

Horror Vacui

A tendency to favor filling blank spaces with objects and elements over leaving spaces blank or empty.

Horror vacui—a Latin expression meaning “fear of emptiness”—regards the desire to fill empty spaces with information or objects. In style, it is the opposite of minimalism. Though the term has varied meanings across different disciplines dating back to Aristotle, today it is principally used to describe a style of art and design that leaves no empty space. Examples include the paintings of artists Jean Dubuffet and Adolf Wölfli, works of graphic designers David Carson and Vaughan Oliver, and the cartoons of S. Clay Wilson and Robert Crumb. The style is also commonly employed in various commercial media such as newspapers, comic books, and websites.¹

Recent research into how *horror vacui* is perceived suggests a general inverse relationship between *horror vacui* and value perception—that is, as *horror vacui* increases, perceived value decreases. For example, in a survey of more than 100 clothing stores that display merchandise in shop windows, the degree to which the shop windows were filled with mannequins, clothes, price tags, and signage was inversely related to the average price of the clothing and brand prestige of the store. Bulk sales shops and chain stores tended to fill window displays to the maximum degree possible, using every inch of real estate to display multiple mannequins, stacks of clothes, and advertising promotions, whereas high-end boutiques often used a single mannequin, no hanging or stacked clothes, no signage, and no price tags—if passersby need to know the price, they presumably could not afford it. This result is certainly consistent with common experience, but somewhat surprising as lavish decoration is historically considered an indication of affluence and luxury.

It may be that the inverse relationship is actually between the affluence of a society and the perceived value associated with *horror vacui*—that is, for those accustomed to having more, less is more, and for those accustomed to having less, more is more. Others have speculated that the relationship is more a function of education than affluence. This area of research is immature and much follow-up is required to tease out the causal factors, but the preliminary findings are compelling.²

Consider *horror vacui* in the design of commercial displays and advertising. To promote associations of high value, favor minimalism for affluent and well-educated audiences and *horror vacui* for poorer and less-educated audiences, and vice versa. For information-rich media such as newspapers and websites, employ information-organizing principles such as alignment and chunking to retain the benefits of information-dense pages while mitigating *horror vacui*.

See also Alignment, Chunking, Ockham’s Razor, Progressive Disclosure, and Signal-to-Noise Ratio.

¹ *Horror vacui* is most notably associated with the Italian-born critic Mario Praz, who used the term to describe the cluttered interior design of the Victorian age.

² “Visualizing Emptiness” by Dimitri Mortelmans, *Visual Anthropology*, 2005, vol. 18, p. 19–45. See also *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* by Ernst Gombrich, Phaidon, 1970.



Three shop windows with varying levels of merchandise on display. The perceived value of the merchandise and prestige of the store are generally inversely related to the visual complexity of the display.

