promise of the gestural, but ruling, model of “sustainability” that ends up sustaining unsustainability’. The procedural clutter of bureaucracies is easily mistaken for actual productivity, but it deflects attention away from the ultimate goal and destroys personal accountability.

Bureaucracies are rigid by design. Because bureaucratic systems and procedures are so difficult to adjust, they frequently outlive their usefulness. Bureaucratic approaches to sustainability are likely to suffer the same fate. For this reason, Ehrenfeld (in Ehrenfeld and Hoffmann 2013, 81) emphasises the dynamic ‘possibility’ of sustainability rather than its successful implementation. He describes how ‘canned solutions’

are usually part of the problem. Ehrenfeld and Fry, amongst other sustainability scholars, readily admit they do not have ‘the answer’ to the sustainability problem, although they believe such a position of humility is essential in working towards a future of flourishing. As Aidan Davison (2013, 54) suggests, the ‘raw yearning for the mystery of sustainability’ is preferable to the ‘technological pretence of its achievement’.

Conclusion: Towards symbol-wisdom for revitalizing sustainability

At the beginning of this article, we noted a problematic disjunction that still exists between talk of sustainability and the goals of DfS, and articulated some rhetorical dimensions of this problem. Burke’s work was then used to explore a more symbol-wise approach to engaging the rhetoric of sustainability. For Burke, the negative side-effects of human symbolicity can be mitigated by becoming more aware of how language frames conduct. One of Burke’s main goals is to draw attention to the manner in which symbols are necessarily reductionist and exclusionary; to highlight how ‘terministic screens’ are not only selective expressions but also deflections. To understand this is to view all communication as strategic and rhetorical. Burke believes that a thorough rhetorical education, characterised by a ‘critical-appreciative’ attitude of what symbols can *do* is essential to becoming ‘symbol-wise’. Such an attitude, explored here through Burke’s own provocative and playful use of language, enables us not only to be critics of rhetoric but also to develop the rhetorical skill of using language in more poetic, nuanced, and responsive ways. A fundamental part of Burke’s aim is to encourage greater reflexive insight into subtle forms of ideological persuasion, including hierarchic logics, perfectionism, technocratic thinking, and hyper-instrumentalism. He also wishes to draw attention to the perpetuation of thought-patterns and behaviors through training, occupational habit, and bureaucratic institutionalization.

Throughout this paper, the rhetorical posture suggested by the notion of ‘sustainability’ has been viewed through various ‘symbolic disorders’ identified by Burke. Burke’s critical vocabulary offers a valuable supplement to the current discourse on sustainability, for two reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges the tendency in symbolic action to become dysfunctional and thus allows us to better understand and empathize with well-meaning sustainability efforts that go awry. Burke’s humble perspective alerts us to the likelihood that our own efforts may fail if we do not recognise and critically interrogate the terministic screens, and especially their deflections, that we live by. This does not mean we should merely pardon or condone misplaced efforts but rather that we carefully question how we may go about changing entrenched biases that prevent us from imagining radical alternatives. Secondly, by realising that sustainability problems may be rooted in ‘symbol-foolishness’, we may work more intentionally on becoming ‘symbol-wise’ through rhetorical education. This begins with nurturing an understanding that our linguistic tendencies shape our experiences of reality and thereby also shape the attitudes and behaviours that will determine the course of our future. Of course, the above is by no means a comprehensive revisioning of what ‘sustainability’ could or even should mean. We have followed Burke’s own strategy of offering rhetorical provocations to interrogate terministic screens and explore alternate possibilities.

This, in the end, is perhaps one of the strengths of Burke’s work, and one reason for further considering its role in thinking not just about DFS but also design in general as rhetorical praxis, namely that it refuses any new prescriptive bureaucratisation of the imaginative. With regard to the notion of ‘sustainability’ itself, a Burkean critique resists merely dismissing it as a term and instead asks if perhaps the problem is not with the term but with the occlusions we have come to unconsciously associate with the term. Burke’s work requires another strategy. By rendering ‘deflections’ explicit, we

can begin to ask again what the more positive dimensions of rhetoric of ‘sustainability’ can do; that is, what ontological engagements it can select and reflect as well. We can ask, for instance, how ‘sustainability’ can raise questions about our awareness of sound hierarchic and technological practices, trained capacities, and, also, how, through symbol-wisdom, we might transcend our bureaucratizations of the imaginative.

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ⁱ Burke's theory of symbolicity developed somewhat independently of the mid-twentieth century semiotic and hermeneutic turns, but his understanding of symbols overlaps with these and other linguistically-orientated schools of thought. While we cannot engage fully either with how Burke's thinking intersects with these and other rhetorics of design, we recognise the possibility of further discussion along these lines.

ⁱⁱ For a thorough literature review on the emergence and evolution of the notion of 'design for sustainability' (DFS), see Ceschin and Gaziulusoy (2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ According to 11, 000 leading global scientists, our global "climate emergency" is closely linked to excessive consumption (Ripple et al 2020, 8-12).

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- ^{iv} Major themes in Burke's work include critiques of modernist 'progressive' ideologies responsible for environmental degradation, as well as Marxist critiques of the division of labour, alienation caused by increased specialization, as well as the inequalities produced by certain capitalist excesses. However, Burke finds traditional Marxist critique inadequate for not considering the rhetorical dimensions of cultural problems.
- ^v In reference to Burke's (1958, 63) statement regarding the human 'tendency to misjudge reality as inspired by the troublous genius of symbolism'.
- ^{vi} Burke (1966, 18) means to draw attention to the possibilities of both honorific and ironic types of 'perfection' (such as 'a perfect enemy').
- ^{vii} In reference to Aristotle's concept of entelechy, whereby a thing works towards its perfect resolution based on the nature of its kind, or towards its natural telos (Burke 1966, 17).
- ^{viii} Arguably Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's 'drive' to systematise all DfS approaches is an example of this. While potentially useful, their ordering exercise multiplies complexity to the point of generating a kind of analytic paralysis.
- ^{ix} A classic example is found in Kalle Lasn's famous 2006 publication, *Design Anarchy* (ORO Editions), which unconsciously enacts the very capitalist-consumerist excesses it critiques. It is a beautiful piece of design but its existence is a performative contradiction.
- ^x Burke refers to Thorstein Veblen's well-known aphorism, 'invention is the mother of necessity' (Hübler 2005).
- ^{xi} Tonkinwise (2015) argues that '[p]utting technology at the center of anything is profoundly conservative' and that '[m]arket penetration of this or that technology is an appalling proxy for societal change'.
- ^{xii} 'Occupational psychosis' is originally devised by John Dewey to explain how a main sustenance-providing activity extends or translates into other aspects of culture (Burke 1954, 38).
- ^{xiii} Ehrenfeld finds the notion of 'sustainable development' paradoxical and unhelpful (in Ehrenfeld & Hoffmann 2013, 23).