

# **Designing in Dark Times**

## **An Arendtian Lexicon**

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B L O O M S B U R Y

## STORIES

Stories are not to be confused with fabrications. As Hannah Arendt observes, stories mark new beginnings, pregnant with unpredictable consequences, just like our own beginnings at birth. Fabrications—not the “tangible things” Arendt alludes to elsewhere—start with endings. Stories evolve both in the writing and in the reading. Or, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, in the telling and retelling. There is no retelling—no comparison of new experiences—permitted in the self-conscious fabrications that have invaded contemporary public discourse, just the insistent fabrication of propaganda.

Propaganda may be an ancient dark art, but in the context of twenty-first-century posttruth politics, it has shape-shifted. Our wolves appear in virtual sheep’s clothing instead of ink, and they cover more territory than their predatory ancestors could have ever conceived. Even so, the stillborn stories proffered to citizen-consumers today are not especially unique. They are not so different, for example, from those told in eighteenth-century England when London’s fledgling newspapers were filled with articles cobbled together from anonymously written “paragraphs” and financed by the powerful to sway readers to their versions of events.<sup>1</sup> There was no fact-checking then, and now the very idea of “fact” is suspect. No amount of evidence seems to make a difference. Prevarication was, and is, expected in a climate where public pronouncements are just new installments in a soap opera. This would be a comic state of affairs (and we have no shortage of satire today) except for its frighteningly malignant effects. Fabrications are meant to shut down any thoughts about their contents. Coming in tidal-waves, fabrications make it seem pointless to think at all, since thinking might lead to unanticipated actions. In other words, stories.

1 John Brewer, *A Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the 18th Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 41–4.



Where florid prose was the order of the day among eighteenth-century romantics, brevity is king today. Tweets, sound bites, and ads posing as a stories-between-stories are working to obliterate contemplation, not to mention the consideration of other points of view. Such distractions make us less focused, much to the benefit of those whose ideas cannot stand scrutiny.

But this is not to confuse brevity with poetic concision. Otherwise works like Lydia Davis's "Household Observation" wouldn't be read as the stories they are. When Davis writes: "Under all this dirt / The floor is really very clean,"<sup>2</sup> she hints at the chore that awaits, or more likely, questions if cleaning is needed at all. She reminds us how paradoxical it is that we care for things (like floors) that have been designed to support and care for us.<sup>3</sup>

Given the bleakness of our moment, a poem about cleaning the floor, or clean floors, might seem trivial. Its feminist politics may be too subtle or its object-oriented perspective too surreal. Nonetheless, Davis's "observation" is a useful example of how even the shortest of stories can trigger multiple trains of thought. Still, no one can predict what actions might result, since, to paraphrase Arendt, each of us is uniquely affected by those [people and things] with which we come into contact.<sup>4</sup>

This is the deeply uncertain terrain in which designers act. In my experience, the most conscientious are acutely aware of this. They take steps to anticipate and prevent any conceivable harm or confusion that their work might cause. Among the most critical is the act of listening. In industry, listening is invariably a means to an end—a product, place, or message. While in practices of design for social justice, listening is part of an open-ended process of engagement without a predetermined goal. It can happen in conversations with designers, but it can also

2 Lydia Davis, "Housekeeping Observation," in *Can't and Won't* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2015), 90.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 184.

4 Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

happen in story writing, particularly when the designer is the reader. This need not be just an anticipatory act to galvanize a specific exploration. It can also be done after the fact, since design is never complete except in use. For example, instead of asking residents what they like or don't like about their new housing complex, they could be invited to write their own stories about a typical day at home.

Design, then, becomes not a matter of coproduction of a particular artefact or situation but of learning from stories. This is important not only for the benefit of other similar projects but also to ensure that any future changes or innovations—in this case, to housing—are not imposed but negotiated. Language—the muscle and bone of stories that live and live on in the Arendtian sense—is critical here. This is especially true of the words designers use. Case in point, words like "change" and "innovation" imply disruption, while "repair" and "reconfigure" actively build on stories while being open to new epiphanies in the process.

As important as it is to be alert to the language of the stories that we and others hear and tell, it is equally important to listen to the stories embedded in things and places. These stories are best told in fiction and poetry where they are actors in daily life. This is not to discount the knowledge of things to be found in histories, but only to point out that fiction and poetry reveal possibilities largely missing from the finite nature of the documentary form where the ending is already known. In the hands of poets and novelists, prosaic things like staircases, luggage, or chests of drawers become catalytic agents. Not only can they viscerally conjure the sense of what it means to be evicted, to be resettled, or to be at home, they can also elicit design responses, as well as a greater awareness of the (largely unacknowledged) futurity of design. And since literary resonance is not bound by the temporality of plot and setting, its epiphanies have the added virtue of reassuring us that others have been there before us. This is no small comfort as we attempt, however modestly, to design the conditions for being truly human.

You will know how salty is the taste  
of another's bread, and how hard the path  
to descend and come up another man's stairs.

—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*<sup>5</sup>

**Susan Yelavich**

*See also*

IMPERIALISM, POWER, TOGETHERNESS, *VITA*  
*CONTEMPLATIVA*

5 Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, in Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1994), 273.