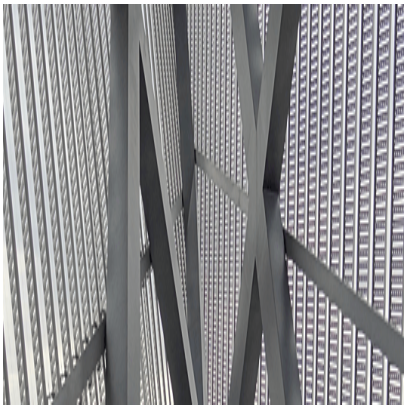
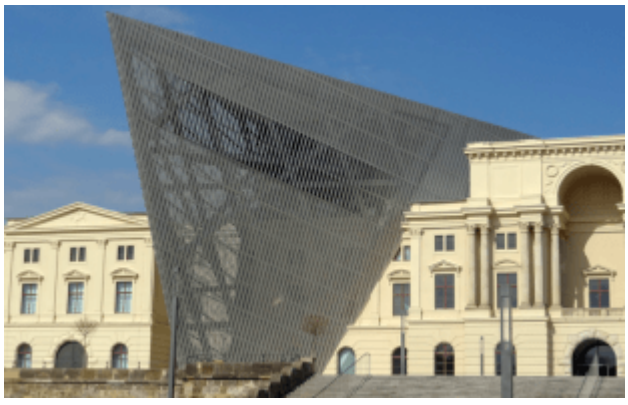


Exaggeration

Description

Iâ??ve been reading the latest book by eminent neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran and trying to get my head into the way of thinking of **brain** researchers. Itâ??s a pop-science book. So it contains nothing technically or biochemically challenging.

A large section of the book is dedicated to why we like art, and particular works of art. Ramachandranâ??s *nine laws of aesthetics* look as though they are straight from the Bauhaus. At best they could claim to offer insights into *visual literacy*.



Ramachandranâ??s aesthetic laws relate to: grouping, contrast, isolation, perceptual problem solving, abhorrence of coincidences, orderliness, symmetry and metaphor. If the categories look old fashioned then thereâ??s novelty in the way Ramachandran explains them.

It appears that much of what we know about human neural processes derives from the observation of **abnormalities**, as when certain brain functions are isolated due to genetic aberrations or strokes.

Thereâ??s a lot in the book about **culture**, as the supreme creation of collaborating minds, but on the other hand neuroscience is reluctant to move to *culture* as a device for explaining the way people think, and of art. It seems animal behaviour (ethology) and evolutionary biology provide the best vocabularies for explaining human thought.

I left out one of the nine laws of aesthetics in the list above. This is **the law of peak shift,** and here there is something strange and interesting. According to Ramachandran, this law accounts for the animal (and human) propensity to respond to **exaggeration**, at least in the visual field.

A lab rat can be trained to respond to simple shapes. Researchers have devised a simple experiment. A rat is confronted by two painted shapes, an elongated rectangle and a square. If the rat moves towards the elongated rectangle it is rewarded with a piece of cheese. If it moves to the square then it gets no reward.

After a trial and error phase, as expected, the rat soon learns to go straight for the elongated rectangle every time. Now replace the square shape with an even longer elongated rectangle than the food rewarding shape. The rat will go for it, and with measurably greater vigour. Thereâ??s a tendency for the ratâ??s cognitive apparatus to assume that **the longer the rectangle the greater the reward**, even though there was nothing in

The simple extrapolation from this and experiments â?? plus some explanation in te neural wiring â?? is that when we animals get s to a visual condition we regard it as normal. But t become impressed, pleased with, allured provoked by itâ??s exaggerated variant. At th least our curiosity is aroused.

Presumably thereâ??s a point at which the exagg no longer registers as such and the shape appea new class of object, or something entirely alien. case, according to Ramachandran, all nine laws So the lure of exaggeration is one of several fa reading the environment.

I think this **law of peak shift** touches on notions so-called uncanny valley, and the putative rea computer images. It also pertains to ideas grotesque â?? faces with inordinately large nos ears attract our interest. Ramachandran writes the popularity of caricatures of well-known politicians, entertainers and even our loved ones.

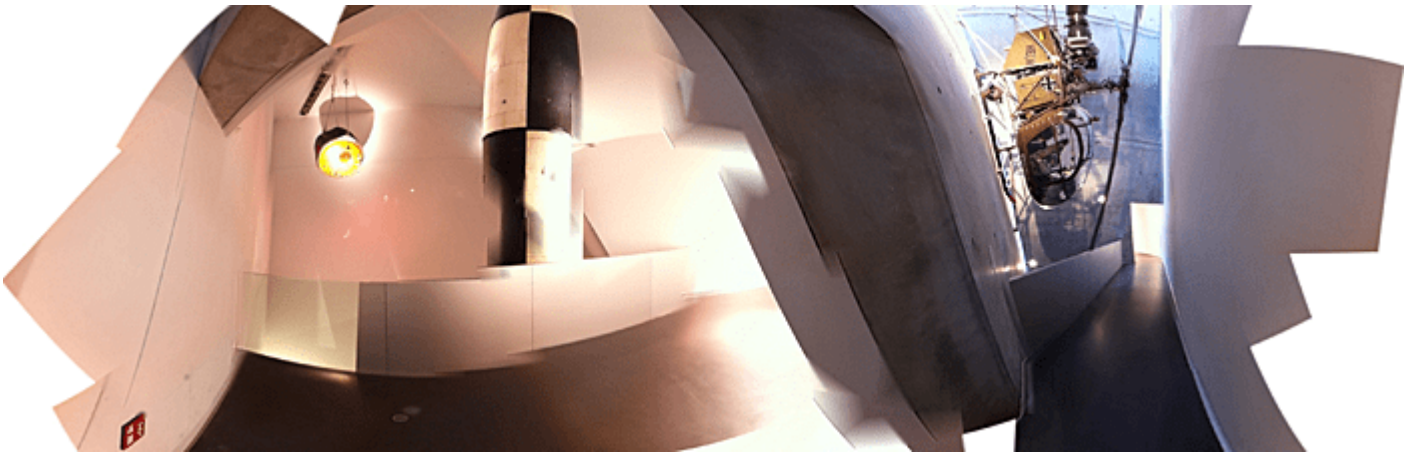
He doesnâ??t address this, but thereâ?? something to be said about animals as bea exaggerated human traits, zoomorphism, anthropomorphised animals in cartoons and The law also touches on **metaphor** and play: th who claims to his mother heâ??s just seen a â??as big as God.â?•

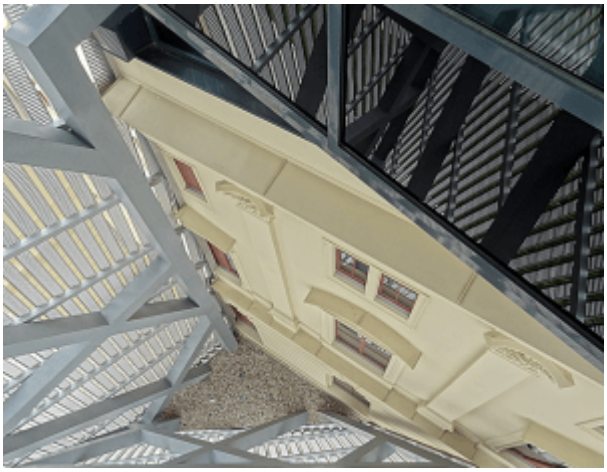
From Bauhaus to *Rat*-haus

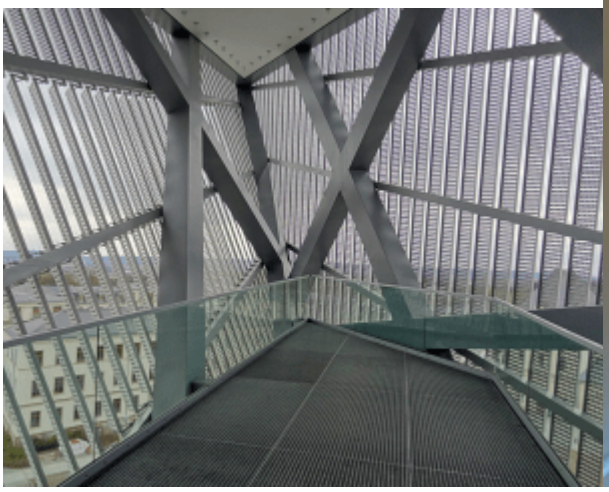
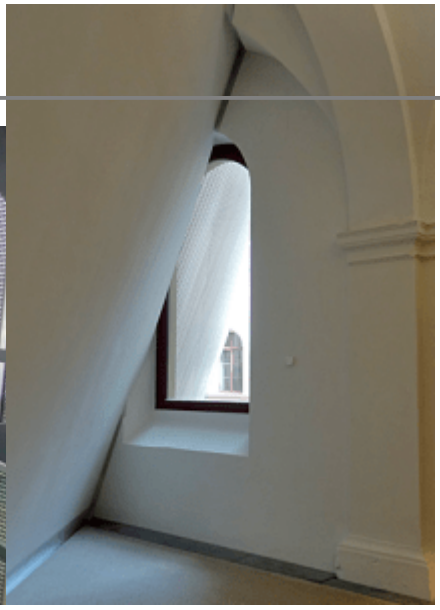
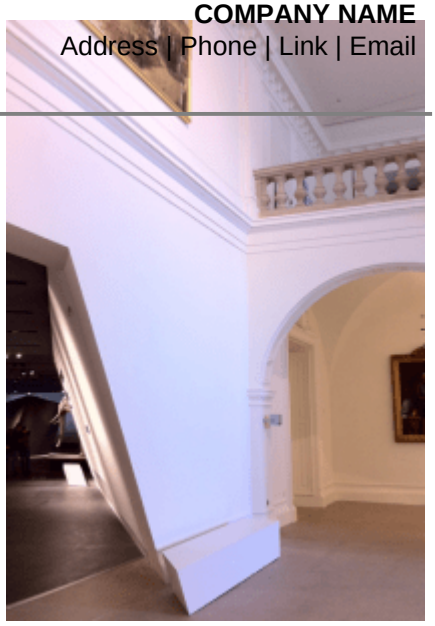
Architecture has masterly control over exagg Human inhabitants are accustomed to orthogon world of right angles. In the visual field these and lines appear to converge according conventions of perspective.

Exaggerating and distorting these vectors c produces an effect on the person negotiatin spaces, or perhaps a particular atmosphere or m

This post is illustrated with some images fr movement (rat-like) through Studio Libeski recently opened Military History Museum exten Dresden, an undoubtedly impressive exam architectural exaggeration. Thereâ??s much familiar in these spaces, not least the straight line and of course the classical contours of the structure. But then you realise the floor is slopin converge, and the rules of form and perspect grossly *exaggerated* â??





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- Ramachandran, V.S. 2011. *The Tell-Tail Brain: Unlocking the Mysteries of Human Nature*. London: William Heinemann.

Also see Obliquitous computing, Brain scans and creativity, Neuroscience eclipses AI, and Superlatives .

Category

1. Metaphor

Tags

1. architecture
2. brain
3. culture
4. Dresden
5. exaggeration
6. Libeskind
7. museum
8. neuroscience
9. peak shift
10. Ramachandran
11. visual literacy

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